



RONNIE MARTIN & DONNIE GRIGGS

Foreword by Collin Hansen

Pastoring Small Towns

Help and Hope for Those
Ministering in Smaller Places

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DONNIE GRIGGS

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Ministering in Smaller Places

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This book is dedicated to our respective church families,
Substance Church and One Harbor Church,
who minister with big hearts to our small towns.

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Foreword

When leading a church in a small town, it's easy to know when you're in trouble. One comment on social media that offends the leader of a powerful clan can take your church from barely solvent to closed practically overnight.

But how do you know if ministry is going well? The town's size limits the numerical growth of your church. Publishers probably won't come searching to hand you book deals. Conference planners won't usually notice your sermons. You could serve faithfully for decades, and a larger, more prominent church might not ever think to hire you away from your small town.

All this means that when you lead a church in a small town, you'll be forced to rely on Christ alone for your validation, to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant." And when you put it that way, ministry in small towns is a special gift.

I often tell young pastors that if they want to gain experience and learn to lean on the Lord, they should look for a job

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in youth ministry. Teenagers care if you love them and if you help them love Jesus. That's it. Much the same can be said for ministry in a small town. All the degrees and connections in the world don't mean anything in a small town if you can't love the person in front of you, from whatever walk of life.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination in the Presbyterian Church in America, Tim Keller returned to the small town where he first served out of seminary. One of his friends from these days in Hopewell, Virginia, organized a reception. Church members were invited to recall what they appreciated from Keller's ministry. By this time his ministry in New York City was flourishing. He'd been a successful preaching professor in a famous big-city seminary. But not a single person in Hopewell mentioned anything he'd preached, even though by the time he left the small town, he'd delivered some sixteen hundred messages. No one quoted a sermon. Several members, however, recalled something he said to them privately in counseling and visitation. They remembered how he'd loved them, as their pastor.

Pastors are my heroes, and that's especially true of these church leaders in small towns. They are the people who taught me to read the Bible, who introduced me to Jesus in Madison, South Dakota. They are the people who planted a church and

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led my parents to the Lord. They are the people who visit my grandmother in the nursing home and lead chapel services where she and the rest of the confined congregation fall asleep.

Donnie Griggs and Ronnie Martin are my heroes. They could lead successful churches in any sized city. But I'm thankful the Lord has called them to small towns. I've noticed that in bigger cities, it's easy to appear courageous as a pastor by preaching against the sins of distant neighbors. Donnie and Ronnie, however, address the sins common to many small towns such as they ones they love. A megachurch pastor rarely needs to worry about seeing a disgruntled former church member in the grocery store—every week, for years to come. It takes real trust in the Lord to preach the whole Word when you know you'll offend the influential members who hold your church together. And that's just the kind of Christlike courage they commend in this powerful book. I hope a new generation of pastors will follow their example and take the gospel to small towns everywhere.

Collin Hansen, vice president of content and editor in chief of The Gospel Coalition; host of the Gospelbound podcast; author, *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*

Introduction

Driving down County Road 250 between the small towns of Ashland and Norwalk, Ohio, feels like entering a series of short stories by Wendell Berry. Scattered, residential neighborhoods turn into scenic farmlands, complete with rolling fields and dense, untouched woods dotting the vast landscape. Just when it feels like all signs of civilization have come to an end until you reach the Canadian border, you find yourself stepping on the brakes and rolling through another tiny, unheard-of town that has never grown beyond a gas station, ice cream parlor, and local grocer. These long stretches of Ohio back roads could easily provide the quintessential backdrop for a Netflix documentary on small-town America. The elements are all in place: the untouched beauty, unrestored brokenness, and untold stories are all there and ripe for the picking.

Of course, if you're not a documentary filmmaker, you can still take a more reflective peek into all the imagery dotting

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County Road 250 and let your imagination run wild. You'll pass by an endless array of old, ramshackle houses, filled with a bewildering clutter of rusted automobiles, weathered farm equipment, stacks of motorcycle engines, and wooden crates of who-knows-what. And on the same road, you'll make your way past an elaborate country estate at the crest of a small hill with a beautifully manicured lawn, well-stocked pond, and elegantly paved driveway that has "second home" written all over it. Then there's the dilapidated trailer park that has looked abandoned for years until you take a closer look and see some ghostlike figures that provide some proof of habitation. Taking up much of the real estate on 250 will be a colorful assortment of picturesque farms with their quaint porches, storybook barns, slow-motion milk cows, and John Deere tractors that bring back memories of boyhood dreams. All these images are like the bindings of old books that contain the pages of flesh and blood people, all made in the image of God, with hopes, dreams, tragedies, and secrets that have become buried in the soil of time and forgottenness. And God sends pastors to people in these obscure towns to spread His words of forgiveness and hope.

County Road 250 was the road Donnie Griggs drove down when he paid me a visit a few years ago. If you're ever

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in the same room as Donnie and me, you'll find out pretty quickly how different we are, and it's not just the length of our beards (his is much, much longer). Donnie is an avid outdoor enthusiast who lives in a small coastal town in North Carolina with his wife Jill and two young boys. He is the founding lead pastor of One Harbor Church, as well as the chaplain for the local fire department. When he's not up to his knees in ministry, you'll find him hunting, surfing, spearfishing, and grilling with family and friends while jamming out to old country music. All the things I described are what I love so much about Donnie. He's a free spirit with a love for Jesus, his church, and community.

As similar as our names sound, Donnie and I couldn't be less alike in some ways. When I'm not pastoring Substance Church in Ashland, Ohio, you will not find me jamming out to country music of any kind, old or new. What you will find is my wife Melissa and me taking some long hikes, scenic bike rides, shopping for clothes we don't need, hanging at fun coffee shops, reading good books, and meandering in the woods daydreaming about our next adventure . . . or meal. (Okay, both.) Besides ministry, I fill the rest of my hours composing electronic music in my Moog-based recording studio (IYKYK), dreaming up my next book project, recording new

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podcasts (yes, there are too many), or checking how many days are left in the year until Christmas arrives.

As different as we are, the thing that knits us together most is our love for small towns, and more specifically, pastoring small towns. This was what started the conversation between Donnie and me a few years ago as he pulled up the driveway to my house off County Road 250. Over the next few days, we had some long conversations about urban church planting and how it had dominated the evangelical landscape over the past fifteen years. Since we are both church planters, we are grateful for the way networks and denominations saw a need in that space and went after it strategically and passionately. We also reflected on some of the rural/small town conversations that were beginning to gain some traction in the church-planting world and wondered if we were seeing a fresh movement of God's Spirit descend on these lesser-known spaces. We also noted that most of these conversations seemed to center around the argument of why it's so important to plant new churches in small towns (again, no argument here). But what we didn't see too much of were many conversations or resources for pastors who were already serving small-town churches and could use some help and hope in the unique place where God has called them.

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This was the conversation that led to the birth of the book you are holding. Our aim is to take a closer look at what it's like to be a pastor in a small town, acknowledge the challenges, and provide some not-so-brilliant encouragement to those who are doing what we do. Why do I say “not-so-brilliant”? Because everything you're going to read is something biblical and practical that's likely been said before (and probably better) but needs to be said again for the world we're living and pastoring in today. Although one of the cliches of small-town life is that it remains rooted and unchanging, the fact is that the world around us is changing, and even small towns are being affected and influenced by our electronically interconnected world. The questions for small-town pastors today are ones that lie at the heart of the gospel, and they sound something like this:

How can I grow in my love and affection for Jesus?

Will I endure through the challenges of a postpandemic world?

Is what I'm doing in the middle of nowhere even worth doing?

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Though the answers aren't simple, we want to speak into the tension and point you back to the help and hope that only come as we press deeper into the heart of Jesus, who is the true Pastor and Shepherd of every small town and of every small-town soul He will save by His grace alone to the glory of God alone.

Ronnie Martin

CHAPTER 1

Love: Having Jesus's Heart for Your Town

Donnie Griggs

Pastoring a small-town church comes with many bizarre moments. We once had someone bring their pet raccoon to church. They informed us that it was their service animal. We googled it; that's not a thing. On another occasion, someone desiring to meet with a pastor brought a crossbow with them to the church office. I can't tell you how many times I've thought, *There's no playbook for pastoring a church like this*. If you've ever felt the same, that's what we're hoping to help with here. No book can cover everything, but we do hope it can help

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you feel encouraged and equipped for the special place God has called you to serve.

In our day, it can be hard to know what to focus on in ministry. For some, it's how big your church attendance is. For others, it may be the reach of your social media footprint. If you live and minister in a small town, both of those metrics are likely going to be disappointing when compared to other places. This hasn't stopped many of us from trying to grow our small-town churches into something we feel is significant. For decades we have gone to the conferences, bought the books, and jumped through all the hoops in hopes that something will work. But when was the last time we stopped and thought about what matters to Jesus regarding the ministry we do in local churches?

Maybe the reason you picked up this book is so you could learn some tips, and we hope you do. However, we hope that more than anything what you walk away with is a fresh sense of Jesus's heart for your small town and the folks who call your local church home. What oozed out of Jesus at every turn was His abounding love. If we hope to lead like Jesus wants us to, we must learn to love like He loves. Paul said as much in describing his own motivation for ministry,

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For the love of Christ compels us. (2 Cor. 5:14)

Love motivated Jesus, and His love must motivate us. The Scriptures give us a paradigm for ministry that is different from so much of the ways we view leadership now.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, since he is not the shepherd and doesn't own the sheep, leaves them and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. This happens because he is a hired hand and doesn't care about the sheep.” (John 10:11–13)

Jesus called Himself “the good shepherd.” That was how He framed His approach to ministry. Of course, He also used *physician*, *king*, *master*, and other titles, but the idea of shepherd stands out. One of the reasons it's important to consider is that *poimen* is the word the New Testament uses and that we use today for “pastor.” We are carrying on in the ministry of Jesus for the sheep.

Jesus Wants Us Pastors to Lead by Loving

Jesus is the good Shepherd because He cares for the sheep. Jesus doesn't just want us to lead and teach His sheep but to *care* for them. Care drove the good Shepherd to lay down His life, and a lack of care caused the hired hand to abandon them in their darkest moment.

While pastors have many things to keep track of and do, of varying degrees of actual importance, the most important thing to Jesus is how we care for the sheep. He doesn't want us to worry about being insta-famous or how many retweets we can get. He wants us to "shepherd the church of God [that is] among you" (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4).

If you're reading this book, most likely the flock among you is a rural flock, and that has implications. Of course, how you and I shepherd the flock has a lot of similarities to any other pastor in any other part of the world. However, how we work out that call to shepherd can and should look different.

In this book, we will look at a lot of the specific ways we are called to shepherd our rural flocks, but we must first start with what must precede them all: love.

Fellow pastor, where are you right now in regard to loving your sheep? Maybe you are already full of affection for them.

But what if you're not? What do you do if you feel like you're losing love for the sheep? The answer isn't just to stare at the sheep until you find them lovable again. Our small towns don't need what we can give in our own strength; they need what we get only by being filled with the love of Jesus for them.

We Are Pastoring in Particularly Trying Times

The pandemic and corresponding social unrest has exacerbated so many struggles and sins. Fears worsened, addictions worsened, struggling marriages worsened or ended, many friendships were fractured beyond the hope of repair. Many of those we lead are afraid, addicted, and angry. How many years will it take before we are fully aware of all the ways the sheep have been wounded?

It's not just that it has been a hard time to lead; often it has felt impossible. Has there ever been a time in our lives that's been more polarizing and exhausting for leaders? Impossible decision after impossible decision came at lightning speed. I don't know if you can remember back to 2020 and into 2021. Maybe you've successfully repressed those memories (If so, how? Asking for a friend.), but our team would obsess over every decision with the current information we had been given

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regarding restrictions. What could we do? How could we still love and minister to people? Then, as soon as we had decided and communicated it, we were hit with frustrations of people we loved for not doing enough or doing too much, and before the dust could settle, restrictions had changed again. It was exhausting, and there was seemingly no reward for our endless toil.

Friends, it can help just to acknowledge that we are living and leading in a particularly dark time. It can feel at times like all hope is lost. What's the point in even trying? Many small-town pastors have already left their roles and sought employment elsewhere, some who needed to for their own well-being. For those of us who remain, mental and emotional exhaustion seem to have become part of the job. The fatigue of navigating impossible cultural land mines that none of us signed up for feels commonplace. If you've wanted to quit, you're not alone.

Another proof of how difficult the last few years have been is the fact that we have fewer and fewer people sticking up their hands to lead in Jesus's church. In 2009, when I planted One Harbor Church and in 2013 when Ronnie planted Substance Church, church planting was, dare I say, "sexy." It's what all the cool kids were doing. Multitudes around the world were fired up to go plant a church. Books

sold like hotcakes, and conferences were packed wall to wall with flannel-shirt, skinny-jeans wearing, fancy-latte-drinking young men ready and willing to answer the call. Now, . . . not so much. Denominations and networks are struggling to find potential candidates.

Incentives abound to motivate young potential pastors who've watched pastors get beat down after beat down the last few years. Understandably, they aren't jumping up and down to experience this firsthand. The church has a leadership crisis that is likely to only get worse. Life coach, yes please; church planter, no thanks.

As those in the trenches and on the front lines, our love for the sheep has been tested to the limits, and, in that way, all these difficulties are a gift. They are a gift in that they expose our motives.

Why are we in ministry? Why are we still in these little towns no one even knows about? If it's not a love for Jesus and His sheep, it will be exposed.

I think that getting into ministry can be a lot like newlyweds getting married. In the beginning, you know that other churches have problems, but you're sure that will never happen to you. Like two newlyweds, you imagine you will always love the church, and the church will always love you, and you'll

both live happily ever after. But the longer you're in ministry, the more you log some tough laps around the track, and that excitement can start to diminish. You've been disappointed and frustrated over and over. It can feel like this relationship might not be worth preserving.

The beauty is that, like a married couple, if you can grow old together, that surface affection you felt at first grows deeper into a beautiful love you never imagined. Over time you learn to endure with each other and serve each other in profound ways. There's been some "sickness" and some "bad times," and you're still together. You have had your heart broken, had people leave, but been around long enough to see some of those relationships restored.

What's Not to Love?

If you're new to small-town ministry, you might be thinking, "What's not to love?" On the surface, small towns seem lovable. We love the idyllic ideal of rural life. Slow pace. Friendly people. Fresh veggies from a farmer you know. Kids can play freely. A church on every corner. Drinking iced tea in a rocking chair while waving to neighbors from our front

porches as we watch the sun go down. These are sometimes the images small towns invoke when we don't live there.

We get these ideas about small towns mostly from TV, movies, or songs—lots and lots of folk or country songs. John Denver sang about “country roads” that take us home. Tim McGraw sang about being close to his loved one in his song, “Where the Green Grass Grows.”

We also get these ideas about small towns from traveling through them. Bed and breakfasts litter a lot of small towns. Spend a few days staying on a working farm, eating breakfast at the local diner, and counting fireflies at night, and you'll start wanting to quit your job to move to “almost heaven.” But is that what it's really like? The answer is a mixture of yes and no.

It's true. Small towns are still full of evidence of God's grace, and we do experience some of what I've just described. However, like larger suburban areas or cities, small towns are full of brokenness and pain only Jesus can heal. The shows, movies, and songs tell a part of the story, but it's only a part. To find out, you must go beyond the country songs and the short vacations and actually live in a small town.

Still, a pastor must do more than just live in a small town. A good pastor follows the incarnational way of Jesus and lives

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his life as part of the town. He becomes a member of the community and finds his role is one that lands him in all sorts of suffering.

So, specifically, what's not to love about pastoring in small towns?

For starters, it's small, and that's not always as lovable as it sounds. If you are from a larger place, you are probably going to struggle with the drastically reduced list of options. I hope you really like that diner because it might be the only one in town. I always slightly envy my friends who lead churches in big cities for how easy date night would be. You could seemingly eat at a different restaurant every week for the rest of your life and never eat at the same one twice.

Added to that, you aren't likely to run into anyone you know, especially anyone you pastor. Don't get me wrong, I love my small town, and I love that I see people from our church just about everywhere I go. But on date nights, . . . not so much. Someone pulled up a chair one time and asked for some marriage counseling while my wife and I were clearly on a date. There were only two chairs, and we had a candle in the middle of us. It doesn't take a genius to see we were trying to be alone. I think they even said, "Looks like you guys are on

a date. Hey, real quick . . .” Those kinds of moments will test your love.

This gets at another aspect of small-town life that can be a bit unlovable; it feels like you're in a fishbowl all the time. When I was growing up in my town, our preacher used to say, “If you're gonna do any sinning, don't do it in this town!” So, as a teenager, when I decided I wanted to try smoking a cigar, a borderline unpardonable sin from what I could understand, I would drive thirty-five miles away to a bigger town to ensure I wasn't going to get caught. Now, don't get me wrong, the accountability is nice. I think twice before yelling at someone at a stoplight or being rude to a waitress considering everyone would know by sundown. However, it can be suffocating when there seems to be no anonymity anywhere you go.

What else is unlovable about small towns? Many folks in small towns have an entrenched affection for things contrary to the gospel. We've certainly seen a lot of that in recent years. The rise of Christian nationalism, largely from the rural places in America, has been hard to watch. I grew up hearing, “God and country,” but have come to wonder how many folks actually meant, “Country is god.” People who would identify as followers of Jesus normalizing hating those who are of a different political persuasion as them? That's unlovable.

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There are other loves that are opposed to the gospel. The love of family often goes too far into an idolization of the family. Sure, it's easy to cast stones at big cities for their overemphasis on individualism. But many in small towns have swung the pendulum too far in the other direction. It can feel like the value isn't love for your family but family first, no matter what.

This can be hard to navigate as a pastor. You can feel like you're walking on eggshells when dealing with a subject that might offend the family. In some cases, related people make up a large portion of the church. If one goes, they might all go, and then how could the church survive?

Another unlovable trait in small towns is a hostility toward outsiders, especially those from big cities. Much of this comes from that deep affection for family and for the traditions that have been built around them. Pastors new to town can find breaking into communities like this to be time-consuming and challenging or downright impossible. You are on the back foot before you even start. Suspicious questions or paranoia about what you believe and what new ideas you're going to try to introduce might be lurking in the background, undetected even by those who are wondering. It can take years to earn trust, which can be unfair to a pastor who has only come to help.

For those of you already serving in small-town ministry, I'm sure I've left some out that you may be thinking of. However, for those of you considering it, I've probably given you pause. My hope isn't to make you stop reading in the first chapter but to consider the task of pastoring small towns as honestly as you can. Until we reckon with the challenges that would cause us not to love our town, we won't be pushed down on our knees in prayer to find the kind of love our town desperately needs.

Jesus Wants to Give Us His Boundless Love for Our Small Town

In Ephesians 5:25, Paul instructs husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.” Essentially, husbands, if you need to find your wife more lovable, look at Jesus. In the same way, pastor, if you need more love for the church you lead, look to Jesus. Let the love He has for you, the way He has cared for you, fill your heart with fresh love for Him that can then spill over to those He has placed under your care.

We see a beautiful picture of this in that vulnerable interchange between Jesus and Peter after the resurrection.

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When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said to him, “you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs,” he told him. A second time he asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

“Yes, Lord,” he said to him, “you know that I love you.”

“Shepherd my sheep,” he told him.

He asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was grieved that he asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep,” Jesus said.

(John 21:15–17)

Jesus didn't tell Peter to tend the sheep because they were lovable or because of how many needs they had. Oftentimes we try to motivate ourselves with those kinds of rationales.

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However, shame or duty will never lead us to pastoring the way Jesus calls us to lead. He called on Peter to tend them and feed them out of Peter's love for Jesus. The best way to get more love for the sheep is to love Jesus more. To bask in His affection for you! To the One who "died for all" (2 Cor. 5:15), you are one of those "all." You are loved by the One who in love gave His life for you. Like a frightened or exasperated child finds comfort in a parent's professing their love, receive fresh nourishment as you experience His love cascading over you.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (2 Cor. 1:2-4)

For those who consistently seek to give the comfort of God to others, there's a pattern here to learn from. Fellow pastor, we are to experience it ourselves first before we give it to others. We are to receive grace and peace, mercy and comfort.

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Our afflictions are to encounter the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort Himself. We, the comforters, are to first be comforted.

Take a moment right now before you continue reading to go to the fountainhead of love, love Himself. Behold Him who sees you as you are, knowing every single flaw and sin, and yet abounds in steadfast love and mercy for you. Push aside all the needs of the sheep, all that didn't get done yesterday, all that must get done today. Before you are an undershepherd, you are one of His sheep. You are known by Him. You are loved by Him. He cares about you, not just what you do for other sheep. Be freshly nourished by His love for you. Through all of your wandering, He has brought you back every time. All of the dangers and tribulations, He's kept you through it all.

Consider Him and bask in His love.

Then, and only then, should you and I move on to care for others. Armed with comfort we don't just read about in books but we experience ourselves, we embark on another day filled with opportunities to comfort and love His sheep.

Small town life is different from life in a big city. There is less traffic. People recognize each other at the grocery store. Sporting events carry a different cultural weight, and locals might become used to the smell of a nearby factory. Pastoring here can be an extraordinary task.

In *Pastoring Small Towns*, Ronnie Martin and Donnie Griggs hope to equip pastors and ministry leaders to take on the nuances of pastoring these communities. They point out the cultural realities of these places and give pastors the tools to effectively engage their people with the Gospel.

DONNIE GRIGGS was raised in the small town Morehead City, North Carolina, where he planted One Harbor Church. Donnie's passion is to see churches in small towns and rural areas equipped and empowered to radically engage culture and make disciples. In addition to leading One Harbor, he travels frequently to help strengthen and encourage other church leaders and planters.

RONNIE MARTIN is founder and lead pastor of Substance Church (EFGA) in Ashland, Ohio. Before pastoral ministry, Ronnie was an internationally-known recording artist, producing more than 15 albums for Tooth and Nail Records. Ronnie is also Director of Leader Renewal for Harbor Network, a church planting collective in Kentucky. He has authored six books, including *The God Who Is With Us*, and speaks at conferences for pastors and church planters.

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