

Chapter Three

The Institutional Context of the Rural Church, Today

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The previous chapter provides an overview of major changes that have occurred in American Society since 1950 and discusses the implications of these changes upon rural congregations and clergy. Economic and social changes are not the only ones that have influenced religion's life in Rural America. Parallel to these changes have been changes in American religious faith and practice which have also constrained the way that rural people have organized their religious lives. This chapter examines these changes and discusses the challenges and opportunities they present for rural churches. For simplicity's sake, I have divided the decades since 1950 into two periods. The first period beginning in the 1950s and ending in the 1970s, I call the "Zenith of Modernism". The mid-century marked the high point of influence of mainline protestant denominations and modernist theology. The second period begins in the 1970s and continues to the present, and I use the phrase "Conservatism, Crisis and Consumerism" to characterize this period. During both periods there were changes in the spiritual orientation of Americans and changes in the relationship between religion and the state that had major influences on rural congregations.

Zenith of Modernism.

The second half of the 20th century began with mainline denominations and modernist theologies dominating Christian life in America and ended with the word "Christian" often being associated with Christian conservatism and Biblical inerrancy. These trends had profound influence on American churches in general and rural churches especially. Modernism has many forms, but the two aspects most relevant to the rural church are its theological and managerial aspects.

Theological modernism had its roots in challenges to traditional understandings of the Bible's teachings that began with the development of biology, geology, psychology and linguistics as formal sciences. Discoveries in these areas called into question the veracity of many holy scriptures as interpreted by the then current principles of hermeneutics. Modernist theology tried to reconcile science and scripture by approaching the Bible as the history of the relationship between a people and God rather than as the literal truth dictated by God's Holy Spirit to the biblical writers. Modernism encompasses a wide variety of theological approaches but most modernist theology emphasizes morality and ethics and one's relationship with God. Because the Bible was no longer viewed, by the modernists as an infallible, literal guide to religious faith and practice, doctrinal and denominational differences among Christians came to be understood as embedded in history and relatively trivial. Consequently, since doctrinal differences were viewed more as reflections of historical approaches to Christ than differences over revealed truth, ecumenical values became central to modernist tradition

In 1950 modernist theologies and progressive Protestantism seemed to have triumphed. In fact after the publicity generated by the Scopes trial in 1926, Christian fundamentalism seemed to have faded from the public view. The National Council of Churches, a mainline ecumenical organization dominated by the modernists was seen to represent Christianity and actually exercised a large amount of control over religious broadcasting and the public face of American Christianity. Churches with pre-modernist belief systems were characterized as "sects" in the texts on the sociology of religion at the time. The idea that modernist theology

was natural and that churches should offer a broad variety of programs supervised by a professional clergyman became the norm. Efficiency and good management were hallmarks of a good church. Emphasis on modern management and efficiency was not limited to the mainline denominations. Evangelical faiths also saw the formation of seminaries offering advanced degrees and the rise of a professional rather than part-time, or bivocational clergy.

Although strongly supportive of rural life, modernist churches viewed rural life and rural congregations as challenges. Rural areas were simultaneously viewed as under-churched and over-churched. They were viewed as under-churched because church attendance in Mainline Protestant congregations was lower in many rural areas than in urban ones. However at the same time it was argued that rural churches were too numerous and too small to meet the needs of rural people. Rural congregations were viewed as too small to be economically and spiritually viable—unless they were heavily subsidized by their denominations. Consequently the lack of rural religious participation was viewed as a result of too many small inefficient, sectarian churches.

The rural church reform movement in the first half of the 20th Century was strongly connected to the secular Country Life Movement. This movement saw a rural crisis that could only be solved through education and technology. For many rural advocates of the time, the rural church and pastor were seen as prime movers of rural advancement. Between 1910 and 1930 most major denominations created offices of country life and/or town and country ministry. Although also concerned with social justice issues, these offices emphasized the upgrading and training of rural ministers and lay leaders. To this end, rural training institutes for pastors were created in conjunction with state agricultural extension programs. These institutes persisted well into the 1950s. But by the 1970s were on the wane.

In general, rural church advocates saw the solution to rural America's religious problems to be church consolidation and higher levels of education and pay for rural clergy. Reduction of the number of rural churches would create the resources needed to support a full-time, well trained clergy and a variety of church programs. It was argued that there should be no more than 1 church per 1000 population if rural people were able to worship in modern well-equipped churches under the leadership of seminary trained clergy. However the rural reality of this time was much different. Many rural areas had a church for every 300-400 population, even less in the rural south. As a result most rural congregations had to depend upon part-time, bi-vocational pastors or circuit riding preachers and priests. Early church reformers sought to consolidate churches and where that was not possible to have churches share the same physical facilities in order to provide rural congregations with well-trained and adequately paid clergy. Where possible, churches should merge into non-denominational, federated, or union churches. When the first of the Missouri rural church studies was conducted in 1951, modernist concerns dominated and shaped the study. Much of the early church survey was devoted to physical plant, the number of services offered and the training of clergy. Less attention was paid to belief or creed. Churches that did not seem to embrace modernism were characterized as "sects".

In general the attitudes of most denominations toward their rural congregations did not shift dramatically until the 1980s. However, the interest of church leaders and the American public in rural America during the intervening period declined. It was an era characterized by what Margolis termed as Metropollyana—the idea that rural problems would be solved when sufficient numbers of rural people moved to the city. Instead the attention of religious leaders turned to a number of wider issues. Three of these concerned the relationship between the church and civil society-- issues of separation of church and state, the Civil Rights movement and the anti-war movement. The "hot spots" for ministry were either the planting of a new congregation in the suburbs or doing ministry among the urban, ghettoized poor. Two other

issues concerned the religious community more directly-- the maturation of the ecumenical movement and the decline in the membership and influence of mainline Protestant churches.

The Supreme Court Decision in *Engles vs. Vitale* in 1962, and subsequent court decisions, dealt a serious blow to the association between Christianity, particularly Protestantism, and American values. The eventual abolition of any type of formal school prayer and Bible reading, the celebration of religious holidays by public institutions and other uses of Christian symbolism in public life generated heavy outcry. The O'Hare case was particularly difficult for many because it granted religious freedom to atheists and other non-believers and extended these protections to the local level.

Equally threatening of traditional views of the relationship between church and society were the controversies surrounding the Civil Rights movement. Churches were segregated institutions and African-American clergy such as Martin Luther King were leaders in the struggle against this injustice. The Civil Rights movement was a moral challenge to white Christians in general as well as a challenge to local congregational traditions that avoided stands on divisive political issues. By the end of the 20th century conservative and liberal churches alike had repudiated racism, but the Civil Rights issue was a divisive one for many denominations, particularly those that had strong roots in the antebellum South such as the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ.

The Vietnam War had a divisive influence, also. Experiences of World War II and the early Cold War had made patriotism and anti-communism to become for many Christian core virtues. The eventual opposition to the war by some religious leaders and the National Council of Churches was seen by many as communistic and anti-religious. In addition the Vietnam war protest movement generated strong interests in alternative forms of spirituality that many also viewed with distrust.

Interestingly enough while the above controversies occupied the attention of many U.S. Christians and religious leaders, the impact on the rural church was somewhat different than the impact on the church as a whole because of the traditional conservatism of many rural people. The biggest impact of these battles was the turning of denominational attention away from rural congregations and the continuation of ideas about rural churches that emerged from the country life movement.

The impact of these issues varied considerably by denomination. For many members of conservative faiths they were more a call to political action than anything else. For the more conservative members of mainline denominations, there was a feeling of being marginal to their denomination. These controversies probably led to an increased feeling of isolation among rural members of mainline denominations, but they were probably only one factor. The main effects of these issues was to draw the attention of religious leaders away from rural issues.

Ecumenism and the reunification of the Christian Faith came to fruition in the decades following the Korean War. Christian unification had long been a desire of religious modernists. During this period several denominations merged with those having similar heritages and increased cooperation and mutual recognition of sacraments became more common among churches not sharing a common root. Most prominent were the merging of many Lutheran denominations into the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the unification of the Presbyterian church and the creation of the United Methodist Church. Uniquely, the Congregationalist and Evangelical & Reformed denominations, one with New England roots and the other Germanic heritage combined as the United Church of Christ (UCC). Inter-denominational cooperation was not just limited to those denominations belonging to the National Council of Churches. Cooperation among evangelical Protestants in areas of public policy and morality also increased. Church unification also absorbed much of the attention of

church leaders and denominational assemblies. Many of these cooperated through the National Association of Evangelicals.

Like the church and society issues discussed above, the ecumenical movement did not have a unique impact on rural communities. Church consolidation and unification was probably less innovative for many rural congregations than for urban and suburban ones. The rural church movement and the union church movement had pushed church unification much further along in rural areas than in other parts of the country. For example, while Presbyterians and Methodists maintain their separateness on the national level, joint Presbyterian-Methodist ministries were not uncommon in rural Missouri and in parts of the South. Perhaps, the area most impacted by this was the Mountain West where rural population was scattered. There, the NCC member churches agreed to not compete with one another through agreements called comity agreements.

The trend that probably had the greatest influence on the rural church was the decline in the membership and influence of mainline/modernist Protestant denominations. At the same time, the membership and influence of more fundamentalist or evangelical churches increased tremendously. Religious participation in the U.S. grew in the 1950s.

As a result even though mainline Protestant churches were losing membership in rural and urban areas, these losses were more than compensated for by gains in the suburbs—even though the percentage of suburbanites belonging to these denominations declined. By the end of the 1960s, membership was declining everywhere.

In the 1970s the shifts in numbers became too large to ignore. In 1972 Dean Kelley, an executive of the National Council of Churches wrote a book entitled Why Conservative Churches Are Growing. His book generated much controversy among modernist Christians because he argued that mainline denominations had become so accommodated to the secular world that they could no longer satisfy a hunger for the sacred. Others like Martin Marty argued that the decline was an effect of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. These movements had led to a widespread questioning of traditional institutions—including those of the religious establishment. Whatever the cause, the numbers were mind-numbing. For example, in 1960 United Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopal, Christian (Disciples) and UCC members made up 27 % of American Protestants. Fifteen years later, in 1985, the members of these denominations made up only 16% of Protestants.

Focusing specifically on the rural church, the relative and or absolute decline in the membership of many mainline Protestant denominations and the rise in membership in the more fundamentalist or evangelical churches changed the religious landscape. (In chapters five through eight we will take a closer look at these changes in a variety of rural places.) Basically, membership declined both in inner cities and in the country side with declines in populations of European Americans who traditionally made up these denominations. In addition, membership numbers failed to keep up with population growth in the suburbs as the children of main-line Protestants either stopped going to church, joined more evangelistic congregations or sought new types of spirituality.

Although the rural church movement was born out of a profound concern for material and spiritual well-being of rural people, the line between concern and paternalism is a blurry one. In the decades immediately after world war two, rural congregations of large denominations increasingly felt under-appreciated by their denominations. This feeling of alienation had many sources, however the most important were organizational pressures from within the denomination and the social issues confronted by the church during this period.

Efforts to professionalize the clergy and to standardize the religious experience of denominations had their origin in the desire to serve congregations better and to respond to an ever more mobile society. H. Richard Niebuhr's idea of the clergy person as a professional manager gained wide acceptance. However these efforts created challenges for rural congregations. As proper church became defined as regular weekly Sunday services led by a full-time clergy, rural churches were seen as increasingly problematic, because they lacked the resources needed to sustain religious professionals.

Pressures for consolidation and rationalization of religion and church practices increased. Declining membership rolls and, by extension declining budgets, of denominations also made small congregations a challenge or even a threat to some denominational leaders. In rural areas, where growth was not seen as a way out, rural churches became a potential problem for denominations with declining resources. Declining resources reinforced the need for denominations to prioritize their programs. For the most part, this resulted in a shift of attention away from rural congregations. An unintended consequence of this movement was to make the suburban church the norm against which other churches were judged. As a consequence most efforts related to the rural church involved the education of rural clergy and lay leaders and the development of materials and curricula that more nearly fit the suburban lifestyle.

Efforts to consolidate congregations and to encourage sharing of pastoral resources were also common. Both were often resisted at the local level.

The labeling of rural church as "problem church" did not contribute to the self-esteem of rural congregations and clergy. In fact the theme of self-esteem became very important in later versions of the Missouri Rural Church study. In addition, attempts to consolidate churches often went against long term commitments to a specific church and location. The apparent failure of denominations to acknowledge the importance of local churches to congregants was another source of alienation.

The Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam war created numerous divisions within the church. There was a tendency of rural congregations to be in the minority that opposed denominations taking stands on these issues. The reluctance of rural congregations to embrace these causes, tended to isolate the urban and suburban based church leadership from rural co-religionists. Rural areas were seen as a theological and social problem in addition to an administrative one. Urban unrest, poverty and unchurched populations caused most denominations to turn their attention to central city problems. There was a wide spread subscription to what has been called Metro-Pollyana, that is to say that most rural problems would be solved when the elderly died, excess population migrated to the city, and the remaining population accepted modern ways of doing church.

Mainline Decline and the Rural Crisis.

Although it was not noticed at first, the victory of religious modernism was not nearly as complete as it appeared in the 1950s and early 1960s. During this period mainline denominations continued to grow as a result of a general trend of increased religious participation and continued to dominate public life. However, their growth was sluggish compared to that of more conservative and evangelistic confessions. Mainline denominations were losing market share to other denominations. Evangelistic Christianity experienced rapid growth during these periods in part due to the effective use of television and radio. Fundamentalist religious ideas became acceptable parts of middle class culture and evangelical churches became as common in the suburbs as they had previously been in the backwoods and slums.

The impacts of the above trends on the rural church varied by denomination but rural churches in general felt isolated and neglected. A 1983 article by Royce A. Rose in Baptist History and Heritage titled “The Rural Church: Not Gone but Forgotten” sums up this situation. The feelings were perhaps greatest in rural mainline churches. The center of attention of their denominations had shifted to the central cities and to social struggles that were not always of great concern to rural members. Rural congregations were often socially more conservative than their denominational leadership and they felt that their voice was not being heard. While this was true among Southern Baptists who were growing in rural America at this time, it seems to have been magnified among the modernist denominations.

The membership declines suffered by many churches caused severe budget crises in many denominations. Small rural congregations were regarded as a drain on denominational resources. Many programs and institutions that supported rural ministries like the Episcopal center in Missouri were closed. The cost of supplying clergy to small rural congregations was becoming a greater and greater burden to these denominations. Many denominations closed and consolidated rural churches to save financial and human resources.

The farm crisis of the 1980s brought the rural church back to the attention of many mainline denominations. The suffering of farm families and farm communities was well documented by the media. Equally important however was the research by two University of Missouri researchers— William and Judy Heffernan – which showed that the church had failed to meet the needs of members facing loss of their livelihoods and homes. Their finding that many bankrupt farmers received more support and sympathy from their bankers than they did from their churches, was a call to action. Many denominations re-examined their relationship to rural congregations and there was a renewed interest in providing support to rural congregations and pastors. New offices were created to support rural congregations like the Heartland Ministry of the United Methodist church and old efforts like the Catholic Rural Life Committee were re-animated. This effort however was more a response to the suffering of people in agriculturally dependent areas than it was a comprehensive look at rural churches.

Religion in a Consumer Culture.

One of the most interesting features of American religion since the 1990s has been the influence of consumer culture on American religious life. Consumer culture is about “choice” and “lifestyle”. Increasingly the self-identity of Americans is based upon the decisions concerning the ways that they spend their money and time rather than upon one’s job, ethnicity or religion. Our use of the term “consumer culture” does not necessarily mean that Americans are more materialistic than they were in the past. It is a metaphor that describes the increased importance that lifestyle and the consumer decisions related to lifestyle provide us with identity.

The 1990s saw an increased interest in the spiritual among Americans but the approach to spiritual life mirrored our consumer lifestyle. Spiritual consumers are often referred to as “seekers”. Like all consumers, seekers are looking for convenience, good service and products that enhance their well-being. Seekers shop for churches much the same way that they shop for clothing– they try to match their style and to get a good fit. They do not shop in their neighborhood. If they are churched they do not limit themselves to their neighborhood or their parent denominations. If they are unchurched they are shopping for a personal spiritual home. Creed is less important, the seeker will pick and choose what elements they will believe. Search for a church will begin with the church nearest to one’s house and continue until there is a match with one’s spiritual needs.

The rise of a consumer culture has had two interesting and somewhat contrasting impacts on religious life in America. The old ecumenical movement which attempted to standardize and unite U.S. Protestants has not disappeared, but it clearly has failed to achieve its objectives. People don't want a standardized religious experience any more than they all want black cars. While the organizational goals of the ecumenical movement will not be successful, denominational and theological differences have become increasingly irrelevant to the general public. Within the mainline tradition, individuals may switch from a Methodist to a Lutheran congregation or from a Presbyterian to Disciples one. Within the Evangelical tradition, there is an increasing acceptance of transfers membership from churches outside one's denomination as well-- as long as they share the idea of Biblical inerrancy and perhaps a common form of Baptism. In fact, many Evangelical churches no longer advertise their denominational connection. And the spread of independent, non-denominational congregations has been dramatic.

The spiritual consumer sees religion, like other lifestyle choices as an individual one. The "one size fits all" doctrines of major denominations are a little uncomfortable for the niche oriented spiritual consumer. Increasingly the modern church has no denomination or downplays its denominational affiliation and instead uses slogans like "Bible based" or "Family oriented"-- words likely to attract the seeker. The larger consumer church--often called the mega-church-- is the spiritual equivalent of a Home Depot or a Walmart which offers a variety of options and services at convenient times and locations. At the other end of the spectrum is the small niche (boutique) church that is based on an important spiritual gift shared by all members. Both types of congregations meet the needs of the new spiritual consumer by providing them with the spiritual experiences that they are seeking.

The trend towards consumer religion has also had an impact on rural churches, but this impact varies tremendously. On one hand, the declining significance of denomination means increased competition for members. This competition has extended beyond the people living within 5 or 6 miles of a church. People now drive 30 or more miles to worship just as they drive considerable distances to shop and work. They by-pass the old country church to find the church that provides them with the spiritual experience that they need--just as they bypass the local dry goods store to buy their favorite brand of jeans at a distant mall. The traditional rural church cannot compete head-on with the "full-service" mega-church.

However, roads run both ways. Just as people can travel out of the rural areas to worship, people can drive out to rural areas to worship. Rural churches that recognize and build upon their spiritual gifts can maintain and attract membership. The destiny of a rural church is no longer tied to their neighborhood or to the birth and death rates of believers.

While rural mega-churches are rare, a rural church located on a rural commuter route has opportunity to grow, -- if it is willing to develop programs to fit the needs of the rural lifestyle community. Although these churches may not become extremely large, they can grow to a place where they provide a wide number of programs carried out by volunteers and paid staff. The key to the vitality of these congregations is to bridge the gap between the spiritual needs of older members who are rooted to the land and to the traditions of a place with those of the rural commuter and the new rural residents. Many open country churches are struggling even though the population in their area is growing because they have not been able to address this challenge.

Many rural churches would not want to compete with the mega-church if they could. This is a good thing. They can no more compete head to head with these churches than the local Five and Dime can compete with Walmart. However, the quest for spiritual experience presents opportunities for small congregations. Further, some will find community and relationships in the small church which they might not find in the larger church. And for those who desire to use

their lives and gifts for ministry to the needs of others, opportunities may abound in the small rural church.

Assessing the Country Life Movement

When this study was first conducted back in 1952, it had an historic background. Although it was well conceived, well designed, well conducted and well reported, it was hardly pure science at work. Early in the 20th century there grew up a movement that had much in common with the urban-oriented Social Gospel Movement which addressed the ills of the inner-cities. Its focus was upon the ills of the country side. Among the issues were tenancy, poor schools, poor health care, bad roads, and poor farm practices. Movement leaders looked to the churches as allies in addressing these ills. They sought to upgrade the churches in order to correct the social problems by providing better training for the ministers.

A primary concern of the 1952 study, like several that had been done earlier, was to assess the current condition in rural churches in order to have a benchmark from which to proceed in making changes that would issue in desired results. The following table summaries both:

Current 1952 Condition

1. One room meeting house
2. Sunday School with occasional worship
3. Part-time, poorly trained pastor
4. A sect "in but not of" the community
5. Small, weak generally over churching
6. Very conservative folk
7. Pre-modern in world view
8. Mostly poor folk
9. Denominationally exclusive
10. Poorly organized community.

Desired Condition

1. Well-appointed church plant
2. Full-service church
3. Well-trained pastor on the field
4. Church at the center of the community
5. Large, one church per 1,000 persons
6. Progressive folk
7. Modern world view
8. Middle-class folk
9. Ecumenical cooperation
10. Vibrant community.

We have already noted the changes related to items one and two in this chart. Most of the church facilities are much improved since 1952; and most have become "full-time", worshipping every Sunday and adding organizations and activities.

Item three contains some surprises in that the hopes of the advocates of rural church reform in 1952 will find that their hopes have been realized, in part, but not in the way that they anticipated. And the same is true for items four and five. The set of pastors are better educated as a whole. But the changes in community life noted in Chapter Two has worked against the realization of the goal or vision that the reformers held. They had wanted to see a set of discreet, six-mile or township communities across rural America with one or two strong churches, with good facilities pastored by well-trained pastors who had a sense of call and commitment to rural church work. It was the fruition of the dream of Thomas Jefferson for America. It was not to be.

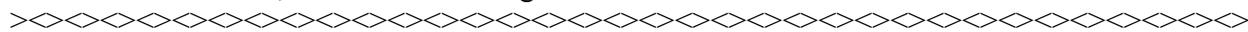
At best, these small township communities have become neighborhoods within a larger rural community, often centered in a "Walmart" town. Consequently, the churches have not grown to be as large as they had hoped because the people are not there. Lacking adequate resources and work, the churches have not been able to attract and support a pastor, full-time, living on the church field. And those who live within the traditional, township community do not necessarily elect to attend church within the township, nor are people who live elsewhere necessarily deterred from attending a church within the township. To put it another way "bounded" communities have been replaced by "centered" communities, at least in part, and many of the surviving rural churches have learned to make do. This is the reason that we call for rural churches to consider being niche or boutique churches.

Concerning item 4 it seems that there are contrasting trends there. The stock of rural churches is more sectarian in heritage now than then. The Made in America ecclesiology has not been replaced with the Western European Heritage ecclesiology as the Rural Life advocates had hoped. One is tempted to say that in many of the townships the Southern Baptist ecclesiology has become dominant. But this observation needs to be tempered by the fact that among the formally trained Southern Baptist ministers there has been a trend toward thinking of the work of the church more in terms of the Western European model. That is, they have moved from a sectarian position toward a church orientation that sees the church as integrally related in total life of the community. There is a tension here. And sometimes there is hostility between rural and town Southern Baptist congregations, or at least their pastors, at this very point. It is this trend that causes me to call your attention to contrasting trends. It may well be that the stock of churches in the sample, while more sectarian in name, are more like the "church at the center" model than they were in 1952.



Carl Dudley and Doug Walrath have developed a useful typology for identifying the community role of churches as Dominant, Denominational, and Distinctive. The dominant church is the one or perhaps two or three in a community that are big, notable, and considered powerful.

The denominational are those that serve as a place for persons who have historically been connected to that faith family. Often they are small and selective. The distinctive is that church that is in the community but not a part of it. Let me give an example. Our small town has a United Methodist and a Southern Baptist church that are the dominant congregations in town. There are two National Baptist and one Christian Methodist Episcopal churches that serve the African American people of the town. These focus on the people of their denominational heritages. And on the outskirts of town is a non-denominational, new charismatic congregation and a Church of God, Cleveland that might be termed distinctive.



Based on the responses to the interviews one might say that rural church members in the sample township continue to be rather conservative, but not radically so. Many have made peace with the modern world view, at least in part. And they have become increasingly middle-class in their life-style. One of the real surprises was to note that these churches have increasingly become congregations not of poor farmers alone, but of business and professionals as well as educators and civil servants.

Moving to item nine, Gary Farley recalls being pastor of a rural Southern Baptist church in north Missouri in the late 1950s and early 1960s that was ecumenical in its relationships with neighboring congregations of other faith families. It was criticized for this by pastors of other

Southern Baptist Congregations. My sense is that the interviews reveal a growth of grassroots ecumenism since the 1950s. But the denominational ecumenism that the Rural Life leaders had hoped for has not fared as well. One of their pet concepts, the federated church comprised of members from several denominational heritages, was not widely implemented and disappeared from our sample in 1998.

And, as I have noted earlier, the image of a vibrant, well-organized small community has not become a reality due to changes in the economy and the general ways in which everyday life has come to be organized. This is the reason that we believe that there is a need for a new vision for rural America. This is a reason that we are calling for the "re-churching" of rural America.

Conclusion

One of the basic insights of sociology is that our personal and corporate efforts to produce change, usually result in some *unintended consequences*. This chapter about the institutional changes in rural America and her churches certainly supports this insight. The goals that drove the Rural Life Movement and the 1952 study of rural churches in Missouri worked from an image of a desired future. While one might debate its desirability, the fact remains that changes that were occurring locally, regionally, nationally, and globally in governmental policies, production agriculture, culture, and the economy made this vision of the future impossible and obsolete.

We would argue that a new vision is needed. The general elements are found in this list taken from *Rural Ministry*, a book written by rural church leaders and academics from many Mainline Protestant denominations and Roman Catholics:

1. Agriculture and other natural resource-based economic activity should be sustainable and renewable.
2. Rural persons/families should be able to enjoy the just fruits of their labors.
3. Rural people should be presented the good news of the gospel and encouraged to respond by ever praising Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.
4. Rural people should be taught about the beliefs and values of the Christian life and encouraged to apply them in their daily lives.
5. Rural people have a special calling to be stewards of the natural resources God has placed in the world.
6. Worshiping/ministering congregations of Christian faith should be available to all rural people.
7. Policies and practices of the American government and economy have often contributed to personal and community disadvantage in rural America, and these areas of neglect should be redressed through policies geared to justice and fairness.
8. The old six-mile boundaries of community, the driving paradigm of the settlement period, is no longer functional. The 30-mile (or county) model seems to be emerging; so, we are called to form and model new communities.

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While we work for this and for churches that will do mission and ministry to the people who live in this new rural world of America, we must also help the churches that now exist to do good work in their current context. Further, we need to encourage some churches to finish out their ministry where it is no longer needed. And we need to encourage the creation of new congregations to minister and to be on mission, appropriately, to the new realities of rural America.

We realize that both changes in our society and unanticipated consequences of a quest for

the vision expressed above will probably mean that it will not be achieved in full, and probably should not be, yet it is an appropriate vision for Christians and others of good will to seek. We hope that it will catch your imagination.

Suggested Readings

Lyle Schaller, *What We Have Learned*, Abingdon Press, 2001. A good summary of the conclusions Schaller, the leading student of Protestant Church life in America over the past 40 years, has drawn.

