



## **Institute for Rural & Small Town Ministries**

*An Institute of Concordia Nebraska*

### **Book Review: The Small Town Lutheran Church and Pastor: A Concise Pastoral Theology for Pastors and Elders**

by Rev, Heath Curtis. Published by Lexham Publishing of Bellingham, WA in 2024.

Rev. Heath Curtis, currently President of the Southern Illinois District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), has written a very helpful book for LCMS pastors and elders who serve small town and rural congregations. Curtis draws on his nineteen years of serving the dual parish of Trinity Lutheran Church of Worden, Illinois, and Zion Lutheran Church of Carpenter, Illinois. During those years, he also provided congregational fieldwork learning for students from Concordia Seminary of St. Louis as well as summer vicarages for students from both Concordia Seminary St. Louis and Concordia Theological Seminary of Fort Wayne, Indiana. He dedicated this book to them as they carry out their calls in pastoral ministry. Rev. Curtis quickly reminds his readers that 60% of LCMS church members live in small towns with rural cultures. Curtis writes, “A small town is a community with its own identity.” Not only has Rev. Curtis served as a small town pastor, but he also has a family history of small town life in Nebraska, including Hastings, Beatrice, and McCook.

He identifies four problems small town LCMS pastors and elders typically encounter: 1) declining and older membership; 2) finances; 3) volunteers; and 4) inactive members. He offers a focus on discipleship to address these issues with practical suggestions for engaging congregational members in God’s Word. He also calls for those who serve in the small town context to grow in their understanding of rural and small town culture. He sums up how small town Americans regard themselves as “competent and conservative” and explains what the understanding of this can mean for ministry. He further emphasizes how important it is for a small town pastor to be respected and how this comes from the pastor being visible with competence in things beyond his pastoral job description.

Rev. Curtis also sets forth the unwritten rules for small town ministry, including sermon length, roles of pastor and wife, expectations for pastoral calls, pastoral availability, vacation time, and more. These are worth the reader’s time. Leadership in the small town church has unique aspects. Rev. Curtis describes it as being the head of the house. He reminds the small town pastor to engage the community leaders and become interwoven community life.



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Advice for the small town pastor's wife is provided in a special way by Mrs. Curtis writing in a letter-style for a new pastor's wife in a small town church. Rev. Curtis also offers guidance on the "preacher's kids" in the small town church context. The balance of marriage, family, and ministry in this unique setting is also addressed.

During his small town ministry, Rev. Curtis also served the LCMS as its part-time Coordinator for Stewardship Ministry. He has authored resources on this important topic and addresses the unique aspects of small church attitudes about stewardship. His take on small town evangelism and discipleship provides a perspective on in-reach and outreach discipleship linked to evangelism. He speaks frankly about barriers to small town evangelism.

His chapter on "Worship Matters" is specially addressed for LCMS congregations and his view of what he describes as a trend for small town churches to expect use of the LCMS Lutheran Service Book liturgies and hymnody.

Rev. Curtis offers refreshing ideas for small town partnerships for various aspects of their congregational programs with an optimistic eye toward the future for rural and small town ministry. In fact, he is excited for the future of small town church missions and ministry.