

Fitting In

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It does not seem very important, at first thought. It does not fit in with chapter and verse. However, in my years of living in North Dakota, it has proven a most important quality for church leaders. I am not talking about theological or biblical beliefs; I am referring to learning to appreciate and enjoy how people live, what they like and what they celebrate. Most of these qualities have developed through necessity but have come to be a part of the very fabric of their lives. Church leaders usually do not have the admiration of people they lead until they learn the lessons of "fitting in."

I will address three areas of fitting in:

Learning to fit in to the environment: We can either learn to appreciate our environment or hate it. People do not like and will not follow complainers.

Weather-Garry Redmann, a professional photographer said "I am *starting to appreciate North Dakota Winters more and more. The weather doesn't bother me because it can be the best time to capture a photo. There are so many interesting textures.*" (Outdoor Journal, Winter, 2008)

Teddy Roosevelt said while living in the badlands of North Dakota, "This country is growing on me more and more. It has a curious, fantastic beauty of its own." Years ago, while visiting the cabin where President Roosevelt lived for a period of time while he healed emotionally from the death of his wife and mother, I read this statement and determined that I would discover what he learned. I find it a very surprising and repulsive to hear the question "why have you lived in North Dakota all these years (41 years). I usually answer "why would I want to live any other place since this is the very best place there is?" God helps us enjoy living where He has called us. When we complain about the weather, it is really a complaint about God and His creation and management of His world.

Learning to fit in as a bi-vocational pastor:

Our churches' size and financing force people called of God to pastor here to be bi-vocational. There are advantages to being bi-vocational. The model missionary in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul, was bi-vocational. New Testament Christianity was born out of leadership given by bi-vocational leadership. Present day church leadership is made up of hot-house leadership: people who do no work in local communities. Our churches in Prairie Partners have bi-vocational families. My ministry as a pastor in Mandan was financed by an employed spouse. The record of Dakota churches does not show that full time pastors are the most skilled at leading growing churches. The book "Bi-vocational Church Planters," published by the North American Mission Board gives the stories of 15 bi-vocational church planters with every kind of vocation: electrical engineer, Starbucks manager, car salesman, professor, school teacher, parole hearing officer, computer lab coordinator etc. All of these were successful church planters. We need to take a fresh look at bi-vocational church planters and pastors.

Learning to fit in to the natural calendar people/communities have developed:

Easter and Christmas: Tradition and the long winters make it wise for churches to maximize celebration of these special events. Make the most of the time when people, by tradition, focus on attending church.

Deer hunting season: Brian Gehring in an article "It's not the Ritz It's better," (Outdoor Journal, Winter, 2008) said, "*For those who don't hunt it's difficult to put into words what deer season means to those who do. And deer camps, for many, are the like the word 'church'. Deer camp is about traditions.*" One of every four people in North Dakota, and over half of the men, hunt. To reach men, we need to understand the social importance of hunting deer, pheasant and water fowl.

Class B basketball: The biggest event each year, in North Dakota, is class B basketball. It drives the lifestyle, purchasing, barbershop talk and generally everything that deals with North Dakota culture. My barber friend, Gene, told me shortly after I moved here, "*I can tell in 5 minutes whether someone really cares about North Dakota by how much they know about Class B basketball.*"