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Study Guide by TIM AMOR

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# Gather Up the Fragments

- 1. How would you describe the difference between rural and urban? Do you consider your community to be rural or urban?
- 2. In what ways does your church community reflect the diversity of your area? What parts of your surrounding community are not represented in your church?
- 3. On page 31, Roth says that "rural is not just a population designation. It's a way of seeing the world." How do you think that your community "sees" the world?
- 4. Why is your church "here" in your community? What is the mission and purpose of your church within your surrounding community?
- 5. In what ways does your church strive to represent "God's commitment to be with all people, everywhere," and "to be with people in all places, however small" (p. 34)?
  - 6. How can we as a community of Christians embody "a kingdom vision, a vision of the church gathered into one by the Holy Spirit" (p. 35)?

**Prayer:** Take some time to pray that the Holy Spirit would guide and empower both you and your church to fully embody God's mission in your community and throughout the world.

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## Praise in Place

- 1. Do you think of the place you live as a "somewhere" or a "nowhere?" Explain your response.
- 2. In Genesis 28:16, Jacob awakens and declares, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" Have you ever experienced God's holy presence in a surprising place?
- 3. Do you think that your church community is affected by *acedia*—the feeling that everything you do is insignificant and without purpose? (For more on acedia, see page 41.)
- 4. How are outsiders (such as new neighbors, visitors, new pastors) welcomed into your church community? How are outsiders welcomed into your town?
- 5. Has your community ever tried to do something creative and new? What might be holding your community back from trying creative new ideas?
- 6. What are the challenges and stresses that might affect ministry in your community?
- 7. What are some of the signs of the "moral beauty" of your community? (See page 53 for Roth's discussion of moral beauty.)
- 8. What are the moral shadows that challenge your community?

**Prayer:** Think about some of the amazing and unique blessings of your community. Take some time to praise and thank God for blessing you with these wonders.

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## Abide

- 1. How has your community benefited from people who have committed themselves to serve and love the place and the people for an extended period of time?
- 2. How has your community been hurt by the cultural narrative of "moving up and moving on (p. 64)"?
- 3. What is your response to this statement (pp. 65–66): "We need our brightest, most promising young people, including pastors, to commit to being present in our most out-of-the-way places"?
- 4. Has your church ever tried to make large changes and shake everything up? What were the results? When is it the right time to push to make changes?
- 5. How can we discern when or if God is calling us to leave a place? What might the signs be?
- 6. Abiding is defined as "making our home among a people, heroically locating ourselves among real people in real places" (p. 75). What does abiding look like for the people of your church? What does abiding look like for you?

**Prayer:** Pray that God inspires you to see your community as God sees it: a place to be loved, filled with people to be loved. Pray that God helps you to hold onto the tension of being present and abiding in your place while also seeking to make wise changes in the right ways at the right times.

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## Watch

- 1. What is the story of your community? What is the story of your church?
- 2. Name the ways that you have seen God's goodness in the culture around you.
- 3. How do you practice thankfulness? How does your church community incorporate thanksgiving into its life and worship?
- 4. Have you ever been blessed by anyone? What was that experience like?
- 5. Have you ever blessed someone else? What led you to bless them? How did they respond?
- 6. What is one practical way that you and your church could bless your community?
- 7. How might the practice of mourning—having a heart that breaks for what breaks the heart of God—be a benefit to your community?

**Prayer:** Take some time to consider some of the stories that exist in your surrounding community. Ask God to help you to better see and love your community and neighbors. Give thanks to God for all that God has blessed you with in your community. Express sorrow for the things in your community that break your heart.

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Pray

- 1. How would you describe contemplative ministry? How could contemplative ministry be a benefit to your community?
- 2. How would you define prayer? In what ways do you make room in your life for prayer? How is prayer practiced as a part of worship at your church?
- 3. How can prayer help your church better discern what God is up to in your neighborhood?
- 4. What is your response to this statement (p. 108): "Prayer is key to moving the church forward. Prayer is what makes ministry something more. It makes it *ministry*"?
- 5. In what ways are your prayers connected to taking action in your community?
- 6. What would a rural church need to do to become a special house of prayer that sustains the global church?
- 7. What would it take for your church to be described as a hotbed of prayer?

**Prayer:** Pray that God opens your eyes to see the world as God sees it so that you can better love and serve your neighbors—so that you can love people as Jesus loves them. Take some time to pray for the global church.

## Grow

- 1. Has your church experienced a growth or a drop-off in membership recently? Why do you think that is?
- 2. Do you believe that growth is possible in your church? Why or why not?
- 3. How do you think we should measure success and growth in our churches? How does your church measure success?
- 4. Do you consider your church to be successful? If not, what would be different about your church if it were successful?
- 5. Do you believe that your church is effectively reaching out into your community? Why or why not?
- 6. In what ways does your church live in and embrace its past? In what ways might the past get in the way of a church embracing the present?
- 7. "People don't want to be indoctrinated. They want to be heard" (p. 134). In what ways does your church interact with and listen to people who are outside of your faith community?
- 8. "Denominational names and histories ground us. They're like last names. We came from somewhere" (p. 138). How does your denominational affiliation help your church serve your surrounding community? In what ways might a denominational name be a hindrance?
- 9. How has your church community adapted over the years? What has changed in regards to your worship, programs, and how you engage your neighbors?

**Prayer:** Pray that God helps the churches in your community to grow. Pray that God would soften your heart and shape you to become more Christlike—that God would teach you how you can more fully embody the Jesus way in your neighborhood, and that more people would be introduced to Jesus through your loving words and deeds.


# Work the Edges

- 1. What are some of the boundaries, or edges, in your community and in your church?
- 2. *Gemeinschaft* is a German term that describes a community structured and regulated by trust, relationships, and social boundaries. In what ways does your community fit this term?
- 3. What are the margins in your community? How might your church reach out to people in the margins?
- 4. Does your church "allow" visitors? Has anyone in your community ever asked you that question? How do you think you or someone else from your church would respond?
- 5. What are the boundaries at your church that might keep newcomers from visiting or connecting with the church family?
- 6. How do outsiders and newcomers feel when they visit your church? In what ways might they find your church welcoming to their participation? In what ways might newcomers find it difficult to fit in and participate?
- 7. What are the practical ways that your church can welcome and adopt any newcomers in your community?
- 8. What risks can your church take to better connect with your neighbors and surrounding community?

**Prayer:** Pray that God shows you how your church's historical boundaries can be celebrated but also how they might be a hindrance. Pray that the Holy Spirit empowers and directs you and your church to lovingly reach out to people who are currently on the margins—that your church would be known as a welcoming community that embraces and adopts newcomers into your church family.

## Learn to Die

- 1. In what way does a church's "death" look like failure? In what ways can a church's "death" look like success?
- 2. If faithfulness doesn't necessarily mean numerical church growth, what can faithfulness look like in a church that is numerically declining?
- 3. Has your church ever considered dissolution? Is that something your church might have to consider someday? What would those conversations look like? In dissolution, how could your church continue its ongoing mission by using its resources to bless others?
- 4. What are some ways that we can show love and care to dying churches?
- 5. In what ways might the perceived successes or failures of a church reflect on the pastor?
- 6. How might holding on to a congregation's survival limit its ability to faithfully serve its surrounding community?
- 7. Why do you think some congregations die off? What might the closing of a church say about that community and about God?
- 8. How can the resurrection of Jesus give hope to congregations that are shrinking in numbers?

**Prayer:** Pray that God gives you compassionate love for the dying. Pray that your church wisely use its resources to faithfully serve the mission of God's kingdom. Pray that God would help you to see death not as a failure but as an opportunity to see the power of Jesus' resurrection.

## Befriend

- 1. "I'm convinced rural places need us to be friends" (p. 188). In what ways does your church encourage you to befriend your neighbors?
- 2. Who are your friends? How and when did you meet them? What made you decide to become friends? When was the last time you made a new friend?
- 3. We cannot love neighbors we do not know. Do you know the names of all of your neighbors? How about those who live near or around your church? Take the risk to talk to them and learn their names. Being friends means going beyond small talk; consider inviting your neighbors over for coffee or a meal.
- 4. How can we make space in our lives to create opportunities for new neighborly interactions and friendships?
- 5. In what ways can you and others stand in solidarity with your community—being friends of your community, working for the good of all, and giving yourselves to the community?
- 6. In what ways can you and your church practice the concept of befriending the land in your community?
- 7. Sometimes churches put on community events in the hope that more people will come to the church. What are some ways that you and your church could encourage each other to do things outside of the church that would create opportunities to befriend people from your community?

**Prayer:** Pray that God guides you to see your neighbors not just as projects or people to invite to church but rather as people to be loved—just as they are. Think of some of your neighbors and pray for them by name.


## Dream

- 1. "The real question is always, *Do I love this place and these people?*" (p. 207). How would you answer that question? Are there specific things that you love about your community and your neighbors?
- 2. How does your church connect and relate to churches throughout your state, nation, and world? In what ways can your church work with other churches to serve and love people—from all tribes, peoples, languages, and addresses—in the name of Jesus?
- 3. How does your church use the Lord's Prayer? In what ways can the Lord's Prayer help guide and fuel the ministry of your church?
- 4. How does your church practice the Lord's table (communion)? In what ways does the Lord's table help to connect you with Jesus' life, death, and resurrection? In what ways does the Lord's table help to connect you with the global church?
- 5. "I don't know which is harder: dreaming the future church or embracing the present one. But I'm convinced that love is what allows us to live in the tension" (p. 218). What dreams do you have for the future of your church? In what ways can you more fully embrace and love your church right now, as it is?
- 6. Think of and share at least five things that you love about your church.
- 7. What is one change that might benefit your church? In what ways could making this change better help the church to serve and love your neighbors?
- 8. "For all our careful words and fine models, I'm convinced it comes down to this: loving rural people and places, communities and congregations" (p. 219). What are some practical things that you could do to show the love of Jesus to people in your church? How about in your neighborhood? What can you do to show love to your community?

**NOTES** 

**Prayer:** Pray that God gives you a heart to love your community: the people connected to your church, the people connected to other churches, and the people who are your neighbors. Pray that God helps you to understand that everywhere you go is God's country: places worth loving filled with people worth loving. Close by praying the Lord's Prayer together.