**Module 2: Knowing Your Community**

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

**Devotion**

Onetime Chair of McDonald’s Corp., Ray Kroc, once said, “The definition of salesmanship is the gentle art of letting the customer have it your way.” With that, he lets on that he was a master at manipulation. In contrast, few rural clergy can pull off such manipulation. Those living on the land or in a small town acquire a reputation whether they want it or not. This is true for pastors as for anyone. Through their ministry at weddings, funerals, conversations, and community events, pastors get known in the rural context. In the country, people get to know each other well. In such an environment of transparency, the safest and best path for pastors is to live with integrity. But pastors are not only known by others, they also get to know their beat too. Pastors quickly learn to distinguish whom they can trust from whom they can’t, with whom they can laugh—or shed tears--, who gossips and who doesn’t.

Through visiting with members, pastors learn the history of their congregation and community: the good, the bad, the ugly, and the lovely. They learn who donated what, who is responsible for what, what happened when Pastor So-and-so was here, and who has the knack to do whatever. This is how we “pay careful attention. . . . to the flock,” as Paul urges us above.

Of course, some parishes have secrets. Pastors eventually learn whether or not their parish is one with secrets. Over time, pastors often learn these secrets, why they are secrets, and find themselves forever obliged to keep confidences. All in all, pastors learn the history and the geography of the spiritual, social, and emotional lives of their communities. As coming from outside the community, they are often in a far better position to discern the heroes and villains in this history. In this way, they follow the guidance that Paul gave to the Ephesian elders just before his departure from that congregation: “pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock.” Learning a community’s spiritual history and emotional geography is a sacred matter. It gathers together the wisdom which that community has accumulated over time and allows pastors to channel it into the community’s future. The wisdom to know when to appeal to this history and when to keep silent about it is a crucial aspect of leadership. That way, the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren” (*Schmalcald Articles* III IV) is strengthened.

Rural ministry has no glitter: one won’t find a Starbucks in farm fields. But it often has a beauty. That beauty is found in the strength that comes through a community’s accumulated wisdom and history.

**Prayer**

*Gracious God, increase my ability to discern what is important from what isn’t and so help me invest my energy in the former and not the latter. Thank you for the sacred privilege of providing me my current call. Help me to live out my ministry faithfully each day. Amen.*