

Chapter Four

How the Rural Churches Have Responded to Change

"Precious Memories: Our Vanishing Rural Churches" was aired by Arkansas Public Television in late 1999. Beautifully filmed and well-narrated, it told the story of 5 rural churches in that state two closed, one closing, and two struggling to continue. A similar documentary dealing with Minnesota rural churches, and a Public Radio Broadcast about rural churches in the Dakotas appeared in early 2000 and followed the same story line. Certainly, many rural churches are closing. And there is a sadness about a church house standing silent by the side of the road. It appears that it has become almost an "article of faith" that all rural churches are headed toward death. Their future is to have no future. As is often the case, random observations have been codified into an axiom, which upon closer inspection proves to be erroneous.

Yes, some rural churches are dying. Often there are good reasons for this death. Many have fulfilled their purpose, and their closure, while sad, should also be celebrative and affirming. Often, this closure is a part of a larger, ecological process, we are calling the "re-churching" of rural America. Given the fact that our stock of rural churches were put in place to serve the 19th century pattern of community life and organization, and given the facts that many rural areas have experienced a deep decline in population density and the means of transportation have improved dramatically in the past century, it seems altogether logical that some rural churches would close. Their ministry had been fulfilled. But, this is not the inevitable future of them all.

In 1952 the Missouri researchers found 505 congregations in their sample of 99 townships. In 1999 they found only 429 congregations out there in these townships. Immediately, one notes a net loss of 79 congregations. Closer investigation reveals that about 150 of the original 505 have closed, moved, or merged. So we are probably looking at a loss of about one in four. Further, during the whole period the researchers have been able to identify as many as 672 congregations that existed, some only briefly, within these 99 townships. So, in actuality 257 congregations that served these townships at some point in the past 50 year period no longer exist. Hidden in these numbers is the fact that almost 100 new congregations have been successfully planted and grown in these communities during the nearly 50 years covered by the study. This means that slightly more than 20 percent of our churches are in their first or second generation of life.

The reality is that birth and death of congregations is a common event, not only in the countryside, but in cities as well. As a matter of comparison, nearly three out of four of the churches in the city of Kansas City, Missouri, affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention in 1950 have closed, moved or merged. I suspect that the statistics for all denominations and their churches there and in most cities would not be much different. The point is that mortality of a congregation was much more an urban problem, than a rural one, in the second half of the 20th century. Or as one astute observer has expressed it, "It seems that Jesus offers Eternal Life to persons, not to local congregations." (This report can be found on the ruralchurch.us site under the tab, sociological studies.)

Both human, or sociological, and spiritual reasons are cited for the closing of churches.

Many of the socioeconomic changes discussed in Chapter Two have been contributing factors. Rural communities in 1950 tended to be agriculturally based, had significant identity bonds, were about six miles square, and were rather isolated. Most of them had a church, or a set of churches, that focused on serving, caring for, and evangelizing the people in that community. Many of these communities were also served by a school, stores, a post office, civic and social clubs and other organizations. Together they comprised a unit or set of the basic institutions of life.

When founded, decades earlier, these communities had been "walk around" places. The bulk of the residents lived out their lives, for the most part, in this little social community world. Changes in transportation, in agriculture, the delivery of educational and other governmental services, and retailing have made many of these places no longer functional in their original, founding sense. Often, there was no compelling reason for people to continue to live on the land, so they moved away, perhaps to a nearby large town. Those who remain in a rural setting, often are connected with several other places--towns where they work, get services, attend school, or even attend church.

There seems to have been two conflicting perspectives about what to do about the churches that served the declining rural communities. One has been to try to keep the church going as the surviving center of community life. The other has been to refocus effort and resources toward having a strong congregation in the larger rural communities or towns where services and trade have been re-located.. A by-product of the latter strategy has been an attitude that affirms euthanasia, active or passive, toward many rural churches.

Our data seems to suggest that slowly the second strategy is winning out. Since 1952 there has been a net loss of 98 open country congregations in the sample townships, from 322 to 224. Conversely, the number of congregations in the large towns has almost doubled, from 68 to 135.

It is our observation that this refocusing has been rather intentional on the part of many of the Mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholics. Scores of open country and village congregations have been intentionally closed, in the townships we are studying, as a part of a well constructed mission strategy. Across North America the numbers of intentionally closed rural congregations in the past half century run into the thousands. The reasoning behind this is that the best use of resources and the wisest plan would be to have a few "full-service" congregations in strategic towns. It is anticipated that people will drive from their rural communities to participate in a congregation that has good quality facilities, staff and programming. While this is often true, many people do not make all of their decisions, particularly spiritual ones, it seems, rationally. We find that many people, particularly the older ones, have opted to "make do" with less in facilities, programs, and professional pastoral leadership, in order to maintain a church in their local community over which they have a sense of ownership and control.

Before continuing, let's summarize the human reasons for the closing of rural churches that we have identified to this point, as follows: (1)the demise of the community that the church was constituted to serve; (2)limited resources; (3)denominational strategy; and (4)decline or change of the numbers and religious affiliation of the persons living in the community. Added to this can be factors such as conflict among members, destruction of the facilities by fire or natural disaster, and loss of leadership by death or their relocation.

Viewed from a spiritual perspective, apathy, spiritual coldness, Satanic attack, and lack of commitment are often cited by observers as causes of the death of a congregation. Inauthentic leaders and sinful conduct would be added by others.

The record of the Southern Baptists in the townships studied, and across the nation, in terms of the vitality of their rural churches to this point has been better than other large denominations. Actually, the total number in our study declined by only 7 from 123 in 1952 to 116 most recently. While the specific numbers for the congregations is not available, generally the number of rural members in churches related to the SBC have nearly doubled since 1952.

Leaders among the Baptists are sometime tempted to attribute this comparative success to spiritual reasons, and a case might be made for their commitment to evangelistic outreach, but human, or sociological, reasons also have played an important role. I would site the following factors as being crucial: (1) the local control of the church. Local leaders have invested themselves and their resources in making the church go and grow. Closure would be a great personal loss, a defeat; (2) where the community is rather stable, the church tends to reflect the character of the community; (3) personnel costs may be less than for a mainline church; (4) judicatories tend to be smaller, closer at hand, and more accessible than with the Mainlines; and (5) pastoral leadership is generally easily available and responsive to the expectations of the congregational leadership. This is because of their historic acceptance of bivocational, not formally trained, ministers to pastor churches.

Within the sectarian or residual category of churches, the fundamentalist, independent congregations seem to have a very high attrition rate. This is because these congregations are normally pulled together by a strong leader, and the congregation tends to thrive or die in terms of the success of the leader. If the leader becomes disinterested, leaves, or is discredited, often the congregation disbands. One finds a pattern of Boom or Bust.

It seems then that rural churches have been closing, for a variety of reasons, all along. Situations change and institutions become no longer viable. From a distance it may appear to observers like us ever so logical that some of these churches need only to change and adapt to their new environment and continue to exist. Usually, this does not happen. Sometimes it seems better to begin afresh.

But enough about death. We found lots of life out there in the rural American churches surveyed in this study. Vital churches doing a variety of good things were common. New churches, thriving churches, changed churches. It is time to move on and look at these things. The story we want to focus upon in this report is the life, rather than, the death of rural churches across North America.

Signs of Vitality

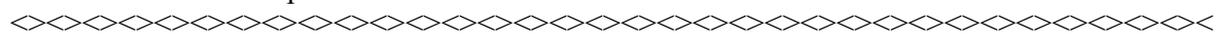
As we considered the data gathered by the researchers in this project, we were able to abstract several factors that indicated vitality in rural congregations. In this section we will present our findings:

First, the one-room clapboard church, with a “path out back” to a privy which was also a favored residence for wasps and hornets during the summer months, has been replaced, mostly. By 1982 when the study was made for the third time, most of the 493 churches had improved their facilities by adding Sunday School classrooms, fellowship halls, and indoor plumbing. The rough old pews had been replaced and/or padded. Air conditioning and a sound

system had been added. And while in many cases the facilities are still inferior to those where the children of the members living elsewhere now worship, they are a far cry from the way things were at the mid-point of the 20th century. The researchers in 1997-99 found much evidence of great pride in the accomplishments being made in the church facilities. They also found that many of the churches have continued to make significant improvements to their facilities. However, the pace has slowed a bit. I am tempted to say that the one room church of 1952 has either improved its facilities, or it has died.

Second, many of the rural churches studied in 1952 were essentially a weekly Sunday School, led by lay persons, with a minister who came in from some distance to lead in worship one or two Sundays a month. Then, less than half of the churches held worship services every Sunday. Today almost all of the churches, even those which are yoked with another congregation, hold weekly worship services. From 1952 to 1982 there was a great expansion of age group and interest group organizations in these rural churches. Some of this was driven by denominational agencies that promoted these organizations and related programs. One hears interesting stories of competition among the churches in a community. If the Methodists down the road, or across the street, improved their facilities or added an organization or program, the Baptists were likely to do the same. On occasions pastors and judicatory persons made use of this spirit of competition to encourage needed improvements. In many of the congregations there has been a sometimes subtle, sometimes conflictive shift in leadership in the churches. More and more it is the pastor who is the primary leader of the church, replacing the dominance of lay leaders.

Since 1982 the rate of change has slowed. This is explained in part by the fact that the churches have adapted and made the changes that they could make. But with the shrinking and aging of congregations, some churches have cut back on programs in 1982, particularly ones held at night. Evidence of this is seen, for example, in a decline in the percentage of churches having Sunday and Wednesday night service, this in spite of the fact that the percentage of non-mainline churches (which historically were more likely to have these services) in the study has increased. Personally, I worry that this cutting back on activities might be a kind of "early warning" sign for future decline and ultimate demise. It may well be that this is indicative of an aging, shrinking, less committed congregation, all of which conditions are associated with death. Doing less may make the church less attractive to potential members who are looking for a fuller set of activities for their families. Most pastors of small rural churches with a very limited set of activities have first hand knowledge of families that drive away from the community of his/her church to a town church, not so much for theological or worship style reasons, as for the fuller programmatic menu they find there. And this will continue. While the data from the survey does not reveal this, observation does. More and more of the major congregations found in larger rural trade area, what are often called the Wal-mart towns, are adding staff, facilities and programs. They take as their model the mega churches of the urban suburbs. They see persons within a 20 to 30 minute drive as potential members.



For many open country and village churches, particularly those of the Made in America tradition the change from being a Sunday School with worship one or two Sundays each month was the second major change in the operation of the church since the time that they were founded back in the 19th century. Then, the activities of the churches focused on a set of

weekend meetings, once a month. On a Saturday the church came together to conduct business. The major focus of the meeting was to settle any differences between or among the members and to deal with any reports of unholy behavior by members. If there were any problems, some of the deacons were assigned to mediate a dispute, or to find out the facts about accusations of unholiness and report back to the church the next month's meeting. Efforts then were made to get an erring member to repent of his or her sins. When these efforts did not succeed, the offender was excluded from the fellowship. But even then, there was hope that in time the former member would repent and be restored.

Most often, however, the Saturday meeting found things moving smoothly in the fellowship of the church. The clerk would note in the minutes something to the effect, "The church met in regular business meeting. It was found that the church was in union. Plans were made to hold worship services on the morrow." Good fellowship and good worship were seen as integrally related.

In addition to this monthly set of church meetings, many of the congregations also held protracted or revival meetings, mostly in the summer after the crops had been "laid by". They would continue for a week, or two, or more. The preaching was "hard". The expectation was that the Holy Spirit would convict the sinners of their sinfulness. Confession and repentance would follow. For the erring church member there was restoration. For the unaffiliated there was the hope of experience of God's grace in the form of a transforming "new birth". God was believed to be the initiator or the conversion process. The sinner was expected to plead with God to save her. Even the most ardent pleadings were not always responded to with an experience of God's saving grace. While the elements of the process varied from those churches with a Calvinist bent to those with a more Armenian theology, the goal was the same.

Following the Civil War the movement to add a weekly Sunday School to the activities of the church grew strong. Earlier, it was expected that Bible Study and religious instruction would be conducted in the home. But it did not always happen. So, the Sunday School was created to supplement the efforts of the home. Missionaries from the American Sunday School Union crisscrossed the nation. They encouraged the existing churches to add a Sunday School. And in places where this did not happen, or where there were no churches, they would find and train workers to start a union (non-denominational) school. Many of the denominations cooperated with this effort and the union selected passages of scripture that were used for both union school and denominational Sunday School materials. In the report for Missouri in 1891 there were 911 union schools and about 4,000 denominational ones.

The Frontier Four denominations soon realized that preparing material for Sunday Schools was a source of steady income, a means of indoctrination in the belief system of the denomination, and a way of tying the local congregation to the denomination. Certainly, this was the case with the Baptists, the Methodists, and the Presbyterians.

When a church started a Sunday School, it moved from being a monthly meeting to being an organization that came together weekly. In some instances the churches kept the Sunday School separate from the church. But gradually the Sunday School became the engine that drove the church and became the focus of much of its activity. At the same time the practice of church discipline declined. It seems that the church grew to expect the Sunday School's teaching and the moral suasion of the class to direct the church members in holy living. The Sunday School also became the primary instrument of outreach. It became the "port of entry" for the unchurched,

increasingly. Consequently, although the annual revival meeting has continued in many of the rural churches, it has been shortened to one week, often less, and far less expectations are attached to it. (*I know that this was true of the Baptists, but what about the Disciples, Methodists and Cumberlands?*)



Third, we observed that there seems to be some correlation between having a pastor who serves a single congregation and viability. At least, more of the churches in 1999 had a pastor that served them alone than was the case in 1952. Conversely, congregations, particularly small ones, in a multi-point charge, seem to be more vulnerable to demise. We see that there are fewer occasions for multi-point churches today than in the past. However, since the Mainlines and Roman Catholics use this system more than the Made in America denominations and churches, and they have been in decline, one cannot help but be concerned about continuing slippage in their rural churches. It seems that when a pastor, even a bivocational one with little theological training, is focused on serving a single congregation there is a greater likelihood that it will be stable or growing. Folk knowledge continues that having the pastor living in the community served by the church is often yet another plus. The good news, then, may be that increasing numbers of the churches in the study are not in a yoked relationship with another church or churches.

Fourth, nearly two-fifths of the active members of the reporting churches live outside the traditional bounds of the church; that is, beyond three miles from the church building. While we do not have comparative data, this is certainly a change from the historic understanding that a church is to focus on serving only its home township, drawing the bulk of its membership from within three miles of its location. I treat this as a sign of vitality because it indicates that the church is attracting new people, or retaining some old ones who have moved outside of the traditional catchment area. A key for the continued viability of many rural churches is to become more regional, finding a "signature" ministry that identifies the church. a church that has been threatened by a shrinking population base in its traditional community. Given the weakening or breaking down of the bonds that formerly tied the residents to a township community, this seems to be a wise strategy for many congregations. Further, it is an axiom of sociology that humankind longs for community. And traditional rural communities are breaking down; so, a church with a strong sense of being a "caring community" of faith will have a strong attraction and can continue to be viable if it is permeable by persons new to the community. It is common for the member of a rural church to speak of it being "like a family".

Fifth, 42.5 percent of the respondents said that their church was growing or increasing in membership. This is up 5 percent from the 1982 round of this study. Only 25 percent said that their church is in decline. Of course this is perception, not hard data. But, what people see as true is true in its consequences for them. Certainly, this is a different perception of the rural church than the one presented in the "Precious Memories" video mentioned at the outset of this chapter. Grassroots folk express hope for the future of their church.

Sixth, not only did 78 percent, almost four out of five, of the churches do major renovation and addition of facilities since 1982, many have purchased and are using modern technology. This openness to using technology, means that small rural churches can access the best in instruction, methodology, music and entertainment. VCRs, DVDs, the Internet, and advances in using video downlinks for continuing education mean that being small and rural no

longer translates as “disadvantaged”. The only restraints are the funds to obtain, wisdom in making selections, and an openness to use these resources. One way that is being address is for area judicatories to purchase the resources and lend them to member churches. Even some very small rural congregation now have very good sound systems that allows them to compensate for the limitations that a local keyboardist might present.

Seventh, the average income of the 415 churches in 1999 was nearly \$52,000, up from \$20,000 in 1982. This exceeds inflation. While this is not enough to support a full-time, resident pastor and a lot of church programs, (that would generally call for an income of \$75,000 to \$100,000) it seems that it is enough for a rural church to be reasonably "comfortable", paying its pastor, keep up with its bills, supporting good causes in the community, and supporting the work of its denomination and/or mission work elsewhere. Most of these churches do not carry much debt to service. Most take care of renovations and improvements with "off budget" donations. Most of these church are well populated with senior adults, a grouping that has the most discretionary funds ever. For the most part, these churches do not go wanting. While they now hire more maintenance and renovation work done than in the past, they still do much of it themselves.

We found that typically, nearly half of the income of the churches was used to support their pastor and his/her family. The increased affluence and financial security of the rural churches has not caused them to become selfish. They average passing along 25 percent of their income for benevolence, the support of mission work, and the activities of their denomination. This leaves a little over one-quarter of their income for utilities, regular maintenance, and church supplies.

Eighth, several questions in the interview schedule dealt with attitudes about social issues, theological issues, support of organizations dealing with concerns for justice and with ministry to the needy, and relationships with members and churches connected with the other denominations. The church leaders and pastors who responded tilted toward the conservative side on social and theological issues. The churches are more likely to provide support for benevolence ministries than for social justice activities. The pastors, while very conservative in outlook, tend to be a little more liberal than their lay leaders. On the other hand, we find some movement toward a more inclusive stance in relationship to persons connected with other faith families. The barriers that retarded movement from one denomination to another found in 1952 have been lowered somewhat, and sharing of Holy Communion (or the Lord's Supper) has been liberalized. We found a growing "grass roots" ecumenism. While the people seem to continue to wear their denominational labels with some degree of pride, they are not as likely to "fence out of the Kingdom" those who do not wear the same label.

Finally, in spite of such negatives as the loss of some congregations, declining population in many of the townships, and the aging of many of the congregations, we found that 87 percent are optimistic about the future of their church. And 82 percent are actively preparing for the future. While the optimism might be passed off as "the expected response," the fact that more than four out of every five churches is actively preparing for the future is heartening. The video, "Precious Memories", seems to have gotten it wrong. Instead of five dead and possibly dying churches, to be true to what local rural church people are thinking, there should have been only one church expecting to die and four churches excited and planning for a fine feature.

I had a wise seminary professor who, talking to us about our sermons, said, "Give them the cream, not the separator." By this he meant that we should share with our congregation the

product of our study, not the apparatus that we used to prepare it. I have tried to be true to this advice in this report. I have scanned the findings of the researchers and extracted these nine primary insights that I believe will help our rural churches and their leaders be more effective in the coming century. We will be putting the apparatus, the "separator", on our web page. There you can find the interview schedules used. You can find the results that were gathered. And you can find the statistical tabulation

Let me summarize this section by noting that while the rate of change, or response to change, seems to have slowed since 1982, we find that the churches that currently serve our 99 townships generally have improved facilities, better equipment, more activities, more income, increased services of a pastor, and seem to fit the values of the area that they serve. Most see themselves as growing, reaching persons from beyond the traditional bounds of their community, and hopeful about their future.

Issues Related to Rural Church Life

The researchers for the rural church study in Missouri interviewed church leaders and pastors in about 400 congregations across that state. They asked about the problems and advantages of rural churches themselves and about the advantages and disadvantages of pastoring rural churches. Below I have collected and summarized the comments. I did not try keep track of the frequencies of the comments.

Note that a particular characteristic might appear both as an advantage and as a problem. Also, the lists may contain contradictory observations. (For example, some listed a lack of money as a problem, and others listed the availability of money as an asset.) This is alright because of contextual differences. And some of the churches are healthy and others are not. Again, note that this is a compilation of responses. As such it is not correct or in error. It is simply a report of what the interviewers. Later when we think about sustainability we will need to take a second look at this list. (*Be sure that we revisit this in the concluding chapter.*) On the Missouri School of Religion webpage you will find an extended discussion of the items listed below. You are invited to submit your comments and observations for future posting at the site.

Problems noted by our respondents which make rural ministry difficult clustered around the following 10 topics:

1. Aging congregation.
2. Traditional or local in perspective and not open to change, or welcoming of the new persons, methods, programs.
3. Lack of young people in the church.
4. Shortage of money and other resources
5. Declining population base in the area served.
6. Unable to offer a variety of programs and activities due to limited number of persons active in the congregation..
7. To few people with leadership abilities and training in the congregation.
8. Hard to keep a minister for the church.
9. Competition from secular activities.

10. Remaining true to the Gospel and proclaiming it properly in an age of secularity.

Conversely, the advantages that rural ministry offers seems to cluster around these 10 topics:

1. Its relational, "like family", atmosphere.
2. Dedicated workers who are reliable.
3. Allow the pastor to be a shepherd/leader.
4. Deeply involved in ministry to one another and to the community.
5. Strong financial support to address the needs of the church and its ministry.
6. Actively supportive of the world missions enterprise.
7. Deep abiding faith that has carried many through difficult times, helping them to grow spiritually.
8. Open minded and accepting of new ideas.
9. Supportive of other small churches.
10. Love is experienced in the congregation.

Consider which of these advantages and disadvantages are descriptive of a rural or town congregation with which you are well acquainted.

The problems that rural pastors may have to confront, or otherwise deal with can be congregated around these 10 topics:

1. Small town mentality conservative, pre-modern in thinking, resistant to change, suspicious of the "different".
2. Limited access to some modern conveniences and cultural activities close at hand.
3. Time constraints related to serving bivocationally, or in a multi-point charge.
4. Constraint of opportunities to grow a church to a larger, more active size.
5. Poor self-image for self and church.
6. Struggles over traditions that seem to stifle vision and change.
7. Sacrifices by spouse and children related to living in a rural area.
8. Sense of being "under-employed" or lacking challenges that are related to ones gifts and training.
9. Stress related to the dysfunctionality of persons in the community; e.g. gossip, addictions, and abuses.
10. Lack of material resources in the church to provide the kind of ministry that one wants to be able to provide.

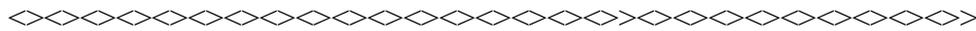
And, the advantages for those of us who do rural ministry are identified and collected in this list of 10:

1. Enjoyment of the intimacy and familiar nature of the congregation.
2. The depth of relationships with congregants which makes meaningful shepherding ministry possible.
3. People who are willing to follow their pastor and are open to new ways of doing things.
4. Relationships with mature Christians who have a deeply rooted spirituality.
5. Relaxed pace in the community.
6. Acceptance and affirmation by the church and community.

7. Involvement in the larger life of the community and its institutions.
8. Working with church leaders who really care deeply about ministry to others.
9. Able to move around the community feeling known and knowing.
10. The sense that one's life is counting for something vital.

Consider how each of these lists speaks to your experience and understanding of rural ministry. Has this been your observation? What misses the point, or distorts it? What has been left out, or missed? Now, how might the problems be addressed by a church, its pastor, and/or a cluster of churches? How might the advantages be maximized for health in the congregation?

One observation that comes to mind from reading this report is that there are apparently some very healthy rural churches and some that are sick. Further, there are some pastors who are very happy with the church(es) that they serve, and others who are unhappy and/or disheartened. Often the two are connected; that is, the health church and the happy pastor are serving one another. Are there any ways that more of the rural churches and their pastors can become healthier and happier? Some of the issues are related to a changing external environment. Can they be addressed? Some reflect spiritual concerns. Can these be addressed? Some of the issues relate to various forms of poverty. Can ways be devised to develop cooperative activities and ministries that will address these issues?



My personal response to some of the issues has been to work at linkages among small churches and acquisition of resources to be shared that will allow them to be part of something bigger and hopefully better. Examples include youth events, musical events, an area thrift store, youth mission trips that involve youth from several congregations, similar trips for men and women who will build a new facility for a congregation elsewhere, video resources for teaching the Bible, church history, or moral issues. One very dynamic rural church which has a bivocational pastor and a budget of nearly \$100,000 and a history of putting 21percent of the budget toward missions and benevolences, rearranged the budget allocations to create a fund of nearly \$7,000 a year to support direct mission work in other areas by the members of the church. They sent a crew of tradesmen to help in the construction, or remodeling, of facilities in a mission church the next summer and have returned for a second year. There is every indication that this has made this an even stronger and active village congregation.



By poverty I mean the lack of resources, vision, leaders, and facilities. The researchers found some very creative persons who were finding ways to make do and/or develop cooperative relationships by which they were compensating for the poverty that they found in their church and in its setting.

Country Ministers

The Mitford series of nine novels dealing with the life, ministry and love of a small town minister, Father Tim Kavanaugh, has been a huge success since the first one appeared in 1994.

While persons in rural ministry may find him, too good to be true, too effective, and too fortunate, we ought to take some comfort in the fact that tens of thousands of persons have read about one of our colleagues. Perhaps, there is more significance to our role that we may have thought. Father Tim is skilled as a pastor. He knows people; he cares about people; he ministers effectively to their needs; and he seeks to lead those who lack faith to faith in Jesus Christ as savior and lord. He served out his ministry in only a couple of small town settings. His career is contrasted with that of his bishop, a former school friend, who moved up the ecclesiastic ladder. Sometimes Fr. Tim expresses regret that he had not done likewise. Jan Karon, the author of the Mitford series, also introduces us to another minister in town, the Southern Baptist pastor. While his character is far less developed than that of Fr. Tim, this man seems to be "on his way" to someplace bigger and more prestigious. Karon does develop in some detail the character of another minister, an older, non-formally trained, effective rural pastor. He and Tim become good friends. They have the wisdom to see that the strength of each complements the weaknesses of the other. Yet a fifth minister treated in the series is the young seminary graduate who comes to be the chaplain at the retirement home connected with Fr. Tim's parish. He takes on some of his ministry work and becomes almost his son in ministry, sort of a Timothy to Fr. Tim.

The nearly 320 rural ministers interviewed in this study includes some who are similar to these five and many others who are unique. Some have an intense sense of call to rural and small town ministry. For some this is but a way station on their career path. Some are formally trained for ministry. Others have been mentored by experienced pastors, mostly. Some are very effective. Some do not see themselves as being so. Some are old. Some are young. Some are good pastors. Some are gifted pulpiteers. Some are angry. Some are happy. Some are perplexed. Some know everything. Or so they present themselves. It is a mixed and interesting group of persons.

The average age of the ministers who were interviewed is 52. They were 31 when they entered ministry, on average. And on average they had pastored five churches in those two decades, or about four years in each parish, on average. Thirty percent of them had served in a community larger than then 50,000 population. But this might have occurred while attending a seminary or college in an urban setting. About half of the ministers had graduated from college. This is up significantly from 1952. More of the ministers today were raised in urban settings than was the case in 1982.

A little more than half, 56 percent, are full-time in ministry. This includes, some who serve multiple congregations. Some of the others are semi-retired. Many others hold some secular employment to supplement the income from the church. Typically, they reported a family income of about \$35,000. About half of this, on average, came from the church. (Note, a good many of the pastors who termed themselves as being full-time with their churches have spouses who are gainfully employed outside the home.) Only 9 percent reported family income of greater than \$60,000, and 18 percent less than \$20,000. From this data it appears that many rural ministers are poor, but none, at least in our sample, are rich. An alarming statistic is that fewer than half receive help for the church or its denomination in preparing financially for retirement.

The 160 who identified themselves as bivocational worked an average of 32 hours a week on their secular, or non-local church job. The sample indicated that they put about 40 hours per week into the role of minister. One would assume that the bivocational ones would be lower, say about 25 to 30 hours, and that the full-time would be higher around 50 to 60. Of the 40 hours

about one-third is devoted to sermon preparation, mediation and general study. Interestingly, the time devoted to community meetings has doubled since 1982 to one hour per week. This might be attributable to the declining pool of community leadership in many rural towns as businesses have closed and the professions are less likely now to settle in rural places. Administrative work is up one hour to five per week. If they had more freedom in allotting their time more than half of the ministers would spend more time in meditation and study. Perhaps, this is an indicator of a deep sense of spiritual dryness which needs to be addressed by churches and judicatories. They expressed a desire to not have to spend so much time dealing with administrative matters.

When asked about what size of a congregation they would be most interested in moving to, about half indicated a larger one, and most of the others would make a parallel move. The average age of the ministers may well be a factor in this. When asked if they would like to move to a somewhat larger town or to one of similar size the same percentages held, about half to each. The ministers continued by noting that their ideal congregation would have 300 plus members. Such a congregation would normally have a good resource base and could furnish the pastor with staff help. They also noted that when a church gets much below 60 it is difficult to carry on the work of a church in ways that they felt it should be operated. Note must be taken of the fact that many of the churches in our study fall in this category.

We had expected that there might be a considerable increase in the number of female ministers in the churches of the study. But this is not the case, less than three percent are female.

About half of the respondents are members of the community or county ministerial association. Most describe themselves as theologically and politically conservative, but not quite as conservative as their congregations are. Interestingly, the number who identified themselves as fundamentalist dropped from 33 percent to 12 percent since 1982. This may be a generational thing, but it may indicate, as well, a moving toward the middle on the theological continuum. Similarly, the number who would accept a label of liberal has declined greatly across the decades of the study.

Nearly half of the respondents reported a sense of call to rural ministry, but nearly as many do not feel their ministerial skills are being used to a maximum in their current setting. For some, I suspect, this is related to the size of the church, for others it is a matter of them having to be a generalist, not a specialist, and for some it is a result of being bivocational and lacking the time to do all that they would like to do with their church and for their community.

We can conclude that on the whole there are not any surprises about this set of rural ministers, unless it is the fact that about half hold college degrees. This is a departure from the stereotype of the rustic rural, untrained farmer/preacher.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to summarize the general findings for our study concerning the churches and those who provide pastoral leadership. And I have tried to see what has happened to the rural churches and those who led them over the past half century. I have argued that there is more health out there than many think. Rural America has undergone very significant change which is reflected in how the churches have changed and how they do their work. I hope that I have demonstrated the fact that rural churches in America are far more diverse and often more vibrant than what seems to have become the standard image.

The next four chapters will focus on specific sub-sets of the rural churches in part to see how

they differ from the general observations. We will look at a variety of rural areas, drawing upon county as well as township data. Next we will focus on what has happened among the rural African American churches. And then we will look at the impact of new ethnics upon the rural scene.

The last three chapters will look at what we have learned about sustainability from this study and will challenge pastors, lay leaders, and denominational office holders to see the mission of rural church work again.



Case study from Rural Alabama

I have tested these observations about the closure of rural churches by looking at church life across the past 150 years in the rural Alabama county where I now live. The population here has ranged between 20,000 and 28,000 throughout this period. Church membership has tended to grow. Part of this can be attributed to the relaxing of expectations and requirements across the years related to church membership.

Almost all of the churches were rural prior to 1900 when the rail roads built across the county. With the creation of four new towns by the railroad companies came a surge of new congregations. Each town had a Baptist, a Methodist and a Presbyterian church planted soon. In the same period of time a score or more of the rural congregations passed out of existence. It seems that in some sections the land was worn out and people moved away with the churches becoming too weak to survive. Several villages that did not get a railroad dried up and their churches folded. As the timber industry grew, saw mill villages sprang up. New churches were formed there, but these villages died away during the Great Depression and their churches often died with them.

Following World War II, several cotton mills and other industries settled in the county. Churches were formed that serviced the mill workers. Included were some Free Will Baptist churches for the rural share croppers who had moved to town, several Churches of God, and a Roman Catholic church which served mostly management from the North. Southern Baptists started two new churches for cotton mill workers.

In the past couple of decades several Presbyterian churches have closed. A major factor has been that their children were professionally educated and moved elsewhere to follow their careers. One might term this a declining "upper class" or local aristocracy in small town and village communities. Their "kind of people" went away and were not replaced. The United Methodists have also experienced decline. Several rural congregations have been closed because they had grown too small. Others, have been yoked with a town church, and appear to have been treated more as a "preaching point" to be maintained, than as a church to be grown. Southern Baptists have continued to grow, however. In the past 50 years three new congregations have been formed. One closed. In each case it was the result of conflict in the life of another church. Nine of the 39 Southern Baptist churches in the county today are very small and their continuing existence may be in doubt. But some of these have been small for a century. Across the years churches with names like Big Creek, Unity, Mt. Zion, Zion, Providence, and Oak Ridge have prospered for a time, but with changing population density, better transportation, and competition from stronger town churches, they have died. This is alright. they are not needed now. It seems

that they had fulfilled their mission.

The African American churches seem to have amazing viability. One finds some of them in remote areas where no one lives within several miles. Many conduct worship only one or two Sundays a month. But on those Sundays one may find as many as 50 automobiles with licenses from two states and up to a dozen counties in the church yard. In some instances, one finds worshipers who make a circuit, worshipping regularly in several of these churches. In other places the church continues to serve as the center of a rural African American community.

It appears that there are almost 150 Christian congregations that serve a population of 21,000 in this county. Most of the pastors are bivocational and most do not live in the community of their church. Many, in fact live outside of the county. Most are not formally trained. Most focus on delivering evangelistic sermons, with alter calls aimed toward personal salvation and renewal.

The pastors complain about apathy on the part of church members and about competition from other community organizations for the time and affection of their people. Commitment is lacking. For many it is difficult to "do" church with 20 or fewer participants. But many others are happy, effective, delightful congregations.

It appears that here as elsewhere two conflicting dynamics have been at work. On the one hand improved transportation, consolidation of services in the towns, and declining population density in some rural communities have made some rural churches obsolete and their viability is in question. But, on the other hand, the emergence of new denominational families and their efforts to move into new territories along with the impact of criticism of existing churches by some televangelists has resulted in the creation of many new congregations in rural and small town areas.



Suggested Reading

Glenn Damon, *Shepherding the Small Church*, Kragel Press, 2002. Very helpful text for leading a small Baptist Church.

Anthony Pappas, ed., *Inside the Small Church*, Alban Institute, 2002. Good collection of articles from the journal, *The Five Stones*.

Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, Baker Books, 2000. One of a group of young missiologists looking at the work of the church in North America.