

Top-10 reasons for liking smaller-town living

By Paul Soderquist

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The church I serve, Ebenezer Presbyterian Church, George, Iowa, is searching for a pastor. I serve them in an interim capacity. It's taking them a while to do their search. I'm told that it is sometimes hard for search committees to draw people into a small town.

OK. I get it. Not everyone is made to live in a small town. Sometimes circumstances just won't allow it. But I ask, what's not to like? Here are my top ten reasons for liking it here and recommending it.

10. Clean air. Every day. I go for an exercise walk and I fill up my lungs with that good, clean, rural Iowa air. Wonderful. My other home is in Phoenix, Arizona, which has significant air quality issues. There are some nasty particulates floating around in the Phoenix air I can't even pronounce. I know the difference between clean rural air and dirtier urban air.
9. I like photography. Clean air leads to crisp photo landscape images. And the rural Iowa night sky is free of urban light pollution, which is great for taking photos of the stars and the International Space Station (ISS) overhead. The ISS circles the globe 15.7 times every 24 hours, traveling over Iowa at Mach 22 a lot more often than most people realize. I've taken many photos of it.
8. A little known detail is that it is expected the pastor will stop at the morning coffee shop now and then. Probably a visit every day would not be too much for some. As it turns out, the morning coffee crowd has a helpful pulse on community life, including who's sick, who's going into the hospital, who's come out of the hospital, and who else the pastor maybe should be calling.
7. Believe it or not, people like pastors here. For the most part. Quite a number of people here even respect pastors. To be liked AND respected are not easy things for pastors across America to earn these days.
6. I find ministry here is really all about people. A visit to a hospital bedside. Calling on people in their homes and in care centers. Celebrating weddings and baptisms. Recognizing God in the ordinary pulse of everyday living. Sometimes in other places, pastors become slaves to the administrative calendar, to committee and board meetings, to budgets, and even to legal or corporate entanglements. But I find small town ministry is really all about people. It's about loving people with the love of Jesus. Most pastors have that in their toolbox somewhere.

5. The occasional drive into a large community for a hospital call can become personal or family time used for dinner out, shopping, or a movie. Small town churches automatically assume business and pleasure go together.
4. People here actually listen to the Sunday sermon. Almost all of them stay awake for it, as long as the sermon isn't too long and boring. I try to give them something they can respect and "chew on." I'm not sure I always achieve that, of course. But I try, and they seem to appreciate it.
3. There are other obvious benefits to living in a small town. Good schools with caring teachers and administrators. People who care are all around. They like to nurture with food, specializing in homemade sweet dessert salads, bars, brownies and cookies of all sorts. Out in town, lines at the bank and at the store are short to non-existent. And there are never any traffic jams in small towns.
2. The relatively relaxed pace of this small town congregation is worthy of consideration. I have office hours in the mornings, and very often I am out with people in the afternoons. An occasional night meeting or emergency room visit to a parishioner also occur. I find mornings in the Pastor's Study are often like being on a contemplative retreat. The church staff members are few in number and all part-time, so I don't see them every day. Oh, there is an occasional phone call and visitor. One of the church elders kindly brings in the mail from the post office every day. Then I open it. I also answer the phone myself. Since the church secretary comes in just one or two mornings a week to prepare the Sunday bulletin, I often have the place to myself, to pray, to plan, and to prepare for Sunday. I've served large and small churches, and each has its own "buzz" and tempo. Some pastors I suppose need a faster pace. But if you are a pastor reading this, and you are disturbed by the very thought of having quite a bit of uninterrupted time on your hands for holy purposes, then I'd like to suggest you go to your closet right now, close the door, and pray, and ask yourself what's wrong with this picture.
1. On a personal medical note, my blood pressure has never been better.

I'm going to grieve when I leave here. It's been great.

About the Author:

Paul Soderquist has served in Presbyterian ministry since 1980, and has been doing interim ministries since 1998. He is currently a member of Prospect Hill Presbytery. Paul served as a Navy Chaplain. He and his wife, Gail, have two grown children and reside permanently in Mesa, Ariz. He can be reached by email at pfsod@yahoo.com.

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