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The Rechurching of Rural America:

A report of the restudy of rural churches in America

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The Rechurching of Rural America

Chapter 1, Introduction

Gary Farley

As Sunday morning's dawn spreads across rural North America, millions of people awake, arise, and prepare to make their way to worship in one of the more than 200,000 churches that dot the country-side and cluster in the hamlets and the towns of this land. For the most part, these are small congregations with fewer than 100 persons in attendance. Most have existed for a century or more. Typically, the churches have been bonded by ties of kinship and place, a history of shared experiences, pleasant memories, deep commitments to the continued viability of the church and a vibrant faith.

Some of these rural churches serve as the anchor or the center of a small community. Other rural congregations seem to be a community within themselves. They are *in* a place, but not really *of* it. Still others are part of a set of congregations that serve an area, cooperating, competing, creating and continuing a sense of community among the residents of the place.

Sunday in most of these 200,000 places of worship is a wonderful, warm experience. Accounts of the events in the life of each person, since they last met, are shared. Any absences are noted and explained. Intercessory prayers are offered. Words of encouragement, praise and consolation are exchanged. Feelings of love and mutual support pervade the place. Hope is restored. Self-esteem is enhanced. The presence of God is experienced in deep and powerful ways, personally and collectively. God is worshiped in a variety of ways—ritual, music, and sermon—depending on the heritage of the congregation.

Certainly, there are the “down” times as well in each of these congregations. Sickness and accidents strike loved ones. How is this to be understood? Death too comes, seldom when and how one might select. Families have troubles. Relational problems may disrupt the harmony of the congregation. Most often, however, peace will be restored and equilibrium re-established.

Many of the rural congregations are smaller and the membership older than they were in the remembered past. Questions about the future of the church sometime rise to the surface. Some ponder. Some pray. Some act. Some muddle through. Some find new health and vitality. Some die. Some vow to be a “faithful remnant”.

Generally, however, the people in these churches seem to see the hand of God working in the life of the congregation. They hold a deep faith that God will bring victory. It may not be a return to joys of the “golden” past, but it will be an appropriate victory for this time and this place. God will accomplish His purposes in and through the life of this church. As the six remaining active senior women members in one of the churches visited as a part of the current study declared, “We are still paying the bills, supporting missions, and providing help for the less fortunate. This being the case, we do not believe that God is through with our church yet.”

It is this kind of spirit that the researchers from the rural sociology department of the University of Missouri found again and again as they have studied the life of about 500 congregations in 99 select Missouri township, repeatedly, since 1952. This is a unique study in North America because it alone has longitudinal data from a set of rural churches extending for almost a half century. It offers the possibility of understanding how churches at the grass roots have responded to the waves of change that have come sweeping across our heartland. (The

1982 data was reported in the book, *The Rural Church* written by Edward Hassenger, John Holick and Kenneth Benson.)

Here in this report we will integrate the township level data of the University of Missouri researchers with the county level data gathered by the Religious Congregations and Membership Study (RCMS), since 1950, across Missouri. We believe that the result will be an accurate picture of what the current state of rural church life in America is.

The research reported here was funded by the Eli Lilly Endowment. The central purpose of the research has been to ascertain principles that have contributed to the sustainability of rural churches across the past half century. As the book unfolds, we will address this concern again and again. And in the final chapters we will share our conclusions about what factors have contributed to sustainability of rural churches, both collectively and individually. We hope that those who have the responsibility of caring for the viability of these churches will consider our findings and act upon them.

This report from the heartland is directed to pastors, lay leaders, students preparing for ministry, denominational leaders, and all those persons who care about the life of common people in very ordinary places. It will reveal what is happening in many, many tiny places among persons of faith. We want to provide an authentic look inside the churches of the countryside. We also want to present the larger picture of what has happened to the Christian faith in rural America over the past 50 years, or so.

While the primary data is from but one state, Missouri, we believe that it has much broader application. Persons from all across the continent, from many faith families, and from varied experiences in rural ministry have reviewed the manuscript and offered helpful insights, raised questions, and been of great assistance to us.

Missouri, the word, brings to mind several images—mules, the “Show-Me” State, Branson and country music, the Gateway to the West arch, Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, President Harry S. Truman—to list some of the most common ones. Our book draws upon these images. For example, we have described it as a “mule” book. As you probably know the mule is a hybrid creature. Its father is a jack ass and its mother a horse mare. The mule tends to exhibit some of the better qualities of both creatures. In this book we draw upon the data and the insights of sociological research and interpret the data from the perspective of theology. Hopefully, we capture and display the strengths of both disciplines. What we have to say about the rural church is based on scientific research, not theorizing. But we do not limit ourselves to describing rural churches, we are passionate about them being healthy, whole, and biblical. Further, we believe that a church has a spiritual, or divine, dimension that cannot be captured by social analysis.

It is fortunate for several reasons that Missouri is the location where this data has been collected over the past half century. Demographically, it contains the center point of the population of our nation. In the 1990 and 2000 Federal censuses a point in the southeastern part of the state was determined to be the spot where half of the people lived to the east and west and to the north and the south. Denominationally, there is a rich and diverse mix. At least nine significant religious bodies have their national/international headquarters in Missouri. Historically, it was a border state, north and south, and the gateway for the settlement of the west. St. Louis is the last eastern city and Kansas City is the first western one. The patterns of settlement in the rural areas have resulted in ethnic and racial diversity, as well.

We have selected as our title for this report **The Rechurcing of Rural America**. This title is indicative of and a response to four important facts the study reveals. One, rural and small town America is much changed since 1950. Second, the number of churches in the 99 townships which have been the focus of the study has dropped from 505 in 1952 to 428 in 1999. Third, and most alarming, we found that the percent of the persons living in these townships who are church members may have dropped from just under 50% to just more than 36% over the past 50 years or so. The sociological data calls for a theological response and activity. Fourth, while the Baptist movement has become dominant in much of rural America, some of our data suggests that its influence and effectiveness is on the wane.

Many of the bonds that held the congregations of 1952 together, when the initial data was gathered, are diminished in their power. We will attribute much of this to changes in the economy and in community life in rural America. *Consolidation* is the term often used to describe the changes. Further, the mix of churches has changed. There are fewer “mainline” congregations and more sectarian and independent congregations. There are fewer open country and more town churches. We have found the churches in this sample much changed, operationally, since 1952. This is true of their facilities, their schedules, their activities, and the work life of their members. We have tried to determine what, if any, commonalities there are among the congregations that have prospered since 1952 and those who have closed. We will share what may be some clues for the future. We believe that a primary focus must be on forging new bonds, and/or strengthening the old ones.

And we believe that current and coming changes will call for still more “rechurcing” in rural America. We hope that our findings will contribute to this being done with vision and intentionality. Some rural areas are attracting new comers from the cities. Others are being resettled by new ethnic workers. Some are still declining in terms of population. These changes will call for new staffing patterns, new congregations, and the refocusing of old ones. Some churches, those in depopulating places and those that will not or cannot change, will die.

What we mean by the unfamiliar term, “rechurcing” is that rural places have indeed changed over the past half century; that, some will need to make changes soon if they are to continue; that, many new churches have been born during this half century; that, more new churches will need to be planted in the decades to come; and that denominational leaders need to be very intentional about strategizing for the church life of rural America.

We believe that the message of our book is a valid and important one for most of the 200,000 congregations in rural North American and for the many millions of persons who belong to and care about them. For this reason we have chosen to write a brief, concise, and readable book. We want it to be available and helpful. In addition, we want to augment the book with a web-page which will provide additional information, resources and stories about the victories of rural churches, ours and yours. We will place on the web-page several background papers that were written to set the boundaries for the project. A special feature will be an electronic library where rural church leaders will be encouraged to submit accounts of what has proved effective in their congregation and community. A living bibliography of books and other materials related to rural church life will be maintained on this web-site as well. This web-page will be managed by the Missouri School of Religion. For nearly a century it has worked ecumenically to train leaders for rural church work. It will be a good steward for this task.

Unlike pre-information age books that told a “frozen in time” story and soon became obsolete, we see this book as an introduction to a living, lively, on going conversation among rural people about how they are re-churching the countryside. In addition to the web-page there will also be a second book, one that looks in depth at six of the townships, the ones that were studied in greater detail. It will provide a kind of ecology of ecclesiastical life. It will demonstrate how the churches in a given area evolve to address the various interest groups and populations in a place.

Historical Background

Now, to set the stage for this, let’s consider how all those thousands of rural churches came to be out here in rural America. While each congregation has its own unique story, it is also the product of larger historical forces. To understand their stories one must attend to the larger one. The story features the Christian believer, the local church, the church universal, the community and the nation. A central issue is how they relate to one another. Here we will focus on church and community relationships.

In the early centuries of the Christian movement, individuals and families were converted from Judaism or from pagan religions and became members of congregations of fellow believers. Often these congregations were persecuted by the authorities and ostracized by the community. So, it was a conscious and often courageous act to convert to the Christian faith. Because of this the members of the congregation were very close to one another and felt a deep connectedness, at least this was the expectation of the apostles Paul, Peter and John as evidenced by the writings which they left and we accept as holy scripture. The believers experienced “community” within the church.

By the early 4th century Christianity had grown to the extent that it was adopted and established as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Soon, being a church member did not call for a brave commitment. It came with citizenship. Thus, community membership and church membership became coextensive. Because the Emperor Constantine initiated this change in the nature of the church, and its relationship to the community and the nation, this period that extended on to the Reformation in the 16th century and beyond was called the Constantinian era.

In that era the local church served a specific community, or parish, and almost everyone belonged to the church. One might say that the church was the spiritual arm, or department, of the community. The focus of church life shifted from witnessing to pagan and non-believers to the administration of sacraments, proclamation of the word, and pastoral care. Subtly, the nature of the church was modified from being essentially a community within itself that witnessed to the world, to being an integral part of the larger community. Salvation was found in the church and was mediated to individuals by the church.

When the Reformers broke with the Roman Catholic Church, most of them continued with the existing pattern of church and community relationship. A very few, often labeled Anabaptists, called for the restoration of the ecclesiology (church order and practice) that characterized the church in its beginnings. They wanted the church to accept as members only those who had had a transformational experience of grace and had, as adults, made a commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over their lives. They wanted to form local churches with members gathered from the larger community, instead of ones which were essentially coterminous with their geographical communities.

When the North American Continent was settled during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of the colonists came with the old, parish model understanding of the life of a church. Many of the colonies, which were to become states, established a particular denomination—Congregationalist or Anglican—as the official church and provided it with funds and other benefits. But there were other denominations present in the colonies—Presbyterian, Lutheran, German Reformed, and Roman Catholic which, although not established here, were part of national churches back in Europe. Still others, Quakers, Baptists, and German pietistic sects championed freedom of conscience. Thus, they were opposed to the establishment of a particular Christian denomination by the political authorities.

Changing the social paradigm to allow for religious freedom and pluralism did not come easily. After 1688 with the ascension of William and Mary to the throne of England, dissenters were tolerated, but the social theory that called for the establishment of a particular faith as an integral part of community and national life continued to be normative.

The First and Second Great Awakenings, at the mid 18th and the early 19th centuries, brought the explosion of denominations that called for freedom of conscience and the restoration of New Testament ecclesiology. They gathered new congregations within existing communities, often in competition with a congregation which held to the parish model ecclesiology. In New England it was New Light Baptists breaking with the Congregationalists. In the Middle and Southern Colonies it was Methodists breaking with the Episcopalians. Most of these new congregations sought to create a “community of faith” within the larger community.

The Baptists adopted an organizing document called a “church covenant” which asked members to pledge to live lives of personal holiness, physical and spiritual care for one another, and mutual accountability in the form of the disciplining of members who violated the covenant in the hope of restoring them to a pious and holy lifestyle. The Methodists formed “class meetings” which served a similar function of encouraging personal morality and the forming of spiritual communities. Most towns, villages, and even hamlets came to have multiple congregations within them. This often resulted in fierce competition and some doctrinal conflict.

Lyle Schaller has recently termed as the “Made in America” denominations these emerging faith families and contrasts them with the “Western European Heritage”, or establishment, denominations. Methodism, as a reform movement within Anglicanism carried strains of both ecclesiologies. It spread quickly on the expanding Western frontier as the continent was settled in the 19th century. It became the most common expression of church life in rural America across the nation in that century.

A more evangelistic wing of Presbyterianism, arose on the frontier and gathered congregations of new converts with significant success. It took the name Cumberland Presbyterians. Rural Missouri was one of its strong-holds. Rev. Finis Ewing, one of the founding ministers of this movement moved to Missouri in the 1820s and founded a school for ministers there.

In the wake of the Second Great Awakening, Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone made common cause for the restoration of the New Testament type of church and formed the Disciples of Christ/Christian Church . This movement also carried a strong commitment to ecumenism as the dual name suggests.

It was these Frontier Four denominations—Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Disciples of Christ/Christian--that were destined to play primary roles in the settlement of the Midwest and

the West during the 19th century. As one seeks to understand local church life in rural America, it is crucial to keep in mind that both of these paradigms, or models of what a church is, and how it relates to the place where it is, are present in the context, and often even within a given congregation.

Prior to the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 during the administration of Thomas Jefferson, those who settled in the region that was to become Missouri were Roman Catholics, mostly from France. They established towns and planted churches along the Mississippi River and inland in the Lead Belt, a mining area, south and southwest of the modern city of Saint Louis. With the change in ownership of the territory, many Protestant settlers came from Kentucky which was in the throes of a great revival of religion called the Second Great Awakening.

(A Missouri map here that shows the regions—Little Dixie, German Ozarks, Bootheel, Mineral Belt, Commercial Agriculture etc will be inserted at this point.)

In the first decades of the 19th century, Baptists, Cumberland Presbyterians, and Methodists established congregations, particularly along the northern side of the Missouri River. Many slaves were settled on farms in this region which came to be known as “Little Dixie”. The 1830s saw a great surge by the Disciples of Christ movement, some of it coming out of the infant Baptist churches in the region.

Then in the 1850s Germanic Lutherans, Catholics and Calvinists settled in the area along and south of the Missouri River from Saint Louis to Boonville and beyond. Much of this area came to be called the “German Ozarks”. Following the Civil War, Union veterans streamed into the Ozarks to homestead and form new communities. And the building of railroad lines throughout the state brought Irish workers, some of whom settled in the new towns along the rail lines. The railroads also encouraged various European ethnic groups to come to Missouri, buy land from the railroad company, and establish a town which would be much like the one from which they had immigrated. Of course, included would be the church of the colony. By the end of the 19th century, the state has been settled up and churches established along with many small communities.

The 1900 U. S. Census of population counted 3,106,665 residents in the Show-Me state. The 1906 Federal Census of religion reported that 1,199,239 of these persons were affiliated with churches whose denomination had cooperated in the collection of this data. The Roman Catholic church counted 382,642 of these persons as members in 457 parishes. More than half of the Roman Catholics resided in St. Louis City. The various Methodist denominations counted 214,004 members in 2,533 congregations. About 200,000 of these members were in the denominations which have since merged to form the United Methodist Church. The Baptist churches affiliated with the Missouri and Southern Conventions numbered 176,208 members in 1,894 local churches. The various other Baptist groups, mostly African American, swelled this figure by about 22,000, or to just less than 200,000. The Christian/Disciples churches reported 159,050 members in 1,545 congregations. The Lutheran churches which are now known as Missouri Synod Lutheran Church reported 41,185 members in 175 congregations. The various Presbyterian bodies reported 71,500 members in 788 local churches. The largest number of these members and churches were affiliated with the Cumberland Presbyterians. The various Mennonite denominations counted only 1,032 members in 17 congregations. The denominations which became the United Church of Christ reported 43,702 in 238 congregations.

Before, I continue the story, let's pause for a moment and look at the comparable statistics for 2000. The population of Missouri nearly doubled during the century to just less than six million. Since the reporting denominations are now very different, the total membership figures may not tell an accurate story, but in 2000 the participating denominations counted 1,465,017 full members. The number 2,893,159, which includes adherents as well as members, may provide a better picture. The Roman Catholic church had grown to 856,964 in 537 parishes. United Methodists counted 226,478 adherents in 933 local congregations. The churches affiliated with the Missouri Baptist Convention numbered 1,824 congregations and 797,752 adherents. The whole of the Baptist family swells this total to more than one million. The Disciples of Christ and Independent Christian churches totaled 651 congregations with 183,818 adherents. The Missouri Synod Lutherans reported 140,315 adherents in 311 congregations. The Presbyterian denominations reported 352 congregations with 32,693 adherents. You will note that some denominations lost adherent totals while the population doubled. Some gained adherents but not as rapidly as the population grew. Others grew more than the population rate of growth and thus gained "market share". What questions does this raise in your mind?

The Roman Catholics, the Southern Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, and the various Mennonite bodies have grown faster than the population. The Mainline Protestant denominations have not done so. The 2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Study reports that more than 51 percent of the Missourians are claimed by churches participating in the study as adherents. And while the 2000 study counted more denominations by far than the 1906 census, the number of congregations in the state is down from about 9,000 to about 7,000, as reported. The lack of participation by African American and Independent congregations may be a major cause of this decrease.

One must be careful not to draw absolute conclusions because of the differences in the data sets, but it would appear that many small rural churches have closed in the past century. So while there are more denominations at work, and more people related to the existing churches, they are gathered in larger congregations. As we will see in the next chapter, changes in where people live, work and congregate have driven this.

Now back to our story, when one traveled across rural Missouri in 1900, one would find areas where there were ethnic colonies with a single church for the whole of the community—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, German Reformed, or Mennonite. Much more common, however, would be a community with two to four of the Frontier Four denominations represented by congregations. Interesting patterns of cooperation and competition, even conflict developed among these congregations. For example, in many communities a building would be erected to house a school. A union, or non-denominational, Sunday School would be formed and would meet in this community school building. Three or four different denominations would take turns providing for a worship hour after the Sunday Schools classes were conducted. Perhaps the Baptists on the first Sunday, then the Methodists, the Disciples and the Cumberland Presbyterians on the fourth Sunday provided a preacher who led in worship. On the other hand, these same denominations might engage in fierce debate concerning which one was really most like the churches of the New Testament because the "restorationist" theme had strong public support in rural areas.

Students of rural community life have found the ethnic colonies to be strong multibonded communities. Novelist Wallace Stegner would have called them communities of

“nesters” by which he meant places where the settlers were committed to creating a true commonwealth in the full sense of the word. Stegner contrasted this with the new settlements led by “boomers”; this is, folks looking to make a big profit and move on.

My sense is that the emerging communities where the Made in America denominations formed congregations were usually a mix of nesters and boomers. One of the challenges of the churches in these communities was to tame them, and to replace the boomer mentality with a nester mentality. The story of their effectiveness in this effort is mixed.

Many others of the local churches one finds today in rural America trace their denominational history to a time of great religious ferment near the end of the 19th century and on into the early years of the 20th century. As the nation industrialized, moved to a market economy and accepted the world view of modernity, many rural people reacted against these changes. Often they saw their national denomination as compromising the historic faith by embracing these trends. And some accused the national church of moving toward the Western European Heritage ecclesiology, abandoning the effort to restore the New Testament patterns. Consequently, several new denominational groups hived off of the Methodists–Nazarene, Pentecostal, Assembly of God, and other Holiness groups. The Disciples lost many of their rural and poor congregations to the non-instrumental Churches of Christ. The Baptists lost many congregations to an independency movement, to the American Baptist Association, and significant numbers of members and pastors to the Church of God, Cleveland, movement. Interestingly, the Cumberlands and the larger Presbyterian body reunited early in the 20th century. The Episcopalians and Congregationalists simply lost many members to atheism, agnosticism, or to the more evangelical denominations. Often they were the business and professional persons in small towns. Their children, went off to college and then settled in the large cities of America. By the second half of the 20th century, the period covered by this study, their presence in rural America was greatly diminished.

But to continue the story, the 20th century saw the spread of the anti-modernist, often rural, sects across the nation. And in the last third of the century they were joined by large numbers of the New Charismatics who rejected denominationalism and wanted exciting, spirit-filled worship experiences. It was triggered by a rekindling of “speaking in tongues”, signs and miracles. So, today some small town communities that had the four basic Protestant congregations at the beginning of the century, came to have 10 or so congregations, and then have experienced a gradual decline in the number of congregations serving it. I say serve, but often these sectarian groups, although in a community, did not have much of a community function. For them, the community that they served was the gathered church itself. Most of the community needs were served by persons from the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Disciples churches.

How then did all of those thousands of open county, village, and small town churches come into existence? Some came with a colony of persons from Europe and sought to replicate village life here in North America. Many more were established as a missional response to the settlement of the frontier. Among these some were planted by missionaries supported by mission boards “back East”. Some resulted from the establishment of a non-denominational Sunday School, often with support from the American Sunday School Union, which as the community grew hived off two, three or four congregations with denominational connections. Some were the work of local lay persons and itinerating preachers who saw a need for a church of their

denominational connection in a developing settlement and took steps—revival, summer-time Bible school, or camp meeting, to generate an interest in having one. Some were the result of conflicts within local congregations. The African American congregations arose after Emancipation as an expression of freedom and as a setting for persons called to ministry to exercise their spiritual gifts. Some were the result of the formation of new denominations or movements as a consequence of unhappiness with the existing ones. The successful groups have expanded into existing and forming communities. And some independent congregations are the product of charismatic leaders who felt called of God to form a congregation but who lacked the credentials or the will to connect it to an existing denominational family.

Still another type, one not mentioned to this point, is the federated, or non-denominational church which resulted as the consequence of the shirking population in an old rural community. In some instances this was the reversal of the process that caused the non-denominational Sunday School to divide into congregations of differing denominations as the community developed. Most of these were formed during the first half of the 20th century.

In 1952 when this study was first conducted, the stock of churches in rural America could not only be catalogued in terms of denominational affiliation, but also in terms of being a town church or a country church. Generally, the country churches were populated by farmers and their families, were conservative theological, had poor facilities, and worshiped only once or twice a month. The town churches tended to draw from business and professional people, have good facilities, more activities, and worship every Sunday. Within many denominations there was a kind of social class tension between the country and the town congregations. We will see that this has changed.

Please, reflect upon the history of the community where you live and its churches. How does this story fit it and its congregations? Keep asking this question as you read on through this book.

The Plan for the Book

The next two chapters will summarize the changes that have occurred in rural and small town life since 1952 in North America, economically, socially, and religiously. Note will be made of how the changes have “moved the cheese” of those who work in and for rural churches. The lead writer for these chapters is Jere Gillis. He heads the rural sociology department at the University of Missouri.

Chapter four summarizes the data that was gathered in the most recent study of the rural churches in 99 Missouri townships and compares it with the findings from the three previous studies. This is useful data. It contains some important insights about local churches, pastors, and denominations.

I was the principal writer, but drew upon the resources of others. My background includes 19 years teaching sociology on the college level, 13 years leading the rural church program for the Southern Baptist Convention, and since 1998 I have headed a rural Baptist judicatory in Alabama. I am ordained as a Baptist minister and have served rural and small town churches along the way since 1957.

Chapters five through eight look at the data more intensely by integrating it with the RCMS material and looking at various types of economic and demographic characteristics in selected counties across the state. I was the primary author of these chapters.

Chapter nine was written by Arnold Parks, a CME minister and social scientist who is on the faculty of Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Park did field work with three predominantly African American congregations. His chapter provides insight into a set of rural churches which is generally not available.

Chapter ten looks at the growing Hispanic population in rural areas. It reports on several creative ministries. John Bennett, who serves as the president of the Missouri School of Religion, was the primary author. Bennett is an ordained minister in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ connection.

Chapter eleven has as its focus ecclesiology. I describe the church as having both divine and a human side. I look at the missiological considerations of an effort to rechurch rural America.

Chapter twelve is directed to the judicatory persons who are concerned about religious life in rural America. Here we will address the issue of sustainability and will seek to draw together our thoughts and insights concerning rural church work at the beginning of the 21st century.

Our Purpose

We love life in rural churches and communities. We want them to be healthy, lively and sustainable. We will share what we have found through our surveys, observations and analysis. We hope and pray that what we share will prove to be helpful to the rural churches and communities in their quest to be healthy, sustainable and effective.

Again, we hope that this book will, through the related website, take on a life of its own. We recognize that few denominations are now addressing the needs of small and rural churches. If these congregations are to be helped, much of the help will need to come from efforts to network among themselves.

Further, we recognized there is significant diversity among the churches presently serving rural America. Help for the churches with a colony or Western European Heritage background may not fit the needs of a Made in America, or conquest, church. We cannot offer a program or a solution that will fit them all. But we hope that we can stimulate understanding, reflection and conversations that will result in solutions.

Finally, we hope that our research will encourage the churches and their judicatories to take a fresh look at their mission in the emerging and changing rural setting. We believe that there is a crying need to develop policies and procedures by and for denominational officers to rebuild rural communities and to rechurch them.

Chapter Two
From a Place to Farm to a Place to Live:
The Transformation of Rural America in the late 20th Century
Jere Gillis

The Missouri Rural Church Study has been America's principal source of information about the Rural Church for 50 years, now. The study was originally funded in 1952 by the Rockefeller Foundation to look at religion in some of the most rural areas of Mid-America.. At that time 100 townships representing Missouri's economic, cultural and ecological diversity were selected and representatives of each church in these townships were interviewed. None of these townships contained a town or village with more than 2500 inhabitants. Subsequently, all churches in the same townships were studied in 1967, in 1982 and in 1998-99. The 1982 and 1998-99 studies were funded by the Eli Lilly endowment. The goal of each of these studies was to document the condition of rural churches and how changes in society at large had influenced religious life in Rural America.. Although each of these hundred townships has experienced substantial change over the past half century, their fundamental rural nature remains unchanged. In 1999 only two townships in the sample contained towns with more than 2500 inhabitants. Only two of the 100 do not have an active congregation within its bounds. (One has not had a congregation during the half century being studied. So, we often refer to 99 townships in the study. The second churchless township emerged only in the most recent replication of the study.)

To understand the changing life of the rural church, we must first understand the changes that have occurred in the rural communities where they are rooted. The Rockefeller Foundation financed the first Missouri rural church study because of a perceived need for information to help modernize and reform religious life in the countryside. In 1952, Rural America was undergoing dramatic changes. Farm numbers which had peaked in the 1930s were beginning to decline at a rapid rate and for the first time in our history, farmers were becoming a minority in Rural America.

In 1952 the institutions which served and depended upon farm populations were already in trouble, although few realized this to be the case. The one room schools, crossroad hamlets, and open country churches that served farm families were faced with a double challenge-- they were losing the people they served at a time when more was being expected from them. Rural schools lacked the resources needed to provide the comprehensive education required by an industrial age, hamlet businesses could not provide the breadth and quality of goods and services demanded and churches that could not afford full-time professional clergy had difficulty providing for the needs and wants of current and potential members. Rural leaders and reformers pointed out that institutions like the one room school and rural church were pre-modern and ill prepared to meet the needs of modern rural life. For these reformers, the future of rural religious life required a reorganization of rural churches. The first Missouri Rural Church study was designed to provide the information needed to carry out this reorganization.

Changes in Rural America

Rural America was optimistic in 1952. High commodity prices during World War II and the reconstruction of Europe which fueled expansion and improvements on the farms and in the towns. Tractors were replacing draft animals. Mechanical cotton pickers had been introduced. Electrification had come to the farms. Milking machines, heated brooder houses, and equipment

to put grain and hay in storage became much more common. Homes were being modernized with running water piped to kitchens and bathrooms, and central heating being added. Television sets were bringing entertainment and information into the parlors. Young families were being formed and settling on farmsteads. Farm to Market programs were improving roads. Most families could now afford an automobile and a truck. Stores at the crossroads and around the town square were well-stocked and were doing the best business in memory. Life was good and getting better, it seemed to many. A Missouri farmer was in the Whitehouse. A Kansas farm raised man was about to replace him. It seemed to be a Golden Age for rural America.

Actually, the seeds of destruction of the old rural paradigm were beginning to sprout. Modern markets, means of production, communication and transportation would make the little six mile square township worlds of the Jeffersonian or Agrarian vision obsolete. The old patterns of social dominance and economic dependence that welded town business and professional persons and farm dwellers together were cracking. Although farmers made up the majority of rural inhabitants and town and country were linked economically, the social worlds of town dwellers and farmers were much more distinct then, than they are today.

Demographic Change.

Throughout much of the 20th century, rural areas in New England, the South and the Midwest experienced population decline. Agricultural mechanization allowed more land to be farmed by a single family and stagnant or declining farm commodity prices required farmers to cultivate more land to maintain a decent standard of living. This resulted in a fluctuating, but overall steady, decline in the number of farms and in the number of businesses and institutions that catered to farm populations. This decline was largely the result of the out-migration of farm and town youth. Relatively few farms were forced into bankruptcy, but many farms were unable to generate enough income to support to families. As a result, farm children left the land and their parents worked the land until their retirement. At that time they usually rented most of the land to neighbors who were trying to expand in order to provide an opportunity for the next generation. Upon the death of the elders, farms were usually sold to neighbors. In many parts of the country, this pattern has repeated itself for more than a century.

Until the 1970s rural Americans declined in numbers. However that decade saw a rural population “turn-around”. Many rural counties experienced growth and together their populations grew more rapidly than urban ones. However, farming dependent areas continued to lose population.

New types of rural community were emerging at this time. Thanks in part to the interstate highway system and the availability of cheap rural land and labor, manufacturing plants began to leave the big cities and relocate to Rural America. Farm wives took a factory job to supplement family income. Most did not mind periodic lay offs from the plant. This allowed them to catch up with chores at home. In addition, rural communities with natural amenities such as lakes and forests also experienced growth. Increased national affluence led to rapid growth in the leisure and outdoor recreation industries. Recreation areas not only provided tourist related jobs, but many attracted a large contingent of retirees and urban refugees.

In the 1980s, the overall population of rural America stagnated, however. The percentage of persons living in rural areas declined again. Growth and decline was quite un-even. Communities dependent on agriculture lost population at a rapid rate. The farm credit crisis actually forced a large number of middle aged and young operators of farms to move on. Farm

bankruptcies also had a devastating impact upon supply businesses that extended credit to farmers. Agriculture was not the only casualty in the 1980s. The financial crisis that affected agriculture also affected manufacturing. Many of the manufacturing plants that came to rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s, in search of cheap land and labor relocated. Even cheaper land and labor existed in Asia and Latin America and improved information systems made it possible to ensure product quality over long distances. Shoe, apparel and textile manufacturing, once staples in small town economies, all but disappeared from the rural landscape.

Not all rural areas experienced stagnation and decline in the 1980s. Areas within commuting distances of suburbs or small cities continued to experience growth. In addition, communities with the natural amenities required for outdoor recreation continued to enjoy substantial growth.

In the 1990s America's rural population began to grow again—albeit not as rapidly as suburban areas. While most agriculturally dependent counties continued to lose citizens, some farm areas—those concentrations of industrialized hog and poultry operations—experienced growing populations. Much of this growth was due to a dramatic influx of immigrant workers—first from Southeast Asia and later from Mexico and Central America. Recreation based counties continued to grow with most of the new “ruralites” taking advantage of improvements in communication and transportation networks. These improvements in the flow of information and people, allowed some service oriented businesses to relocate to rural areas and other people to settle down in the countryside and to commute as much as 100 miles to small cities and suburbs to work. Rural population grew by about six million, or more than 10 % to 56 million. In Missouri one finds significant growth among rural, non-farm populations. What can this mean for rural and small town churches? (Studies of counties and townships in each of these categories of rural growth and decline can be found in chapters five through eight.)

Economic and Occupational Change.

One of the most important results of the demographic changes we have noted, is the increased diversity of rural areas in America. Until the 1950s, the word “rural” was synonymous with agriculture in North America. For example in Missouri, 57% of rural residents lived on farms in 1950. Rural communities that were not based on agriculture normally had economies based on extractive industries such a mining, logging or fishing. These latter communities were a minority of rural places and were generally confined to isolated mountain and coastal regions of the country.

By 1990, agriculture was a significant activity in only 29% of rural U.S. counties but 49% of non-metropolitan counties had economies based on manufacturing or recreation. By 1990 only 6% of rural Americans and 10% of rural Missourians lived on operating farms. These changes were largely the result of technological changes. Agriculture had ceased to be the defining characteristic of Rural America. As a result of the above changes, the economic basis of rural life has diversified considerably. The most important consequence for us here is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about the “rural community” and the “rural church”. Many, perhaps most, rural areas are no longer dominated by the agricultural calendar and the swings of the agricultural economy. Without a common “rhythm of life,” programing for rural churches has become more difficult.

Dramatic as they may be, the changes in the farm population actually understate the shift away from agriculture in rural America. Not only did most rural Americans live on farms in 1950,

but living on a farm had a different meaning in 1950 than it does today. In 1950 people who lived on farms, depended on their farm for all or most of their livelihoods. Today this is not the case. Now most farms families are heavily dependent upon off-farm employment. For example, in the Missouri of 1950, 15% of farm operators had full time off-farm jobs and 14% of farm women had off-farm employment. By 1990, 42% of Missouri farm operators worked full time off farm and 53% of farm women had off-farm employment. Today fewer than 30% of American farm families receive a majority of their income from farming. (If one figures in the relatively higher average age of men and women on farms these numbers are even more arresting.)

Small town businesses and professional services have often declined in numbers more rapidly than rural populations. Improved transportation and communication systems have permitted rural residents to bypass small town businesses for regular purchases and go to the “Walmart towns” or nearby cities where consumers have more choices and often pay lower prices. Since a large portion of rural residents commute to a larger town or city, shopping in these towns is often as convenient as shopping locally. If a town does not have a Walmart, small town businesses are likely to suffer as harried farmers seek lower prices and rural residents shop near their workplace instead of near their home. The same infrastructure that allowed manufacturing plants to move to the country allowed rural people to travel to nearby cities to work and to shop.

Community Life.

The nature of community life has dramatically changed in the past 50 years. In 1952, most people rural and urban alike, lived their lives in a single community or neighborhood. They lived, worked, learned, socialized, worshiped and died in a single place. In reality two types of rural communities existed at that time. One was the town communities which were dominated by the merchants, but depended upon the trade from others living in small towns and nearby farms.

However, community life for farmers revolved around neighborhoods and territories outside town limits. These neighborhoods were the source of socializing and social support contained the basic institutions needed by the farm populations—the one room school, the one room church, and often the crossroads general store. By 1952, these communities were under severe pressure. As farm populations declined, neighborhood schools, small businesses and some churches disappeared. Vestiges of these communities continue to exist, however, the surviving open country churches are the remnants of these old farm communities.

By the 1960s a new rural community began to emerge. This community was and continues to be centered around the consolidated school and the small town where the school was located. As farmers began attending high school with town residents the distinctions between the town and farm communities started to blur and disappear. Where agriculture remains the dominant industry, these “new” rural communities have continued to experience decline as farms have disappeared and local people travel to larger towns to shop and to obtain medical services.

Improvements in transportation have had profound impacts on rural towns. When the Midwest was settled, towns were located so they were accessible to the farm populations that they served. In an age of horses and dirt roads, this meant there were hamlets every 5-6 miles and larger towns every 15-30 miles. Often this was the county seat town with governmental offices and services. Today with cars and paved roads, people can travel further in an hour than they could in half a day in the 1940s. This phenomena has led to the relocation and concentration of

businesses in a few larger towns and the obsolescence of most rural business districts. Rural areas may still be places to live, but many rural communities are no longer places to carry out business.

Community life today is remarkably different from the world of the 1950s where most people lived, earned a livelihood and shopped in their home communities. Today these activities are physically separated. Among the consequences of this separation is that time once devoted to participating in community life is now spent on driving-- to work, to shop and to get medical care. Civic participation has declined in all parts of America, but its impact is probably greater in rural America where it is not possible to replace volunteers with professional staff.

Family changes.

Family structure has changed considerably since 1952. Out-migration has meant that some rural areas have a large elderly population living far from their children. Although traditional two parent families are more common in rural areas than in urban suburban areas, divorce and single parenthood has become increasingly common in rural areas as well. More importantly, women have ceased to be homemakers and have increasingly found employment from the home. In fact rural women in Missouri are more likely to work outside the home than suburban or urban women. Women have less time to contribute to their churches and daycare is now a serious issue for those with young children. These changes have contributed to the increased heterogeneity and complexity of rural life. What we have said about rural life in Missouri is applicable across North America.

From Homogeneity to Diversity: Types of Rural Communities

The largest consequence of the changes outlined above has been a trend toward increased diversity in rural America at a time when mass media and consumer values seem to be homogenizing our cities and suburbs. In 1951 it was easy to talk about the “rural life” and the “rural church” as generic categories, because agriculture was the dominant occupation throughout rural America and open country churches made up nearly two thirds of rural congregations. Ethnic and historical differences distinguished one community from another, but orientation and rhythm of life of rural residents was remarkably similar.

Today more people are living in rural areas than in 1951, but rural communities are increasingly diverse. Today, the only characteristic shared by most rural communities is a small population base. Rural America is extremely diverse--so diverse that it is difficult to summarize the differences. To illustrate some of this diversity, we will describe five types of rural areas found in Missouri and throughout the U.S. Three types will be from communities that are experiencing significant population growth and two types of communities which have experienced stable or declining populations. The rural areas that we are talking about here represent the very smallest rural communities--those with towns of less than 2500.

Types of Growing Rural Communities

Nearly half of the townships in our study experienced net population growth since 1950, with many of them fluctuating across time. Growing communities are those who have made the transition from a farming community to one based on other economic activities. These

communities are a diverse lot, but I will discuss three types of these communities based upon the sources of their population growth—immigrant communities, commuter or rural lifestyle communities and recreation/retirement communities.

Immigrant

Some rural communities owe most of their population growth to a large influx of foreign, predominantly Hispanic, workers who are employed in the expanding food processing industry. Since the late 1970s, the meat industry has undergone rapid change. Increased demand for white meat has led to an expansion of turkey and broiler production. Innovations in pork production and beef packing led to the movement of hog and beef production to new communities as well. Processing facilities needed more workers to meet the expanded demand and there was not sufficient local labor available. The packing industry has historically relied on immigrant labor. In order to expand production in the 1990s, industry turned to foreign workers again.

The small communities of Noel and Milan, Missouri are two examples of the many rural communities that are experiencing changing ethnic content. In 1990 Milan Missouri had 1769 people and Noel had 1169. At that time, the two communities had very different economies and cultures. Milan was a Northern Missouri agricultural community that had been adversely affected by the farm crisis of the 1980s. Its largest employer was a frozen foods plant. Noel was in many ways a typical Ozark community. Agriculture had not been an important industry for decades. The local population worked in nearby poultry processing plants and light industry. In the 1980s Hudson foods opened up a new poultry plant nearby and Tyson foods expanded its production facilities. In the 1990s Premium Standard Farms opened a hog slaughter plant in Milan. By 2000 Milan had 1958 persons and Noel 1480. More importantly was the change in ethnic composition. The two communities had 24 Hispanic residents in 1990 and 968 in 2000. Anglo populations in the two communities actually declined significantly!!

Recreation and Retirement

Other small communities have grown because of outdoor recreation opportunities. Missouri has scenic hills and numerous lakes and reservoirs. These reservoirs are sources of weekend recreation and are favorite places for second home construction. Recreation and construction create new employment opportunities. Second homes frequently become retirement homes and this in turn creates new demands for health services and other amenities. Recreation communities often have growing service and retail establishments. Prosperous in-migrants bring capital, expertise and connections with them. Warsaw, Missouri or Eldon, Missouri are two communities which fit this profile. These areas have experienced steady growth over the past three decades. Conflicts between locals and newcomers do occur, but on the balance the newcomers can bring energy to their communities—if they choose to become involved. Recreation based industries are not high paying ones, and housing for local populations is often an issue and new residents pay premium prices for real estate.

Lifestyle

The third type of community is what I call the lifestyle community. Visually, these communities sometimes resemble areas surrounding recreation communities. In both you will see new houses springing up on large lots in fields and pastures, but there are some important differences between recreation and lifestyle areas. The growing population of lifestyle communities is comprised of commuters. They have chosen to live far from where they work

because of affordable housing, safety, pace of life, and/or country living. New residents in these communities are moving away from the negatives of urban life. Life style communities may not have tremendous recreation or employment opportunities. They have rural tranquillity and picturesque rural vistas. In these areas, population grows much more rapidly than employment. While small towns in recreation communities see growth in retail and service employment, this is often not the case in lifestyle communities. Many of the small towns in these areas seem unaffected by the growing populations. Commuters rarely pass through the small towns in their area and often shop near where they work. Businesses and churches do not thrive unless they move to the small towns along the roads that people use to travel to work.

Commuters are a very diverse group of people. Some are there to enjoy the splendid isolation of rural living and want little to do with their neighbors. Others want to be actively involved in community life, but their long rides to work give them less time and energy to devote to civic affairs than people who live and work in a community. The commuter's quality of life is not tied to the economic well-being of the communities in which they live—this is something that can separate them from old time residents whose livelihoods are connected to the community economy. Examples of these communities would be found in rural Callaway and Gasconade counties in Central Missouri where large numbers of people commute from their rural acreages to small cities within an hours drive of their homes.

Types of Declining and Stable Rural Communities.

Farm Service

The stereotypical declining community is probably still the agricultural community. The Midwestern town surrounded by small farms and dedicated to providing services to farm populations is still the most common image of rural America. Farm numbers have now declined in the U.S. steadily for more than 50 years. There are fewer farmers to serve than in the past and improved transportation has made it possible for farmers and rural residents to travel farther to shop—leaving little business for the small town shop keepers who lack the volume of business to compete. These small towns are characterized by deteriorating buildings, empty store fronts and an aging population. These towns are often described as “dying towns”—each year they have fewer and fewer businesses and their population declines as buildings become uninhabitable. The towns of Northern Missouri which typify this—towns like Keytesville, Gentry and Mound City. These are communities that have had a prosperous agrarian past, but whose future looks dim. They typically lack the amenities to be a recreation destination and are located too far away from employment sites to attract commuters. Local populations have a large number of elderly residents and many businesses and services are in crisis because of a declining client base. This type of community may represent less than a sixth of rural communities today. *In our set of 99 rural townships in 1952 14%, are still rural in 2005.*

Persistent Poverty

The second type of declining community is often found in what the USDA has classified as persistent poverty counties. These are counties that have very different economic bases, but they are characterized by large numbers of poor people who are not farm operators. None of these areas have ever been prosperous family farming communities. In Missouri these counties are found in the Ozarks, the Mississippi Delta and some marginal farming counties of Northern Missouri. Most were formerly subsistence farming areas or share-cropping areas. Tax bases and

educational achievement levels have been traditionally low. People have stayed in these areas because of attachment to land and family and because they often lacked the education and skills to prosper in the outside world. Nonetheless, these areas have experienced steady population decline as slowly and surely, the best educated and most ambitious youth have migrated to urban centers. These areas typically lack natural amenities to base a recreational industry upon. Poverty and the low tax base that accompanies poverty, make it difficult for local governments to finance the infrastructure and schools needed to attract new industries or commuters.

Implications of Diversity for the Faith Community

The increased diversity of rural communities provides us with both hope for the future and challenges for the present. The specter of the declining rural community no longer is the image that dominates rural America. Most rural communities have stable or growing populations. The largest challenge for most rural communities today is more often rapid change than demographic decline. Hope is more common than despair in rural churches today, according to those who were interviewed in our study..

At the same time, the challenge of increased diversity is a large one. Many rural congregations continue to be led by persons who have their roots and their identities tied to the agrarian communities that existed when these churches were founded. These wonderful communities of faith, tradition and commitment to place are not places where most newcomers, or the person who does not have that connection, can feel attracted, welcome and comfortable. It is not easy for a congregation to serve a diverse population or membership. In addition, the increased diversity of rural areas makes it more difficult for seminaries and denominations to provide the training needed by rural clergy and lay leaders. When rural life was synonymous with farming, it was far easier to develop educational programs than it is today.

Our study found that while the population of rural Missouri and of the 99 township from which we gathered information has grown, the numbers of persons involved in the life of the churches has declined. Later in this study we will consider causes and responses. Here, I only want to note that the churches have opportunities.

Conclusions

The rural community of 1952 is much different than the rural community of 2005. It is different in terms of socioeconomic activities and support. It is different in its diversity. It is different in its rhythms of life. It is different in its relationship to the larger world. Its institutions are also different.

Among the persons we found in a rural community was a “30 something” lawyer who serves also as the pastor of a Primitive Baptist church. He speaks eloquently of the need to return to the “old paths”, or the old ways. Apparently, he is an exception. And the personal, family, church and community life of 1952, or 1852 for that matter, does not seem to be an option. Somehow we must learn to live in our present context with an eye toward the future.

The “old paths” of our lawyer/pastor were once the “new way” that his spiritual ancestors believed the truths of the Holy Scripture were to be applied to the context in which they found themselves back in the mid Eighteenth Century when the Baptist movement expanded in America. And, on closer examination of his “old paths,” one finds that they accepted human slavery and found justification for this practice in an appeal to the Scriptures. So, the “old paths”

are not only not eternal but also subject to error. This is to say that the old was once new and that being old does not mean better or perfect. What is really needed is to find ways of responding to the current context in rural America that applies biblical revelation and principles appropriately. This must be one element in the task of Rechurching Rural America.

Suggested Further Reading

Rex Campbell, *Revolution in the Heartland*.

A rural sociologist Rex Campbell has published a book about change in rural America during the 20th Century. He grew up in the Missouri Ozarks. The book is an interesting mix of personal reflection and academic insight. It is an electronic book which can be accessed by typing his title into your search engine.

Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets*.

Doubleday, 2001.

A wonderful account by the current professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School concerning his experiences in the 1970s as a city raised minister in his first parish, a rural Missouri Synod Lutheran one. It was across the Mississippi River in rural Illinois.

Chapter Three
The Institutional Context of the Rural Church, Today
Jere Gillis

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 Right’s 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,

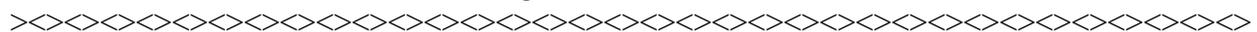
six-mile or township communities across rural America with one or two strong churches, with good facilities pastored by well-trained pastors who had a sense of call and commitment to rural church work. It was the fruition of the dream of Thomas Jefferson for America. It was not to be. At best, these 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.

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.

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.

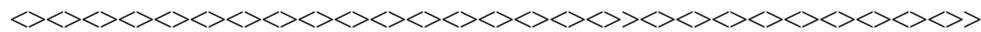
2. The depth of relationships with congregants which makes meaningful shepherding

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, worshiping 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.

Chapter Five
Religion in Little Dixie
Gary Farley

In this chapter I will focus on five counties in central Missouri—Lafayette, Saline, Cooper, Howard, and Callaway which comprise the heart of the *Little Dixie* region of the state. R. Douglas Hurt in his book, *Agriculture and Slavery in Little Dixie*, also includes Clay and Boone Counties. But I have not included them for this study because these two counties have become essentially urban. We will draw upon the data from our study and from the Religious Congregations and Membership study.

In this chapter and the three that follow it, I will look at sets of counties across the state which have similar demographics and/or economies. Our goal will be to discover what has happened in each of the settings, religiously, across the past half century. I will draw not only on the data generated by the **Missouri Rural Church Study (MRCS)** but also the data from the recently published **Religious Congregations & Membership, 2000 (RCMS)**. We will be looking at how change has impacted Christian religious institutions both in terms of church growth or decline and church planting and closing.

For the reader who is not familiar with the material provided by the RCMS research project, a few lines of explanation are in order. Beginning in 1950 many of the denominations in the United States have cooperated in gathering data, at the end of each decade (except 1960), concerning the number of congregations and adherents each denomination reported in every one of the about 3,200 counties of the nation. This data was coordinated and compared with the Census Bureau's population data for the same decades. This makes it possible for an interested person to look at the population, the number of congregations and the number of adherents to these congregations in each county in the nation over the past half century, noting changes that have occurred. One can see which groups have grown and which have declined county by county, state by state, and across the nation. (To access some of this data, perhaps to look at what is there about your county or your denomination, go to www.thearda.com.) One can see which have grown faster than the population and which denominations have not. Following the practice of Roger Finke and Rodney Stark in **The Churching of America 1776-1990** one can talk about gains and losses in “market share”.

From the beginning many groups have cooperated in the data gathering process. These include American Baptists, Assembly of God, Catholic, Christian Church (Disciples), Episcopal, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Nazarenes, Southern Baptist, United Church of Christ, United Methodists, and several others. Some denominations, most notably the predominately African American ones, and most of the independent congregations generally have not participated in the studies. They either have not gathered this kind of data from their member congregations, or there is no mechanism in place to gather the data, as in the case of independent congregations.

So, in reality, the data normally “under-reports” the total number of congregations and adherents in a county or a state. In addition, because many local congregations and denominations do not keep their membership roles well-pruned, the number of adherents for those participating are often far too high. Even with these limitations it is the best information available about what is really happening, numerically, at the congregational level, to religion in America. One of the helpful features of the 2000 edition is that several of the denominations have reported the average

attendance at their primary weekly worship service. When taken together with the adherents totals, one gets a more realistic picture of the impact of a denominational family on a county, a state, and the nation.

The Missouri Rural Church Studies have gathered similar data for smaller political entities, townships. We hope that by looking at both sets of data that we can get a clearer picture of what has happened to rural churches in the second half of the 20th century.

The Little Dixie area is the core of early settlement in Missouri by persons who brought slavery and plantation agriculture from the Old South to the western frontier. Beginning about 1810 families came from Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia to this set of counties which lie along the Missouri River and sought to duplicate the life they had known, or aspired to, before. The most famous of these was the family of Daniel Boone.

Certainly, some of these families had participated in the Frontier Revival, also often called the Second Great Awakening, in the previous decade. So they brought with them a passion for the Christian faith and evangelism.

The Frontier Revival spun off two new religious movements, the Disciples of Christ and the Cumberland Presbyterians. Both were effective in planting new congregations in Little Dixie. Alexander Campbell, a key figure in the Disciples movement, came to the region on several occasions in the mid-1800s. Finis Ewing, one of the founders of the Cumberlands, settled in the region and opened a seminary at New Lebanon in Cooper County to train ministers for the work on the frontier.

The Methodists also came to Little Dixie in large numbers, as did the Baptists. Both groups evangelized and planted congregations aggressively. All four of these denominations founded colleges in Little Dixie before the Civil War. The region became the center of Protestantism in the west, even as St. Louis was the center for Roman Catholicism.

Little Dixie culture was not limited to the seven counties included in Hurt's study. It was present back to the east and north toward Hannibal and on west for 50 miles or so either side of the Missouri River toward Independence.

Upheavals in the Germanic states of Europe brought non-slave holding settlers to the Little Dixie region during the 1850s. Consequently, Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed communities sprang up. Concordia in Lafayette County became a center of Lutheran life. Early Civil War battles occurred at Boonville and at Lexington, Little Dixie towns. The Germans comprised significant portions of the Federal troops. The massacre of Germans by Confederate soldiers is commemorated by an historical plaque on the main street in Concordia.

During the 19th century, it was common for many communities in Little Dixie to have congregations of the four basic English speaking Protestant churches, what we have identified as the Frontier Four—Baptist, Disciples, Methodist, and Presbyterian. Sometimes they shared a common building and a union Sunday School, but rotated which group would hold the worship service week by week. But they were also competitive. Each denomination contended that its understanding of theology and form of church organizational life was the correct one. Of particular interest in this vane was the Disciples because this movement melded elements of “restorationism” and of “anti-denominationalism.” Interesting patterns of cooperation and conflict developed.

After the Civil War many African American congregations were founded in Little Dixie by former slaves who had been members of the churches of the basic four frontier Protestant denominations. Although, there has been significant out-migration of African Americans from Little

Dixie, particularly since World War II, many congregations remain, particularly in the towns and cities.

At the beginning of the 20th Century the four frontier Protestant faith families might be ranked in terms of membership in the following order: Methodists, Baptists, Disciples and Cumberland Presbyterians. Over the course of the century each has been impacted by changes in the religious landscape. Most of the Cumberlands reunited with the larger United Presbyterian denomination. Many of the Disciples were lost to the Churches of Christ and to the Independent Christian Church movement. The rising Holiness and Pentecostal movements drew many adherents from the Methodists. The Baptists were able to stay together until more recently when conflict between the Fundamentalist and Moderate wings of the denomination became ugly and hurtful.

Population of Five Little Dixie Counties

County	1950	2000
Saline	26,694	23,756
Lafayette	25,272	32,960
Howard	11,857	10,212
Cooper	16,608	16,670
Callaway	23,316	40,766

Lafayette and Callaway Counties have experienced some population growth due to the fact that they adjoin metropolitan counties. Cooper has been plateaued. Saline and Howard have experienced a slight decline. As we look at the fortunes of the seven denominations that have the larger representations in these Little Dixie counties, we will be interested to learn who has gained and who has lost market share; to see if these changes are connected to population shifts; and to consider what might be done to address the changes that we find.

Southern Baptists

County	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att.
Saline	18	3,971	17	4,341/1,030
Lafayette	14	3,587	15	6,395/1,387
Howard	12	1,263	8	2,151/450
Cooper	12	2,267	14	2,632/653
Callaway	13	3,224	19	6,296/1,569
Totals	69	14,312	73	21,815/5,089

In the 20th Century the congregations connected with the Missouri Baptist and Southern Baptist Conventions emerged as the largest denominational presence in Little Dixie. (This is true, even when Boone and Clay Counties are included.) From 1950 to 2000 these Baptists added a net four congregations and gained adherents more rapidly than the growth in population. However, closer observation suggests a decline in both numbers during the 1990s in the Little Dixie region. Further, less than 25% of the adherents attend worship on a typical Sunday. This seems to suggest that either the adherent numbers are inflated, or there is a declining level of commitment to the churches.

The greatest growth for these Baptists was in the two counties that experienced population growth. There were actually slight losses in total membership in Saline and Cooper counties. (Note: the adherent figures are used for comparison in the effort to adjust for the differences in how the various denominations report membership.)

United Methodists

<u>County</u>	<u>1950 Cong</u>	<u>1950 Mem</u>	<u>2000 Cong</u>	<u>2000 Adh/Att</u>
Saline	20	3,053	12	1,901/499
Lafayette	13	2,786	11	2,189/687
Howard	13	2,138	7	1,059/343
Cooper	8	1,292	6	1,047/280
Callaway	18	2,340	16	1,838/753
Total	72	11,609	52	8,034/2,562

The United Methodists began the second half of the 20th Century with more churches but 2,700 fewer members than the Southern Baptists in these five Little Dixie counties. They ended the period with 21 fewer churches and far fewer adherents. (In 2000 the UMC reported 6,533 members in the five Little Dixie counties. This is a loss in the 40 percent range.) Yet, on a given Sunday the Methodists have about half as many persons in worship as do the Southern Baptists. Further, the Methodists lost market share. Why this happened, while the Baptists gained, is a question that may have multiple answers including: denominational focus or purpose; patterns of out-migration; patterns of staffing of pastoral leadership; and nature of congregational governance.

In 1950 the Methodists denomination was the primary or largest one in 16 rural Missouri counties. In 2000 this had dropped to two. These are Atchison and Holt in the Northwest tip . Was this because the Methodists went into a “survival” mode, moving away from their traditional emphasis on evangelism and church planting? This is a question that denominational leaders and local church ones too should consider answering.

The Christian Church

In 1968 many of the Christian churches elected to create a more centralized form of

denominational connectionalism; however, some did not follow this course and retained their autonomy. So, there was a rather amiable division in this movement. In Little Dixie many of the Christian churches went with the new arrangement and now use the denominational name, Christian Church (Disciples). Most of those who did not accept the more centralized, denominational arrangement, use a label such as Christian, Church of Christ, or Independent Christian. (These Churches of Christ are not to be confused with an earlier splint of the movement, the “non-instrumental” Churches of Christ. This variety is most often found in South Missouri and on southwestward into Texas and Arkansas.) In order to get a accurate picture of what has happened to the Christian Church movement in Little Dixie since 1950, I have combined the Disciples and Independent Christian church and membership figures for the 2000 data reported below.

Counties	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000Adh
Saline	13	2,153	5	1,319
Lafayette	10	1,495	5	1,310
Howard	9	1,831	4	782
Cooper	6	538	2	413
Callaway	17	1393	9	1.446
Totals	55	7410	27	5270

As with the Methodists, the Christians Churches experienced decline in Little Dixie during the past half century. Only in Callaway County, where there has been population growth, was there a small gain in the 1990s. Again, the question comes as to why. Some possibilities might include a scarcity of ministers, denominational focus on the suburbs, failure to start new congregations, and/or failed vision and purpose. Did the movement become identified with the business and professional people in the towns and become separated from the common folk? Were some important elements lost with the departure of some congregations? Do the overlapping of names cause confusion?

My thought is that the founding purposes of restoration and reform withered in the 20th Century. Its ecumenical goals were coopted by the National Council of Churches. However, on the broader stage of contemporary American Christianity, many of the mega churches that are developing across the nation are connected to the Independent Christian Churches.

Presbyterian

County	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 Adh
Saline	8	872	7	565
Lafayette	5	766	4	320

Howard	2	279	1	27
Cooper	8	456	3	251
Callaway	8	804	5	761
Totals	31	3,177	18	1,924

The pattern of the Presbyterians in Little Dixie is much like that of the United Methodists and Christian Churches. Fewer churches seems to have resulted in fewer members. The Presbyterians seem to have been stressed in communities with declining population and church membership by the fact that there is an expectation that the pastor be fully supported by the congregation. When this is not possible, the church either closes or is yoked with another one. And the data from the Missouri Rural Church Study seems to support a conclusion that a church is more viable when it does not share a pastor with another congregation, even if the pastor is bivocational; that is, the pastor holds a secular job which provides most of the family income.

Lutheran

County	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Saline	7	859	7	1,565/631
Lafayette	8	4,145	8	4,224/1,673
Howard	0	0	1	58/30
Cooper	5	964	5	953/402
Callaway	0	0	2	309/92
Totals	20	5,968	23	7,109/2,828

All of the Lutheran churches in these five Little Dixie Counties we are reporting on are connected to the Missouri Synod, a rather conservative denomination. Although it has lost some market share in most of the counties, it has done better than most of the denominations, actually gaining support in the area. The largest congregation in the Missouri Rural Church Study is St. Paul's in the Lafayette County town of Concordia. Its counts nearly 2,500 adherents. It seems that the Germanic culture is still strong, and the role of the parish as the center of community life seems to be of continuing significance. It should be noted that the ratio between adherents and attendees is much better for the Lutherans than for the Methodists and the Baptists.

United Church of Christ

County	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Adh	2000 Ahd/Att.
Saline	4	488	4	441/165
Lafayette	7	1,998	6	2,105/607
Howard	1	238	1	246/60
Cooper	4	755	3	561/221
Callaway	1	115	1	87/39
Totals	17	3,594	15	3,440/1,092

All of these churches were Evangelical and Reform congregations in 1950. They became United Church of Christ congregations after the merger with the Congregational Churches. These churches, for the most part, serve predominantly German communities that date back about 150 years. Like the Lutheran churches in Little Dixie they have been reasonably stable for the past 50 years. And like the Lutherans, participation in these churches which have a tradition of being the center of community life and to which the community is bonded in many ways, is considerably higher than that of the four other pioneering churches in Little Dixie, churches whose tradition is tied to the Second Great Awakening.

Catholic

County	1950 Cong	1950 Adh	2000 Cong	2000 Adh
Saline	4	1,668	3	1,400
Lafayette	3	1,097	4	1,491
Howard	2	1,021	2	850
Cooper	4	1,934	4	2,930
Callaway	1	882	3	1,720
Total	14	6,602	16	8,891

The Catholic Church has gained both in real numbers and in market share over the past 50 years in Little Dixie. They passed the Methodists to become the second largest faith family in the region, next to the Baptists who are also growing, in fact more rapidly than the Catholics. But, as I noted earlier, the Baptist figures seem to be inflated, as indicated by the attendance report. Unfortunately, there is not comparable data from the Catholics in the RCMS. Lacking attendance figures for the Catholics, I cannot venture an opinion as to the validity of their adherents numbers.

The growth in Lafayette and Callaway Counties is probably attributable to the expanding metropolitan areas of Kansas City and Columbia. It is not clear to me why the Catholics grew by

nearly 1,000 in Cooper County.

Others

The seven denominations that were established in Little Dixie during the settlement period continue to be the primary religious bodies serving the area. However, there are congregations connected to other national religious bodies. Unfortunately, as noted earlier the RCMS studies does not have data regarding the independent and African American congregations in these five Little Dixie counties. The report does list growing Latter Day Saint congregations in three of the counties, as well, as Community of Christ, the new name for the old Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Missouri Mormons) with three congregations. There are surprisingly few Assemblies of God in Little Dixie. The Pentecostal and Holiness denominations that cooperated with the RCMS also have but a handful of adherents in Little Dixie.

From the Missouri Rural Church Study

Five of the 99 township studied in 1952, 1967, 1982 and 1999 by the Missouri Rural Church Study are located in three of the five rural counties of Little Dixie, Callaway, Howard, and Lafayette. (An additional one is found in Clay County.) Here are the totals:

Denomination	Congregations	Closed Churches
Christian	6	3
Southern Baptist	5	0
Lutheran	3	0
Catholic	1	0
Presbyterian, USA	1	0
United Methodist	3	1
UCC	1	0
AME	1	0
National Baptist	1	0
Non-Denom.	5	0
Indept. Baptist	1	1
Primitive Baptist	1	1
Total	28	6

First, note that there is more diversity in the stock of churches than one finds in the RCMS

material. There are 8 churches here that did not appear in that data. Second, all of the townships had a Baptist church, and four of five had Disciples and Methodist churches. The Lutheran churches are in only one of the townships. Third, there is a possibility that the non-denominational churches are picking up the slack resulting from the shrinking and closure of the Mainline Protestant congregations.

Concluding Observations

First, three of the four pioneering denominations on the Western Frontier are in decline in the Little Dixie Area. Of course, this follows national trends. Some of this decline can be explained in terms of shifting demographics. The communities that these churches were formed to serve have gone into decline. Some communities have even died. Consolidation of commerce and education has caused many of the persons that these denominations traditionally served to move away.

Second, there is the nagging question of why have the Baptists, the other member of the frontier four, continued to survive and even to gain market share in Little Dixie. There are probably many factors, some good and some bad. Let me just mention a few that are often suggested:

- *larger families,
- *more farmers than townspeople in the congregation,
- *local ownership of the church,
- *the “call system” for selecting pastoral leadership,
- *flexibility on requirement for ordination,
- *ability to do church for less money, due to bivocational pastors which allayed some financial pressures,
- *strong national program to help town and country churches develop and adapt,
- *continued emphasis on church planting,
- *conservative stance on many social and moral issues,
- *continued emphasis on growth versus maintenance,
- *staffing with bivocational pastors who tended to be more available to a church,
- *each church has its own pastor,
- *the pastors typically are near local, rather than being imports,
- *the development of the denomination from being a regional to a national denomination during the period of this study helped Southern Baptists to maintain the same Great Commission emphasis which informed all four of the denominations during the 19th Century.

Whether or not the Southern Baptists can continue to sustain their growth and their market share in the 21st Century is open to question. Certainly, at the beginning of the 20th Century, Methodists were dominant in much of rural America. But they were not able to sustain themselves.

Third, the continuing sustainability of the Germanic “colony” congregations in Little Dixie is impressive. The Lutherans, UCC and Catholic denominations have done well. In the early days they retained their culture. They used their German language as a bond maker, and with the exception of the Catholics, for their worship. Many continue to operate their own schools. While inter-marriage is now more common, they have been able to sustain themselves in congregations that mix bonds of heritage with religious expression. We will revisit this in a later study of counties and churches in the German Ozarks.

Fourth, here and elsewhere in rural Missouri there is evidence of very good strategy for

church extension on the part of the Catholics. Today there are only two small counties in Missouri without a Catholic parish. They have closed some of their “colony” parishes when the demographics no longer supported the expenditure of resources there. They have planted new congregations to gather up urban Catholics who have retired to rural retreats. We will see more about this in the chapter dealing with the Ozarks.

Fifth, it is interesting to note that the two denominations that have grown in Little Dixie and are the two largest in the state of Missouri have such very different ecclesiologies and denominational structures. Does this mean that there really is no “best way to do things”. There are some commonalities, however. Both plant new churches. Both are driven by a well defined mission. Both have good resources base. Both are generally conservative on social issues.

Sixth, the data from both the RCMS and the MRCS reports raises the possibility that Christianity is losing market share in rural America. Perhaps, more detailed studies that include the independents and the African Americans will prove that this is not the case. But, in the meanwhile, Christians need to be serious about the Great Commission. We need to work to *rechurch rural America*.

Chapter Six Religion in the Ozarks

The Ozarks is the name of a hilly area which encompasses most of Missouri south of the Missouri River. It spills over into Arkansas and Oklahoma. For the most part it is an ancient plateau which has been eroded away across the ages. It is rich in minerals and timber. But the land beyond the river valleys usually is thin and poor in fertility. In this chapter I will present data from four distinct areas of the Ozarks. The first will report on two counties with a history of “kitchen-garden” agriculture and timber industry, much like that of Appalachia. The second will be a report on three counties in the mineral belt where mining has driven the economy in the past, but are increasingly being driven by commuters to the Saint Louis area. The third will be a report on two counties that were settled by Germans about 150 years ago seeking to duplicate the life they had experienced in Europe. And the fourth will be a set of seven counties which formerly were very similar to the first set, but in the past half century have been significantly impacted by recreational and retirement development and usage. Ex-urbanites are swelling their population.

Again I will draw upon the data from our study and from the RCMS study. We will be able to note changes over the second half of the 20th century. And we will note the differences among these four subsections of the Ozarks.

The Rural Ozarks

In this section we will look at the development of religious life in two Ozark counties. One is Iron. As its name suggests it is also a part of an area known as the Mineral District. Its population is about the same now as it was in 1950 when it was 9,458 residents. Today it counts 10,697. It is an odd shaped county with two arms or panhandles. It looks much like and upside down “L”. The MRCS researchers of 1999 selected it as one of 6 counties in which they intensively studied one township. They found the county seat of Ironton to be depressed. They also found a number of independent congregations that would not be identified and counted by the RCMS methodology.

The second county is Shannon. Its total population is about the same in 2000, 8,324, as it was in 1950, 8,377. I was first introduced to this county in 1986 by Dr. Robert Flanders, then Director of the Ozark Studies Center at Southwest Missouri State University. Dr. Flanders had just completed two films on the county, *My Shannon County Home*, and *The Hearts of the Children*. They are both still available from the Center, now on video tape. Timber and hosting recreation are the primary economic engines in Shannon.

Christian Denominations in Iron County

Denominations	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 And/Att
Assembly	5	206	6	329/241
Catholic	1	475	2	368
Episcopal	1	92	1	35/22

Lutheran	2	157	2	139
Presby	2	93	1	73
S. Baptist	11	1,522	11	2,665/582
U. Methodist	8	564	3	499/289

The first fact that I find here is that the Assembly of God and the Southern Baptists are the two denominations that have grown over the past 50 years in Iron County. Second, as we have seen all across rural Missouri the attendance in the Southern Baptist churches is averaging less than 25 percent of the adherents they claim on a given Sunday. A third point, but one not present in the chart, is that 56 percent of the residents of Iron County are not claimed by any of the denominations involved in the RCMS project. This brings us to two related points. One is that there are many churches in Iron County that did not report, so the county is more churched than the data suggests. But second, there are some persons claimed by the reporting churches who have dropped out or moved away. It seems to me that there is a good bit of outreach and evangelism that needs to be done there.

The township where the towns of Ironton and Pilot Knob are located was included in the MRCS study. Across the 50 years of the study, 29 congregations have been identified there. Four churches, three of them United Methodist, have closed. The remaining congregations include four Southern Baptist, two Lutheran, two Assembly of God, two Independent, and one each Presbyterian, Missionary Baptist, General Baptist, United Baptist, Full Gospel, United Pentecostal, Nazerene, Church of Christ, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Methodist. In terms of congregations the stock seems to be tilted toward the newer Pentecostal and holiness groups.

Christian Denominations in Shannon County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att.
Catholic	0	133	1	70
Christian	3	187	2	299
S Baptist	6	697	8	1,551/349
U Methodist	8	529	5	332/115

This data corresponds with what is reported elsewhere in the region, except here the Christian denomination, in this case the Independent branch, is growing. Two of the Shannon townships were included in the MRCS sample. They contained 6 churches, two of which have closed or moved. Two are Methodist, one is Church of God, and the other is a Church of God Prophecy.

The RCMS data leaves more than two-thirds of the people in Shannon County unclaimed by any church group. Certainly, this is the result of the missing of many persons who worship in an

independent church that did not participate in the gathering of the data. Yet, there must still be many persons who have not affiliated with a church.

Another interesting fact about the RCMS data is that in 1990 it reports a Mormon congregation with 371 adherents in Shannon, but in 2000 no such congregation is reported. However, in Iron County while there is no Mormon congregation reported in 1990, in 2000 there is one with a reported 129 adherents. How can this be explained? (In the Alabama County where I live the RCMS reports a Mormon congregation with 123 adherents, but no one I have talked with knows where it is located. Apparently, its physical location is in Tuscaloosa, but is composed of residents of Pickens County.)

Observations

In certain areas the mix of congregations that report to the RCMS and those that do not will give an erroneous picture of the number of churched and unchurched persons. This is truth where there are many independent and African American congregations. So, one must always dig a little deeper than the RCMS data. We will find that historically the Ozarks have been home to many independent congregations, more so than in the other parts of the state of Missouri, particularly where churches and people of a Western European heritage are dominant.

The Lead Belt

Some of the earliest European penetration and settlement in Missouri was in the area southwest of St. Louis. It came to be termed as the Lead Belt or the Mineral Area. Much of the Lead Belt lies in Washington, St. Francois, and Madison Counties. Today the area has turned to other economic activities since much of its mineral wealth has been mined and used elsewhere. US highway 67 has been improved as a major artery, providing good access to St. Louis. Some St. Francois residents now commute.

Population	1950	1990	2000
Washington	14,689	20,380	23,344
St. Francois	35,276	48,904	55,641
Madison	10,380	11,127	11,800

The area gained population over the past 50 years. It grew from 60,345 to 90,785. Half again as many people live in these counties as did in 1950. Growth continued through the 1990s and will likely do so for years to come as the St. Louis area expands to the south.

Churches of Washington County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	6	255	4	371/307
Catholic	4	3,547	4	3,732
Presby	3	227	2	135/54
S Baptist	6	658	8	2,209/588
U. Methodist	10	992	7	576/252
Christian	2	116	1	171

First, only the Southern Baptist gained market share in this county, at least in terms of the number of adherents. But again note the disparity between the adherents numbers and the worship attendance numbers. Second, here too, Methodism and Presbyterianism declined both in actual numbers and in market share.

The Church of God (Cleveland) grew dramatically in the 1990s. The Assembly of God churches declined in the 1990s. The Church of Christ, here, as in many other rural counties, declined rather dramatically.

I was interested to see the large number of Baptist Missionary Association (BMA) churches in Washington County, 11. And they report adherents at 1,713 with 697 in average attendance. This places the BMA in third place in number of adherents and ahead of the Southern Baptists in number of worshipers. While the BMA is also present in St. Francois and Madison Counties, it is a minor presence. There is probably an interesting story of missions, migration, or of church and denominational conflict here. The BMA is centered in Arkansas and came into existence only in 1950. It is very fundamentalist and “Landmark” in its faith and practice. Landmarkism appeared among Baptists in America about the time of the Civil War. It claimed that the Baptist way was the only Scriptural way. It partakes of the elements of the “restorationist” movement. Often the BMAs and the non-instrumental Church of Christ will debate which is the most biblical, thus “the only true church.” These sentiments are to be found widely in the rural Ozarks, but most often the churches remained affiliated with the larger Southern Baptist movement.

More than half of the people in Washington County are not claimed by any of the churches participating in the RCMS study. None of the townships in the MRCS are located in Washington.

Churches of St. Francois County

Denomination	Cong 1950	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	9	835	14	1,535/1,173
Catholic	3	2,912	5	4,257
Lutheran	4	1,012	4	1,512/513

Presby	2	530	2	211/62
Christian	5	919	6	747
S. Baptist	15	6,812	23	12,959/2,622
U. Methodist	17	4,716	10	2,386/1,035

First, in terms of market share, the Assembly, Catholics and Lutherans have kept up with population growth. The Southern Baptists have grown more rapidly than the population. The others have lost in real numbers as well as in market share. Again, it appears that there is a tremendous number of inactive Southern Baptists.

Here as in the other Lead Belt counties there is a presence of another sub-denomination of Baptists, the United Baptists. Historically, this name stems from a union of Calvinistic and Evangelistic Baptists on the Western frontier in the early 1800s (centered then in the Appalachian highlands). Most of the Baptist churches in the South from then until the 1840s referred to themselves as United Baptists. This distinguished them from Regular and Separate Baptists. With the formation of state Baptist conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention (1845), most Baptist Churches in Missouri and their regional association affiliated with the SBC. However, some, mostly rural, Baptist churches did not join and continued to be known as United Baptists. One finds a few other United Baptist congregations in the Ozarks, as well as in the Appalachian Mountains. (Note: historically, in Baptist life conventions were organized to support mission work, education, orphan homes, and other ministries. They had no judicatory function. Associations were formed for the purposes that are often identified with judicatories, but with the exception that they had no “church power”; that is, they could not dictate to the local congregation. They offered counsel, not control.)

The Church of God (Cleveland) is also well represented in St. Francois County with 8 congregations and 1,389 adherents. But here as well as in Washington County more than half of the residents are not claimed by any reporting denomination.

Churches of Madison County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000Adh/Att
Assembly	3	185	2	78/165
Catholic	1	882	1	466
Christian	2	345	2	452
Lutheran	1	161	1	192/92
Presby	2	140	1	63/30
S Baptist	9	1,508	12	2,608/1,586

U Methodist	8	1,330	3	478/222
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This county has the lowest population and is most distant from St. Louis. When I passed through there recently, I noticed a large Independent congregation in Fredricktown. Apparently, it is reported in the RCMS as having 1,200 adherents. That is about 10 percent of the population of the county. For such a large Independent congregation to develop, it has probably drawn members from the more established denominational congregations. This may explain some of the decline noted among several of them.

Here the Catholic numbers have dropped rather significantly. My thinking is that this reflects the movement of young Catholics to St. Louis for better jobs, and this has not been compensated for by the movement of retirees or commuters into the county.

Again, we see the common pattern across rural Missouri of the Methodists closing churches and having fewer members and of the Southern Baptists adding churches and gaining members. Note also that Madison County is unique among the counties we have looked at so far in that the weekly worship attendance in these churches is more than half of their adherence number. There may be one or more interesting stories here—better record keeping, churches that have attractive activities, or a response to the competition from the big Independent church in Fredericktown.

The German Ozarks

The area west of St. Louis to Jefferson City, on the south side of the Missouri River and south and east of St. Louis to Cape Girardeau is often called the German Ozarks. The area wraps around the old Mineral District. Scattered through the area are small towns with “high spire” churches. Usually, it is a Catholic, Lutheran or United Church of Christ church, and it dominates the town. These towns were formed as “colonies” from the Germanic states.

In this series of studies we will look at two of the counties which have remained rural and where the German heritage dominates still. One is Gasconade on the Missouri River, and the other is Perry on the Mississippi River. Gasconade was settled, largely, by German Reform and Catholic families. Perry has an interesting history as the location of an early German settlement which played a role in the development of the Missouri Synod Lutheran denomination. But it also drew many Catholics from the German states. Both settlements occurred in the two decades before the Civil War.

Both counties have populations of less than 20,000, today. Both have experienced some growth over the past 50 years. Gasconade counted 12,342 persons in 1950. In 2000 there were 15,342 residents. Perry counted 14,890 persons in 1950. In 2000 there were 18,132.

Christian Denominations in Gasconade County

Denomination	Cong 1950	Memb. 1950	Cong 2000	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	4	2,109	3	2,270

Christian	1	46	3	437
Lutheran	3	522	4	710
Presbyterian	4	349	3	138
S. Baptist	6	1,163	9	2,254
UCC	13	2,659	8	2,508
U. Methodist	10	1,154	6	614

Again as throughout rural Missouri, generally, Methodism has suffered very large declines both in congregations and in membership. The Southern Baptists gained in both, although they slipped some in number of adherents during the 1990s. I suspect that there is some mixture of cause and effect to be found in the fact that the Methodists declined both in number of congregations and adherents while the Baptists gained in both. It seems that at least for Protestants, the addition of congregations tends to result in the expansion of membership.

Somewhat untypically the Christian movement, in this case the independent congregations wing, gained congregations and members in this rural setting. When population growth is factored in the Catholics were plateaued. The Lutherans added a congregation and grew in number of adherents.

The UCC closed several congregations, but lost only a small portion of market share. The Presbyterians lost one congregation and a large number of adherents.

Almost 4 of ever 10 residents is not claimed by any denomination. Given that is not very likely that there are many congregations in that county that did not participate in the RCMS data gathering process, this would seem to indicate that there is a considerable amount of evangelistic work to be done in Gasconade.

The MRCS project has found 9 congregations in the Gasconade township that was in its study. All have been present from the first study in 1952. There are three Southern Baptist, two United Methodist, and one each of Christian, UCC, Pentecostal Church of God, and Full Gospel.

Christian Denominations in Perry County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	6	6,763	8	8,322
Lutheran	10	4,678	8	4,099
Presbyterian	2	191	2	185
S. Baptist	3	568	4	647
U. Methodist	4	515	3	426

The Catholics added congregations and grew at about the rate of population growth. The Lutherans did not grow with the population. Neither did anyone else. The Baptists lost about 300 adherents in the 1990s. I think that it is fair to say that the experience in Perry County is reflective of experience across the nation. The older Protestant denominations, those born or invigorated by the 19th Century frontier revivals, have not had much effect in rural areas where the bulk of the population came as a colony from non-english speaking Europe. The bonds of culture and kinship are strong even when the language and the memories of the “old county” have passed.

Observations

For 150 or more years in those rural areas that were colonized by denominations with a Western European Heritage, and where there has not been a significant influx of persons who do not share that heritage, denominational adherence does not change much. Some will be lost to other groups. Some will drop religious faith. Some will marry into or convert to the dominant faith. But in terms of market share, it seems that things rock along pretty much the same.

No Perry County township was included in the MRCS.

Retirement and Recreation Counties

Since 1950 several rural counties in retirement and recreation areas in Missouri have grown dramatically. Here we will look at how this has impacted church life in seven of these counties. Miller, Morgan and Camden are at the Lake of the Ozarks. Taney, Stone and Barry are at Table Rock Lake. Taney is also the location of Branson, Silver Dollar City, and the Shepherd of the Hills Country. Barry contains very popular Roaring River State Park. And Hickory is the site of Pomme de Terre Lake. The county seat of Hickory is Hermitage which was the location of an important anthropological study of a small town in the late 1930s. It was published as *Plainview, USA*.

In 1950 six of these seven counties had fewer than 10,000 persons. Today six of the seven have more than 20,000. Most have more than doubled their population. One has quadrupled. In 1950 the Baptists were the dominant denomination in each of these counties. This continues to be the case. In 1950 three of the counties had no Catholic parish. Today they all have at least one and in most the Catholic faith has expanded dramatically. Much of this growth is the result of the retirement of urban Catholics to the lake country.

Against this backdrop let's turn to an analysis of the data from the RMCS and MRCS studies. We will begin with Hickory.

Congregations in Hickory County

When Carl Withers studied Hermitage, the county seat of Hickory, he found most of the basic set of Frontier Revival based churches in place. The Christian church was the largest and best housed, the Methodist had the most prosperous membership, and the Baptist was rather weak and shared a pastor with three nearby rural congregations. There was also a Holiness church in town. A rural Church of the Brethren, and two more rural Baptist churches rounded out the stock of churches in the township. He estimated that many of the towns citizens (25 to 33 percent) had

rejected the fundamentalism of the churches and were not involved in the Christian faith in any on-going way.

About 25 years ago a large recreational lake was formed in the county. Hermitage began to market itself as the “Gateway to Lake Pomme de Terre”. Slowly the county has gained residents, many of them retiring from urban jobs to live on and fish from the lake. In 1950 Hickory County had only 5,387 residents. Today it has 8,940. Certainly a third or more of them are retirees. This changes the mix of religious backgrounds of the populous. Catholic and Lutheran churches have been added to the community.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	1	38	3	290/239
Catholic	0	0	1	250
Christian	7	549	3	246
Brethren	1	85	1	39/18
S. Baptist	13	1,744	7	1,536/444
UCC	2	77	1	23
U. Methodist	9	543	3	363/198

Hickory is one of the few counties in Missouri that reports fewer Southern Baptist congregations and adherents in the face of overall population growth. It may be that Baptists were highly represented among those who moved from the marginal farms of the area to urban jobs. It may be that some of the churches that were listed as Southern Baptists in 1950 left the denomination and united with the Bible Baptist movement which has its headquarters in nearby Springfield. The fact that there are five congregations with 743 adherents in the 2000 data of the RCMS material that are affiliated with this movement suggests the likelihood of this explanation.

The Catholics have constructed a fine facility south of Hermitage, near an arm of the lake. There is a fine United Methodist facility nearby. The old Hermitage Methodist church relocated to this site and seeks to meld townsmen and the retirees into a single congregation. Back in town the Baptist church remains at one corner of the courthouse square. A newer, much smaller Christian church building is over near the school facilities. A Missouri Lutheran congregation has been formed in Hermitage. It has targeted retirees. There are Assembly and Nazarene congregations, new to the town since the development of the lake.

Out in the county there is a small Amish settlement with a 65 adherent congregation. Some of the Amish are growing hothouse vegetables. The description of this project that I read recently made it sound like an application of cutting edge low technology.

The RCMS material found 58.3 percent of the residents not claimed by any church body among those they were able to gather data from. Given that there are likely several independent congregations that did not participate, this still appears to be high for a rural county. Could it be that many of the retirees have not bothered to join a local congregation? Maybe some of them have not found in the current mix of congregations there one in which they are comfortable? Or has the

observations of Carl Withers more than 60 years ago concerning Hemitage continued to be true; that is, a kind of grassroots rationality and agnosticism that rejects the Gospel story? In any case this is something that those who minister in rural America need to address.

Congregations at the Lake of the Ozarks

The Lake of the Ozarks is a major private power company project, and was formed in the early 1930s. The lake boasts of more than 1,000 miles of shore line. Initially, the residential development focused on vacation facilities and some week-end cottages. In time people began to retire to live at the lake. More recently, there has been the construction of condominiums along the shores. Outlet mall stores and additional recreational facilities have been added. Early on the Disciples of Christ built a beautiful community church to serve merchants, retirees and visitors in the community that grew up around Bagnell Dam. (The township where the dam is located is one that was chosen for more in depth study by the 1999 team of researchers at the University of Missouri. It will be addressed in their forthcoming book of ethnographic studies of rural churches.) The development around the dam which is in Miller, spills over into Morgan and Camden Counties.

Here we will look at these three rural counties that have been greatly impacted by the development of the lake. Miller County had 13,734 residents in 1950 and in 2000 this number had grown to 23, 564. This is about 10,000 with about 3,000 of this increase occurring in the past decade. Camden County had only 7,816 residents in 1950. This jumped to 37,051 in 2000. And Morgan County had 10,207 residents in 1950. This nearly doubled by 2000 to 19, 309. All three had their greatest growth in the 1990s. And with an aging, affluent regional population this trend may well continue for several years to come.

Like any significant recreational area, these numbers are dwarfed by the number of visitors who pass through the area annually. Many of the churches in such places have multiple ministries—locals, merchants, retiree residents, seasonal workers, seasonal residents, and visitors. Many local churches will focus on only one or two of these groups. They need to be aware of the differences that they must address. If not their church, then whose will seek to enlist, evangelize and disciple the other groups of citizens? No group should be neglected.

Looking first at *Miller County*:

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	3	272	4	452/355
Catholic	5	1,809	5	3,790
Christian	10	1,305	4	1,271
Nazarene	2	200	2	363
Lutheran	0	0	1	188/100
S. Baptist	21	3,419	18	5,983/1,429
UCC	1	50	1	55

U. Methodist	3	462	3	670/299
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Looking next at *Camden County*:

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	2	55	4	724/632
Catholic	0	0	2	1,750
Christian	6	520	4	1,393
Nazarene	0	0	1	468
Episcopal	0	0	1	92/87
ELCA	1	101	2	632
M. Lutheran	0	0	3	764/518
Presby	1	68	2	214
S. Baptist	20	3,091	17	5,096/1,549
U. Methodist	2	181	4	1,202/438

Now looking at *Morgan*:

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	4	288	3	648/474
Catholic	0	0	2	970
Christian	3	307	3	712
Mormon	0	0	1	559
ELCA	3	424	2	346/142
M. Lutheran	2	533	2	384/147
Presby	2	172	3	178/94
S. Baptist	11	1,741	13	3,926/845
U. Methodist	5	1,039	7	1,644/645

Here, as in many other Missouri rural counties, the data indicates that the Catholics and the Baptists have experienced the most growth, perhaps even some gain in market share. The Catholic data here is interesting. Three of the five parishes are in eastern Miller County and are part of the German Ozarks. They are old ethnic congregations. The other two, particularly the one at the

Bagnell Dam, have grown from the arrival of retirees and persons to work in the businesses that serve the retirees and recreation seekers. The four other Catholic parishes in the three county area seem to have been formed to service the retirees and the recreation service owners and workers who have relocated into the area.

The Baptists did not grow with the population in the 1990s. Much of their stock of churches is comprised of local folk. One church near the dam has been effective in reaching the merchants and including them in an older congregation, how-be-it one that was relocated when the lake was formed. Baptist have started some new congregations that are focused on reaching retirees and recreational folk. These have experienced mixed success.

The Assemblies of God have shown good growth in each of the counties. One Nazarene congregation reports surprising growth in the 1990s. There are at least two strong independent congregations near the dam. They both use contemporary worship and have good pastoral leadership. But overall, the effectiveness of the churches in responding to the growth of the county seems to have been limited at best

The Lutheran congregations are a mix of old ethnic and new congregations for the urban retirees. These, mostly near the dam, have done well. Frankly, I am disappointed with the showing of the Methodists and the Presbyterians in the Lake of the Ozark area, for the most part. The Christian Church (Disciples), seem to have a much better record. It has seemed to me that their ecumenical focus would fit well for the creation of new congregations in a setting like this, particularly given the declining importance of denominationalism in the general culture.

In the area, but not related to the Lake development, are several Anabaptist (Mennonite and Amish) denominational congregations. These are the continuation of early colony-like settlements.

The Mormons have formed a large congregation near the dam with 599 adherents.

While the Catholics and some Protestant groups have planted new churches for the new people, the area has become increasingly “unchurched” over the past 50 years. Given the nature of those who are not churched, the rhythms of their lives, and the growing secularism of the society, reaching them for the churches will not be easy. But there are some examples in the area of effective church plants. These will be discussed in the volume of ethnographic studies.

The MRCS has two townships in Morgan and one in Miller Counties. One Morgan township has had seven congregations. One has closed. One has moved out of the township. Two are attempting to reach the new lake people. The other three serve the local folk. One is independent. Three are Baptist. One is Christian. This township grew dramatically in the past decade.

The other township in Miller County includes Bagnell Dam and the related development. Since 1950 it has grown from 1,885 to 5,127. Our researchers have identified 22 congregations in this township over the past 50 years. Only two have closed. Most of the churches are older and for the locals. The exceptions are the new Catholic church, a new Calvary Chapel church, and the older Community church which is affiliated with the Disciples of Christ. Most of the churches for the new people are on down the US Highway 54 in Camden County. The other township is rural with a stable population of about 1,000. It has had a total of seven churches, two of which are closed. The current denominations are Baptist, Christian, Church of Christ and Assembly of God.

Congregations around Table Rock Lake

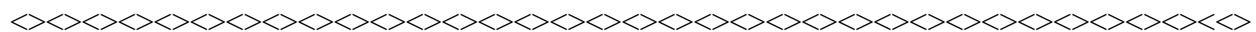
The area south of Springfield has been a tourist destination for generations. Beginning with a smaller lake, Taneycomo, the area added Marvel Cave and then Silver Dollar City Amusement Park as attractions. The story line of a popular novel set in this community, *The Shepherd of the Hills*, was developed into an outdoor drama. The “shepherd” is a former urban minister who moves to the Ozarks and finds an important and fulfilling ministry among the rustic locals. About 50 years ago a major Corps of Engineers lake, Tablerock, was impounded. Beginning with the Pressley Family country music show others were added until there are almost 40 theaters in Branson serving up a variety of musical faire. More recently an outlet mall has been added, along with a variety of other recreational activities. Branson is now a major tourist destination, particularly for retirees.

A little to the west there is Roaring River State Park in Barry County with the best trout fishing in the region. Second homes and retirement homes are springing up on the shores of the lake in Barry and more so in Stone.

Here we will look at the population, congregations and church membership in the three counties. Taney had but 9,863 people in 1950. By 2000 it had reached 39,703. The 1990s saw about 14,000 of this increase. More than two-thirds of that number are not claimed by any congregation. Stone only had 9,748 residents in 1950. Today it has 29,658. Almost 10,000 were added in the decade of the 1990s. Nearly two-thirds of the population is not claimed by a congregation. Barry had 21,755 in 1950 and has grown to 34,010. It added a little more than 6,000 in the 1990s. Nearly two-thirds of the residents are claimed by a congregation.



In 1961 my parents moved to Barry County. They operated recreational facilities adjoining Roaring River State Park. My father also became the Elementary School Principal at Purdy. My father died in 1968. Mother continued to live in Cassville until 1984. I was in and out of the area frequently during these years and occasionally since. I have particularly watched the development of the First Baptist Church of Cassville into a near mega church in a small town setting. Regularly, this church has more than 700 in worship.



Looking first at Taney County

Denominations	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	1	71	5	700/439
Catholic	1	22	2	1,583
Christian	1	257	5	844
Episcopal	0	0	1	192/81
ELCA	0	0	1	307/177
M. Lutheran	0	0	2	612/309
Presby	5	537	4	1,169/834
S. Baptist	3	243	8	4,209/1,606
U. Methodist	0	0	2	922/462

Next, a look at Stone County

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	4	79	6	788/408
Catholic	0	0	1	1,176
Christian	2	120	4	514
M. Lutheran	0	0	1	424/200
Presby	2	345	2	353/210
S. Baptist	10	1,221	18	4,679/2195
U. Methodist	1	67	3	869/437

And now Barry County

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	5	208	9	713/521
Catholic	3	1,031	4	2,356
Christian	5	645	6	1,156
Nazarene	2	26	2	340/129
Ch. of Christ			10	560
Episcopal	1	32	1	97/42
M. Lutheran	2	379	3	409/201
Presby	2	312	2	383/160
FW Baptist			5	532
S. Baptist	31	5,599	30	11,331/2,840
U. Methodist	16	2,930	8	1,855/818

First, let me make note of the tremendous growth of Catholicism in this area during the past 50 years. Most of this can be attributed to recreational and retirement development. From three ethic and one mission congregation in 1950 with a little over 1,000 adherents, the Catholics have grown to 7 congregations and about 5,000 adherents. Similarly the Lutherans have grown in these counties because of in migration of retirees. Not a few came first to Branson for the music shows and then decided to retire there. Robert Gilmore, former dean at Southwest Missouri State University and a close student of Ozark religion was a key figure in the planting of a Evangelical Lutheran congregation in Branson.

The Presbyterians have done better here than any other section of rural Missouri that we have studied. It seems that they had a good base here and have been able to maintain and grow modestly. Near Purdy in Barry County is a rural church which was founded by Waldensian settlers. (Apparently, the Frisco Railroad recruited several Italian colonies to settle along its line west out of Springfield. This is a source of the old Catholic congregations in Barry County as well.) The church cooperates with the Presbyterians. Methodism was weak in this part of the Ozarks. Many of its adherents were swept up in the Holiness and Pentecostal movements a century ago. Methodism had to build back. The family of churches related to the Stone-Campbell movement is most represented among the locals in the non-instrumental Churches of Christ. Here as elsewhere across Missouri they are static or in decline. The data suggests that the Disciples of Christ branch has met with some success in reaching the retirees. They have pretty well kept up with population growth in the Table Rock region.

There is an independent-charismatic church in Branson that reaches a thousand or more. There are two Mormon congregations reported. One is in Monette. It has been there for many years. It grew significantly in the 1990s. And in Stone County there is a congregation with nearly 500 adherents.

The Baptists were very strong in Barry County in 1950. And they have grown significantly. The First Church in Monette typically has 500 in worship. And with 700 at Cassville this does not leave many for the other 28 Baptist churches in the county. As we have seen in the other rural counties, the adherence numbers are 4 to 5 times higher than the average worship attendance. Both Monette and Cassville have industry and a balanced economy. The two large congregations are interesting mixes of locals, workers, managers, professionals, and retirees. The Baptists related to the Missouri Baptist Convention were weak in Taney County in 1950. Most of the churches had broken with the denomination two generations back. So, the Southern Baptists started almost from scratch. They have grown faster than has the population over the past half century, but they did not keep pace in the 1990s. The same is true in the other counties.

Two Stone County townships are in the MRCS sample. Both have grown. The one with the village of Cape Fair in it has six churches. Most are Baptist. The other has the village of Galena in it. It has seven churches. Most are Baptist. All seem to be local in focus.

Conclusion

The influx of new people from a different setting, religious background, and sub-culture presents interesting challenges for community life, evangelism, and church planting. I am impressed with how well the Catholic church has responded here and elsewhere across rural Missouri. They seem to be well along in the process of their rechurching of rural Missouri, and America. They have had the wisdom not to expect old ethnic congregations to reach the new comers. Rather, they have planted new parishes and let the old ethnic ones run their course.

The Lutherans also have been effective in creating new churches for their folk who have moved to a new area. I do not find much evidence that they have worked at evangelizing the unchurched.

Generally, I have been disappointed by the work of the Methodists, Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ. For the most part, they seem to have fallen into a pattern of decline.

Also, generally, the numbers do not suggest the vitality among the Assemblies or the

Nazarenes that I had expected. They grew in some places and not in others. There is little evidence of their expansion during the past 50 years in rural Missouri.

I am still mystified by the developments among the various Independents. In my trips around rural Missouri and other places I note many congregations of varying sizes that are Independent. It appears that those who are using contemporary worship are more likely to be having growth. And those who are narrow theologically are plateaued or in decline. Unfortunately, our two methods of gathering data miss many of the Independents. They do not report to denominations and that is the source of most of the data for the RCMS, and they tend to locate in places of more than 2,500, so they were missed by the MRCS.

Without complete data from the independents, most African American congregations, and other small groups it appears that congregational Christianity is in decline in many rural places. I doubt that their data would change this picture in most locations, or overall. There is work to do.

And even the data that we do have is suspect. Take the Baptists. The gap between the numbers of adherents and worshipers is not good. There is work to do.

The growth of Mormonism in rural Missouri and elsewhere is a matter of concern for orthodox, trinitarian Christians. There is work to do. Perhaps, if the outreach zeal and efforts of the traditional denominations had matched that of the Mormons, their growth would not have occurred.

The data that shows the large number of rural churches that have closed is depressing to me. There is work to do.

Chapter Seven
Religion in the Agricultural Regions
Gary Farley

In this chapter we will consider what has happened in two types of rural counties beyond the Ozarks. One will look at the area of North Missouri which adapted well across first two-thirds of the 20th Century to “general agriculture”. But with the development after 1970 of “commercial agriculture”, it found itself with “comparative disadvantage” in grain production. (See Chapter Two.) Operations have shifted. And population has dropped as a consequence. The second type of rural county will be the Bootheel, or Southeast Missouri on the Mississippi River. This area has been able to adapt and compete in modern commercial agriculture. But machines have replaced farm workers and the population there has dropped even more dramatically. We will look at a set of two counties there. We will see what the data has to say about the growth and decline of the denominations and of congregational life. (In Chapter 10 we will look at a third set of farming counties, those who have been impacted by changes in the processing of meat and poultry.)

Commercial Agricultural Counties

James Street used a small, farm service town, in North Missouri as the setting for two novels that focused on the role of Protestant pastors in the churches and communities which they serve. *The Gauntlet*, tells the story of Rev. London Wingo and his family as he comes in the late 1920s from studies in a seminary to pastor in this small town, near Moberly. Street himself had been a seminary student and pastor in this same period, so one suspects that at least some of the material is autobiographical. He deals with themes such as cliques in a church, power conflicts between the pastor and the church leadership, and struggles between the wife of the pastor and the older women of the church over lifestyle issues. He pictures the church as being dominated by the mainstreet merchants. Tensions arise as he seeks to evangelize the small time farmers who live outside the town. Wingo’s wife, Katie, dies at the end of the book. Street suggests that Wingo learns from this life lessons that make it possible for him to become an effective pastor.

The second book, *The High Calling*, is set about 20 years later in the late 1940s. Wingo, now a widower with a high spirited daughter in her 20s, returns to the town, but as pastor of the second church of his denomination, one that serves a mill town. In the intervening two decades he had served a large church in the suburbs of Kansas City. While this book deals well with the issues of getting a new church up and going, it focuses even more on the courtships of his daughter and of himself. A secondary theme is a storyline related to spontaneous, life changing revival that occurs in the church, something that Wingo sees as a work of God.

I became acquainted with the commercial agricultural communities of North Missouri in the 1950s. My father traveled to many of the towns in his work for the area distributor of Youngstown Kitchen cabinets. During vacations from school I sometimes accompanied him. I attended junior college in the region. And from 1958 to 1962 I pastored a rural church there. My subsequent studies of rural church and community life have been done with these experiences as the primary backdrop.

For this study I have selected six of the rural counties of North Missouri. Four of them have experienced a net loss of population over the half century. Two each of the commercial agricultural counties are in the western, the central and the eastern parts of North Missouri—Clinton, Atchison, Daviess, Livingston, Scotland, and Pike. (I also looked at six additional counties in that area. My findings from them confirm the trends noted here.)

Congregations in Clinton County

It was Clinton County where I spent almost five years as a pastor in an open country church, first as a seminary student, and then bivocationally. It is close enough to Kansas City and St. Joseph that it has experienced some “exurban” growth in recent years. Much of this is in the Southeastern part where highway I-35 provides access to Kansas City. The 1950 census found 11,727 persons in the county. In 2000 this number had risen to 18,979.

Cameron is the largest town. It sits at the junction of I-35 and US 36. It was once the home of Missouri Wesleyan College, long since closed. About a decade ago it became the site of a state prison. Later a veterans’ retirement home was built there. It has a Wal-mart store. While its downtown is no where near as strong and vibrant as it was in the 1950s, it seemed to be pretty stable when I visited it recently. My church, Smith Fork Baptist, was midway between Cameron and Plattsburg, the county seat. Plattsburg had some nice stores and businesses in the 1950s. They have all closed and been replaced by several antique shops. There were three small villages near the church, Osborn, Turney, and Perrin. All three have dried up. Perrin was an Irish Catholic community. Today the mission parish is closed and merged with Plattsburg.

Smith Fork church, too, is much reduced in size. Some of this is the result of loss of population, but some might be attributed to pastoral leadership. Several decades have passed since the church was pastored by someone who got out and aggressively visited in the community and sought to build the church up. Instead, the pastors have focused upon their preaching ministry. At first it was students. More recently, it has been bivocational men. Smith Fork celebrated its 100th anniversary while I was there as pastor. I doubt that it will reach its 150th.

Lathrop, another Clinton County town was once a major player in the Missouri Mule industry. This is long passed. But today it is experiencing some renewal as young families are settling there and commute to Kansas City for employment. The area around Trimble in the southwestern part of the county is also being impacted by persons who want to live in the country, or on a lake, and will commute to Kansas City daily to a job.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh./Att.
Assembly	2	134	3	204/205
Catholic	2	931	2	1,122
Disciples	5	1,114	5	1,927
Presby	4	301	2	62
S. Baptist	8	1,521	7	3,757/809
U. Methodist	7	1,092	5	1,597/522

Only the Catholics and the Presbyterians seem to have lagged behind the rate of population growth. The others denominations have gained some, at least in terms of reported numbers. During my tenure there I felt that the Methodists were stronger in the towns and the Baptists were stronger in the countryside. The Disciples had abandoned the countryside and had concentrated in the towns. The Catholic parishes in Plattsburg and Cameron were strong. It appears that the Baptist churches in the larger towns have grown well during the past half century. The open country and village churches have not done so well.

The Free Will Baptist churches in the county grew very well in the decade of the 1990s. The Brethren Church continues to have a small congregation there. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, newly renamed the Community of Christ, has two congregations and 516 adherents. This is a continuation of a long-time work in the county.

The MRCS included two townships from Clinton County. One centers in the village of Trimble. The other centers in the village of Hemple. Over the half century there have been 8 churches in them. Two have closed. One was a very old rural Baptist church. The other was a Cumberland Presbyterian church. The Trimble area includes portions of the Smithville Lake. Churches to the south of it have grown dramatically in the past decade. Hemple is closer to St. Joseph, but that city has been in decline for several decades. The Hemple area has been static.

Congregations in Atchison County

The northwestern most county in Missouri is one where the hegemony of United Methodism has continued to the present. In the 1950s 16 of the rural counties of the commercial agriculture area of Missouri found Methodism as the dominant expression of the Christian faith. For the most part the Baptist denomination has replaced Methodism in this role over the past 50 years. An exception is Atchison county. The RCMS study lists this county as the most Methodist one in the state.

I was almost born there. My father was principal of the high School at Watson in the mid-1930s. Realizing that he needed more income, he took a job in sales in Kansas City a few months before my birth. My parents attended the Baptist Church in Rockport. There was not one in Watson, then or now. They often comment about how weak Baptist work was there. I suspect that it was because the area was settled by persons who came from the northern states and from Europe. They were not Baptist in heritage.

The Presbyterians owned and operated a small college in Tarkio until very recently, but the number of Presbyterians in the county has been low, at least over the past 50 years. The census found 11,727 persons in Atchison County in 1950. By 2000 this had dropped by almost half to 6,430. Much of the farm land in the county lies in the Missouri River bottoms. Consolidation in commercial agriculture is the probable cause for the steep decline in population numbers.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	1	165	1	56/50
Catholic	1	98	1	288
Christian	4	600	4	416

ELCA	3	1,264	2	910/252
Presby	2	243	2	314/113
S. Baptist	5	890	4	1,349/213
U. Methodist	6	1,426	5	1,408/361

Given the rather dramatic drop in population the adherence numbers look impressive. But the attendance numbers raise some important questions concerning the effectiveness of the churches in Atchison County. Here, as in many other of the rural counties that we have looked at, the perception comes that either the denominations have not kept their membership roles clean, or church attendance is not a high priority, or both.

The growth of the Catholic church in Atchison raises some questions that need to be answered. Generally, Catholicism has tended to mirror the changes in demographics. The exceptions have been when there has been an influx of new residents. In this case was it the result of movement of Catholic farmers from Iowa to somewhat less expensive land in Missouri, or an influx of Hispanic farm workers, or both?

The MRCS included but one township in Atchison County. Initially, it had a Lutheran congregation. It has since closed. So, this is now an “unchurched” township, only the second in the original 100 townships selected in 1952.

Congregations in Livingston County

At the heart of Livingston County is the small city of Chillicothe. It has 8,800 residents. This is down from more than 14,000 early in the 20th Century. At one time Chillicothe had two colleges. Its business college was one of the premier ones in the region. As other colleges and universities added business schools and courses, the college failed. The town was also a railroad center. But like other railroad center towns, it lost jobs and people as the primary means of transportation changed. It did have the advantage of being at the junction of two US Highways. It appears that the city stabilized in the 1990s and is again growing as a regional trade center. Over the past half century the total county population dropped from 16,532 to 14,558. (Early in the 20th Century Chillicothe itself had nearly that many residents.)

Early settlers came from Ohio and other northern states. This explains the name, Chillicothe. But there were also a good number of settlers from the South as is evidenced by the significant presence of Southern Baptists in Livingston County.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Mem.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	1	61	2	295/149
Catholic	2	831	1	1,241
Christian	6	1,191	3	589/174
Episcopal	1	93	1	106/50
Mo. Lutheran	1	193	1	158/60
Presby.	6	429	3	210/82

S. Baptist	12	2,258	14	5,724/1,210
UCC	1	27	1	158/57
U. Methodist	13	2,329	5	1,671/597

The developments of the past half century in Livingston County seems to parallel what we have found in other rural Missouri counties. The Baptist numbers have grown in the face of declining population. But the numbers of Baptists participating in church life seem to be rather flat. Again the Methodists closed churches and their numbers dropped. The Christian churches had a similar experience. The Catholics grew over the period significantly, but in the last decade, like the Baptists, have lost adherents. As with several other rural population centers in Missouri, and elsewhere, a new Mormon congregation appeared in the 1990s. It reports 145 adherents.

The MRCS has two townships in Livingston. Both had small populations, less than 1,000 in 1950 and both have lost about half of their populations. There have been six congregations there. Two, one Methodist and one Christian, have closed. They were both in the village of Ludlow and may have merged to become the Ludlow Community Church.

Congregations in Daviess County

Gallatin is the county seat of Daviess County. During the Mormon Wars of the late 1830s, Joesph Smith was a resident of its jail for a brief time. A rather large Amish community has developed in the Jamesport area since World War II. It reported 900 adherents in 1990. This number was reduced to 414 in the 2000 report. The number of Amish congregations was constant at six. I imagine that some of the Amish “hived off” and moved to other places during the decade. Due primarily to high birth rates, the total number of Amish and other Anabaptist denominations have grown in recent decades across Missouri and in other rural areas, particularly.

The MRCS has had the township which contains the town of Pattonsburg in its since 1952. This town was devastated by a flood in 1993. It has been relocated to a higher site. This township was selected by the MRCS team in 1999 for more intense study. This will be reported elsewhere by them. The researchers have identified 9 congregations in this township across the past 50 years. Two of them, both Free Will Baptists, have closed. One Disciples church became independent.

Like most agricultural based counties in Missouri, the census found fewer people in 2000 than in 1950. The decline was about 3,000 from 11,180 to 8,016 over the 50 years. However, there were a little over 200 more persons counted in 2000 than in 1990. Perhaps things have stabilized.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Mem.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	1	11	2	130/93
Catholic	0	0	1	60
Christian	11	1,286	3	708

Presby	3	100	2	54/36
S. Baptist	13	1,704	8	2,588/459
U. Methodist	15	2,562	8	658/241

Here one finds one of the several counties where the Southern Baptists have replaced the United Methodists as the denomination with the most adherence during the past half century. Yet in terms of participation in worship the Amish rival the Baptists. The Catholics dropped almost half of their adherents in the 1990s. The Mormons have returned to Gallatin. They have formed a congregation and claim 249 adherents.

Congregations in Scotland County

Scotland, like the other upper tier counties in rural Missouri was hard hit by the Family Farm crisis of the 1980s. Some of this is reflected in the change of denominations reported in 1952 and in 2000. The population dropped from 7,332 in 1950 to 4,983 in 2000. The county seat is the small town of Memphis.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	0	0	1	146
Christian	6	913	2	447
Presby	5	365	1	89/39
S. Baptist	11	912	5	880/246
U. Methodist	10	1,095	7	620/176
UCC	1	185	0	0
Mennonite	0	0	3	563

Apparently, there has been a very major movement of Mennonites into Scotland County. On a given Sunday there are probably more of them in worship than any other denominational group. Have they pretty much replaced the Christians of the Reformed tradition? The Mormons reported a small congregation there in 1990 but not in 2000. The Catholics did not report a congregation in 1950. They did in 1970. They peaked at 260 in 1990 and have since dropped more than 100 adherents. The numbers for the Baptists and the Methodists also declined in the 1990s although the county population increased some. Perhaps the development of the Mennonite settlements replaced many of the Catholic and the Baptist and Methodist farmers, and this explains their decline. (The Old Order Mennonites did not participate in the data gathering before 1990, so I do not know when they moved into Scotland County.)

A review of all of the Missouri Counties reveals several other rural counties where there are colonies of Mennonite and Amish congregations that have moved in over the past 50 years. There were no MRCS townships in this county.

Congregations in Pike County

The Stark Brothers Nurseries, a major supplier of fruit trees, is located in this county on the Mississippi River. Several other nurseries are located in the area as well. Pike is included by some in the area called Little Dixie. The name of its seat of government, Bowling Green, suggests that some of its early settlers came from Kentucky and were impacted by the frontier revival, the Second Great Awakening. The large concentration of Baptists and Disciples here would seem to support this observation. There is also a large number of Catholics here, as is the case in most of the Mississippi River counties. In 1950 Pike counted 16,062 residents. In 2000 this had increased to 18,351. This increase came in the last decade.

There is one MRCS township in Pike County. It has nine churches. None have closed during the past 50 years. These include four Baptists, a Methodist, a Christian, an Episcopal, a Holiness and one church that is apparently non-denominational.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Mem.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	2	1,420	3	1,680
Christian	10	1,442	9	975/243
Episcopal	3	282	3	61/17
Mo. Lutheran	1	63	2	216/71
Presby	14	1,283	9	743/290
S. Baptist	20	2,977	20	4,716/1,069
U. Methodist	10	1,200	5	438/177

Again we see the dramatic decline of most of the Mainline Protestant denominations which had deep roots in the Frontier revivals. The Catholic story is complicated when one adds the data from 1990. Then the Catholic parishes reported 2,745 adherents. This means that there was a drop of over 1,000 during a time when the population of the county was growing. In fact it appears that Christianity as a whole suffered significant loss of adherence in the 1990s when the population was growing.

In 1990 the Old Order Amish reported three congregations with 450 adherents. In 2000 these three congregations were down to 201. Perhaps, this is another example of the “hiving off” of some of the families as they relocated to other rural area. Here too the Mormons report a new congregation with 110 adherents.

Religion in the Bootheel

Our family was finally able to purchase a new car in 1948 and set off on a much anticipated family vacation. My father did not take us to the usual sights. Rather, as a former agriculture teacher, he loved to look at land, crops, livestock and communities. One destination on this trip was the Bootheel, the several county delta like bottom land of the Mississippi River in Southeast Missouri. I saw cotton growing for the first time. I also saw the poverty that came

with the practice of share cropping, but did not really understand it. Small, often unpainted houses, were clustered at points along the highway. Children of stair step dimensions played in dust yards.

This year of 1948 marked the beginning of the end of this form of share cropping economic system in the Bootheel and across the Cotton Belt. The mechanical cotton picker was introduced. The need for “hands” to pick cotton, as well as to tend it, soon passed. Thousands of subsistence-type farm jobs were lost. Families moved away to Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago and other cities. Tractors replaced mules. Chemicals, not hoes, controlled weeds.

The 1950 census New Madrid County, Missouri, reported 39,434 residents. In the 2000 census this was more than halved to 19,760. Neighboring Pemiscot County reported 45,624 residents in 1950. By 2000 this was more than halved, and 20,047 citizens were found.

Today the old tenant houses have been bulldozed and burned up. Other crops have been added to the mix. Some of those who left in the 1950s have returned to the Bootheel to live out their lives on meager retirement checks. Not a few have the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. Most of the labor intensive work is now done by migrant Hispanic workers who cycle through the area annually. The resident population in the 1990s, was still declining, but much less sharply than in the past. Riverboat gambling and Interstate travel has helped the area some economically, it would appear.

Many of those who moved from the area were African American. (But, over the past two decades there has been a swelling stream of persons, in retirement, returning from the cities to ancestral land in the Bootheel.) The RCMS material, which does not capture most of the African American congregations, does not give an accurate picture of all that has happened to religious life in the Bootheel. But by supplementing it with data from the three townships in the MRCS material, we can achieve a better understanding. And we will take a deeper, congregational, look in Chapter Nne.

Primary Christian Bodies in New Madrid County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	6	553	6	424/231
Catholic	2	1,525	2	569
Christian	1	143	1	118/31
C. of God (And)	4	401	3	204
Presby	3	296	1	52/21
S. Baptist	15	3,226	14	6,120/795
U. Methodist	9	1,703	8	716/273

The first observation is that other than the Catholics, Methodists and the Presbyterians, the other denominations have gained market share over the past 50 years. Second, the Southern Baptists have actually grown in the face of such significant decline in population. However, the

Baptist need to take note of the fact that less than 20 percent of their adherents are in worship on a given Sunday. It may be that their membership records are carrying a large number of persons who no longer live in the area, or many have found another church home and not had their names removed from the membership list, or an awful lot of the Baptists have lost interest in their churches. Third, since these denominations are comprised primarily of white Americans, there is a need to dig deeper to discover whether or not the losses in population over the 50 years were primarily among African Americans.

We have one township in the MRCS in New Madrid County. The researchers found 15 congregations there. This number has been constant since 1952. Included are four Southern Baptist, one United Methodist, two Churches of God, two Churches of God in Christ, one General Baptist, one Missionary Baptist, one Church of Christ, one Pentecostal Church of God and two non-denominational churches, one of which was formerly connected to the Assemblies of God. Three or four of these congregations would be predominantly African American.

Primary Christian Bodies in Pemiscot County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	4	298	4	248
Catholic	1	933	1	235
Christian	2	111	1	163
Presby	2	376	1	367/121
S. Baptist	21	6,192	19	8,654/1,229
U. Methodist	7	1,717	7	935/325

Again we find that most of the denominations have maintained well in the face of declining population. The exceptions are the Catholics and the Methodists. Again, the Baptists are having less than 25 percent of their adherents attend worship. I fear that this may not bode well for them in the future.

The MRCS has two townships in Pemiscot County. They reported 25 congregations in 1952. Today, the number is down to 17. Six of the 8 that closed seem to have been African American. Given the decline in population in these two Bootheel counties it seems probable that a number of churches would close, so, while sad, this is not a surprise.

The Bootheel area has experienced tremendous change in the second half of the 20th Century. It is not the same place that it was. Apparently, church membership has held up in the face of the halving of the population. Certainly, it is much better than one would expect. However, there are indications that church participation is not what it ought to be. We need to look more deeply at what has happened there because of the racial factor.

Apparently, it had continued to be a place where Southern Baptists are dominant. The growth of Caruthersville from the establishment of the gambling industry there may stir another ingredient into the mix of life there. Baptists have generally opposed gambling. What impact will this have on their congregations?

Conclusion

Looking at several other of the rural Commercial Agriculture counties of north Missouri, and others in the rich agricultural area of the Bootheel, I found a similar picture. The Mainline Protestants have experienced major losses in congregations and adherence during the past 50 years. It is much deeper than declines in populations. The losses are usually there even when there has been population growth. The picture for the Catholics is varied. Generally, they have lost adherents or have gained adherence in relationship to population shifts. But in some instances there has been an influx of Catholic persons, either relocating or seeking work, which has swelled their numbers. They have been very strategic in planting new parishes.

The churches of the Anabaptist heritage, or peace churches, have expanded into many of the rural counties in Missouri. Some of this is the result of relocation from more expensive land in the East. Some of it is the result of biological growth and the hiving off of groups to resettle.

The Mormons have been very aggressive and have opened new congregations in several of the counties. This suggests to me that the older Christian denominations might have actually grown had they been as active and aggressive and strategic about church extension and evangelism.

This report underscores the need for the Mainlines to get serious about being Great Commission Christians. I hope that they will.

The Missouri Baptists need to awaken to the fact that their membership and adherence numbers can mislead them into being “at ease in Zion.” Baptists now may well be experiencing much of what the Mainline Protestants experienced in recent decades. They may see rural churches closing and their actual membership numbers decline. This did happen in some of the counties over the past decade. It may well accelerate in the coming one.

Finally, there is much work to be done in rural places. In many of the rural counties of Missouri less than half of the residents are claimed as adherents. Given the nature of the claims, which appear to often be too high, it is apparent that there are many persons who are not active in the Christian faith. Rural areas seem to be much less churching than “common knowledge” would contend.

When James Street published *The High Calling* (1951) rural Missouri was doing well. One of its sons was in the White House. Mainstreets were flourishing in the small towns. Roads were being improved. Commodity prices were good. The churches were making improvements on their facilities. Many churches were adding activities and for the first time some ever were able to afford a pastor of their own and have worship services every Sunday.

But as agriculture became more mechanized and crop yields improved, the farmers of North Missouri lacked some of the advantages of farmers in the northern Corn Belt. They were not able to compete. Gradually, grass lands replaced row crops. Farm families moved to the cities in search of work. Wal-mart stores were built on the edge of many of the country seat towns. This often dried up both their mainstreet and the mainstreets of the farm service towns 15 to 20 miles around. (For a fuller discussion of this see Chapters two and three of *The Rechurching of Rural America*.)

Some help came from small industries that settled in the small towns in the 1960s. But by the 1990s many of them have relocated to Third World countries.

Apparently, at several locations across Missouri colonies of Anabaptist farmers, Amish

and Mennonite, have been formed. Their low input agricultural practices and simple life style seems to make it possible for them to survive, even thrive, on farms of this region.

Apparently, even in some of the relatively depressed larger towns of the region, the Mormons have been able to form new congregations.

In the Bootheel I sense a need for the planting of new African American congregations, ones that will appeal to the “returnees”. Here, as elsewhere, rural communities and farm service towns are drying up. The need for rechurching the area seems to have reached a crisis. Serious strategic thinking is called for.

Some excellent ministries for transient Hispanic farm labors have been initiated. This seems to be an expanding need. More will be said about this in Chapter ten. All of this suggests the need and the relevance of the driving theme of our report, rural America is being rechurched, it must be done intentionally and faithfully.

Chapter 8
Religion in Micropolitan and Urbanizing Counties
Gary Farley

In the second half of the 20th Century the nation urbanized. The cities got much larger, sprawling into the country-side. So many people moved from the farms and small towns of the nation to the cities, that in many places rural population declined. In Missouri, not unlike many other states, this took the form of growing two metropolitan areas, St. Louis and Kansas City, of over one million persons; several smaller metros with 50,000 to 150,000 persons, Springfield, Columbia, Jefferson City, St. Joseph, and Joplin; and several others in the 15,000 to 50,000 range, micropolitan places. In this chapter I will examine two of the Micropolitan Counties, Johnson and Pettis. And I will examine a suburbanizing county, St. Charles, which lies to the east of St. Louis. St. Charles has experienced rapid growth as the city has spread out into it. This has impacted church life in several significant ways. To understand rural church life at the beginning of the 21st century it is important to consider the impact of urban sprawl into rural area, and the impact of a strong, relatively independent micropolitan city upon the surrounding countryside.

Micropolitan Counties

“Micropolitan” cities are larger than a town, or even a small city, but do not have the size to support the activities and resources that one finds in the metropolitan area. Further, micropolitan cities are “free standing.” By this is meant that they are not attached to a metropolis. They have a vitality and independence of their own. Generally, a micropolitan city is driven by an industry, a set of related industries, a college, a military base, and/or a well-populated trade area. There are at least nine micropolitan cities in Missouri—Warrensburg, Sedalia, Hannibal, Sikeston, Rolla, Moberly, Kirksville, Popular Bluff, and Cape Girardeau.

In this study I want to look at data related to religious life in two of these micropolitan places and in the counties where they are located. One is Sedalia and Pettis County. The story of the founding and growth of Sedalia is wonderfully told by Michael Cassity in *Defending a Way of Life*. Briefly, it grew first as the western terminus of the railroad development prior to the Civil War. Then it became a junction where east to west (Missouri Pacific) and south to north (Katy) rail lines crossed. Both railroad companies selected Sedalia as a division point in the 1870s and placed their shops for the maintenance of their rolling stock there. This gave the town the base for significant growth. The sons of area farmers came to work in the shops. Recent immigrants from Germany, eastern Europe and Ireland also found work there.

Sedalia, during the latter decades of the 19th Century, sought to be the home of the state capital, but lost out to Jefferson City. It sought a state teachers college, but it lost out to Warrensburg. It successfully competed with Columbia for the State Fair Grounds. It grew to about 25,000 residents in the mid-twentieth century and has since slipped back. Pettis County has good farm land.

Warrensburg is in Johnson County, the next county to the west of Pettis. It gained some notoriety in the late 19th Century when Senator George Graham Vest delivered his “Eulogy to a Hound Dog” speech at the trial of Old Drum for killing sheep. Until World War II it was a sleepy

college town. An air force base was developed midway between Warrensburg and Sedalia, helping both small cities. During the cold war the base was a key player in the response system to a nuclear attack. Whiteman Airbase was the location of the movie “The Day After” which dealt with the impact of nuclear war. A squadron of B-52 bombers were housed there, then. More recently, it is serving as the home of the B-2 Stealth bomber.

The college grew to university status with the influx of GI Bill students following World War II. Warrensburg is primarily populated by younger persons, young families and those who serve them. Sedalia’s citizens generally are much older. It is a much more stable place. It too has good farm land.

Each of these counties have two of the townships included in the Missouri Rural Church Study (MRCS). Three of them contain dying old farm service towns that were located on the railroad lines. The fourth includes an old coal mining town which is also dying. It is on US highway 50, not far from Whiteman Air Base. I have ancestral roots in two of these townships, one in each of the counties, and have visited them across the years. (See, my discussion of Green Ridge in the Rural Social Science Education material at www.ndsu.nodak.edu/rsse/)

I own farm land in Johnson County. I have a cousin who is mayor of Sedalia. I have a long and loving acquaintance with these counties. Both adjoin Little Dixie and have much of the culture of that area still evident.

Across the 20th Century as transportation improved and family incomes grew, trade and services shifted from the small farm service towns that dotted Johnson and Pettis Counties and re-centered in Sedalia and Warrensburg. In any one of 15 or more little towns empty commercial buildings greet visitors. Public life is much diminished. This is the new reality.

County Population

County	1950	1990	2000
Johnson	20,712	42,514	48,258
Pettis	31,572	35,437	39,403

As you see both counties have grown in the past 50 years, Johnson much faster because its “engines” have greater vitality. The role of railroading in America and in Sedalia is much diminished. It has acquired a few industries, but not enough to spur growth. The coal fields of Johnson County are long since mined out. Agriculture has turned from row cropping toward cow and calf operations. Most farmers and/or their wives hold jobs in town. This is true in both counties.

Primary Christian Bodies in Warrensburg and Johnson County

One of the reasons I had for looking at Johnson County was that the university and the military base should make the mix of religious groups different from that of Pettis County and Sedalia. The turn over of persons in the community will be different. Both of these population groups, students and military, tend to not be very active in local churches. And there is a good

possibility that there will be greater diversity of denominations represented in Johnson than in Pettis. The Religious Congregations Membership Study (RCMS) provides data from 1950 to 2000 as provided by many denominations in the United States. The data says that 56.8 percent of the population in Johnson County is unchurched, but in Pettis 38.6 percent is unchurched. However, the reports finds more variety of religious groups in Pettis, 28 to 26. So, one assumption was correct and the other in doubt.

In the first chart I will present data concerning the 6 primary denominations in Johnson County. In a second chart I will present data concerning the 6 primary groups in Pettis. After some analysis, I will look at the other groups in both counties.

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	3	456	2	1,702
Christian	11	1,742	5	2,001
Episcopal	1	100	1	182/66
Presbyterian	6	762	5	560
S. Baptist	22	4,153	26	9,881/2,455
U. Methodist	14	2,165	9	2,496/813

First, the Catholics gained market share in Johnson County during the 50 years. This may be attributable to the numbers of students and military personnel who came to the county who were Catholic. Second, the Southern Baptist were able to maintain market share. Third, the other Protestant denominations lost market share during the period. Fourth, the gap between attendance and adherents among the Southern Baptists suggests that they are carrying a good many non-resident members, many of them college and military related who did not transfer their membership after leaving the county.

Personally, I know of three excellent Southern Baptist churches in Warrensburg and Johnson County. First Baptist recently relocated from the downtown area to a spacious facility on a large acreage south of the campus of the university. Grover Park Baptist is a big bustling working-class church that serves a constituency that might not be comfortable at First. Then midway between Knobnoster and Concordia is a relatively new rural church, Heartland. It is reaching young families. It employs a contemporary worship style. I imagine that these three churches have contributed greatly to the success of Southern Baptists in maintaining market share.

Only the Presbyterians actually have fewer members, but the Methodists and Christians, although gaining adherents, have not maintained their share of either church members or of the population over the past 50 years. The Episcopalians have gained market share.

Among the other religious groups present in Johnson County are the Missouri Synod Lutherans with 2 congregations and 447 adherents. They have been plateaued. Their attendance runs at about half their adherence rate. There are some African American congregations and some larger independent congregations, but neither one of these groups participated in the RCMS study. The traditional holiness and Pentecostal denominations have small churches and lower

memberships.

The Mormons have grown rapidly. In 1990 they reported one congregation with 352 adherents. In 2000 they reported 5 congregations with 1,327 adherents. The Reorganized branch, now called Community of Christ, reported 3 congregations with 419 adherents.

Given the fact that the generation currently in college and the military do not tend to be “joiners”, and linking this with the transient nature of their residency in Warrensburg, along with the fact that Mainline Protestant denominations have been in decline in recent decades in most parts of the nation, it may be that the Mainlines in Johnson County are doing reasonably well. However, the fact that less than half of the residents are claimed by the churches should be a concern.

Primary Christian Bodies in Sedalia and Pettis County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att.
Catholic	4	2,180	4	3,341
Christian	6	1,771	3	1,973
Episcopal	1	308	1	265
Presbyterian	6	1,005	3	764
S. Baptist	20	5,105	24	10,082
U. Methodist	22	5,639	16	2,976

With a growth in population during the past 50 years of about 20 percent, one can begin an analysis by noting that both the Catholics and the Southern Baptists have gained market share. However, both denominations experienced a declining number of adherents during the 1990s, while the population had continued growing. In addition there are three fewer Southern Baptist churches reported in Pettis County in 2000 than in 1990. Again, the Baptists are only seeing about 25 percent of their adherents in worship on a given Sunday.

The drastic decline among the Methodists is alarming. The numbers suggest that they and the Baptists were headed in opposite directions. The changes in the Episcopal numbers may be reflective of changes in the business and professional life of many smaller cities, it would seem.

Lutherans have three strong congregations in Pettis County, two Missouri Synod and one ELCA. The Missouri Synod Lutherans added a congregation and netted a gain of about 1,000 adherents during the past half century.

Several of the older Holiness and Pentecostal denominations have congregations represented among those present in Sedalia. They are relatively small and stable.

One of the highest profile village churches in the nation during the 1990s was in the village of Smithton west of Sedalia. It was the location of a continuing Charismatic revival patterned after the one in Pensacola, Florida. Thousands of people attended. Many lives were changed. But toward the end of the decade of the 1990s, the church refocused and moved to the southeastern suburbs of Kansas City, about 75 miles distant. It has embraced a worldwide mission and seeks to train serious Christians from all over to be involved in it.

The Mormons reported one congregation with 481 adherents in 2000. This was up slightly from the 1990, but just near the pace of population growth. I wonder what the factor are the cause a difference between the growth of Mormonism in Johnson and Pettis Counties.

Pettis county also has an Amish and a Mennonite community. Both have congregations.

I have already suggested that the reason for Pettis County being more “churched” than Johnson is the result of differences in the age of the residents in each. Added to this is the fact that Pettis County people are more likely to have been born and raised in the county. Becoming a church member in the county and continuing with the denominational heritage of one’s youth would seem to be more likely there.

Townships in the Missouri Rural Church Study

Both of the Johnson County townships, Hazel Hill and Monserrat grew in population from 1950 to 1990, 654 to 1213 and 508 to 1064 respectively. Hazel Hill has four small rural churches, two Baptist, one Cumberland Presbyterian, and one Community, formerly a Methodist church. In 1950 the Monserrat township had four church, two Baptist and two Methodists. One of the Methodist churches has since closed. (The Hazel Hill township will be the subject of a more intense study in an ethnographic report of the Missouri Rural Church Study.) But the truth is that in spite of the fact that both of these townships have roughly doubled their population over the past 50 years, the congregations within them have not kept pace.

Why? Growing secularism? Declining commitment to the local community with persons attending church in nearby larger communities with churches that offer more activities? Exclusiveness within the continuing congregations that thwarts evangelistic outreach? A mixture of all of the above? Whatever. The emerging fact is that in these and many other rural townships, the churches are in decline.

The two Pettis townships appear to have lost population between 1950 and 1990. Each centers in a former farm service, “grain elevator”, town. Both were stops on the railroad lines. Both had high schools in 1950 and anticipated being “good, little towns” for decades to come. Both have lost most of their businesses and professional persons.

Houstonia still has the four basic Protestant congregations (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Community, formerly Christian), but they are very weak. Green Ridge has only 2 congregations as reported in the study. Many years ago the Methodist, Christian and Congregationalist congregations merged and became a Federated community church which later united with the Presbyterian denomination. Actually, the town has grown some in the past decade, has retained its schools, and both churches have experienced some growth recently. The population growth seems to have come from poor ex-urbanites who cycle through the community and may not connect with the churches easily. But the pastors, who are good friends, are working to grow their churches.

Again, both of these towns are within 15 miles of Sedalia where there are large, well-staffed, excellent congregations. Certainly, there are many who drive from Houstonia and from Green Ridge to worship in Sedalia. Modern roads and changing patterns of communities have resulted in people making choices about where they worship, or if the worship.

I, like many others, have observed that the good churches in the micropolitan cities often draw the life out of the country and village churches 15 to 20 miles away. Perhaps this is the way of the future in America. But there is also a counter trend as exemplified by Smithton Community

and Heartland Baptist, a village and an open country church which have grown dramatically in the face of a declining population base and a fading community. Could it be that these churches, one new and one revived, did not limit the vision of their ministry to a township, but sought to be a regional church? One was charismatic. The other is “pure country”. Both are evangelistic, taking seriously the Great Commission. Both seem to have a specific segment of the population in mind. While neither would exclude anyone, each is focused on a specific “people group”. Each found its niche.

An Urbanizing County

Since World War II several counties across the nation have experienced a transformation from being an essentially rural to being a metropolitan county. This is attributable to urban sprawl. An obvious example in Missouri of this change is St. Charles County, west of St. Louis along Interstate 70. In 1950 the census found 29, 834 persons there. In 2000 the number of residents had grown almost 10 fold and stood at 283,833. (Clay County, Missouri, near Kansas City, is a less dramatic example.)

In 1950 the Roman Catholic church was dominant in St. Charles County. It reported 13 parishes with 12,495 adherents. In 2000 Catholics continue to be dominant. There are now 19 parishes with 79,103 adherents. In the decade of the 1990s the Roman Catholic parishes grew by almost 24,000 members. However, the Catholic “market share” continued to slip in spite of this impressive growth. Over the 50 years the Catholic share has dropped from about 42% to 27%. This is in keeping with the common pattern in a county that has experienced intense urbanization. With population there will be more diversity in religion and newer groups will often grow at a faster rate than the denomination that once dominated the community, or county.

In the case of St. Charles County much of its growth has come from the movement of Roman Catholics out from the city of St. Louis where that faith family had been dominant from the beginning of European settlement. (It is interesting to compare the denominational change in Gwinnett County, Georgia with that of St. Charles. Gwinnett was the fastest growing county in the nation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The historic dominance of the Baptists was eroded by the movement of thousands of Roman Catholics from the North and the Midwest to the Atlanta metro area. In 1950 there were no Catholic parishes in Gwinnett. The Baptists had 32 congregations and 8,448 members. In 2000 the Southern Baptists reported 91,000 adherents and the Roman Catholics, 47,000. Today the Southern Baptists have 68 congregations and the Catholics have 9 large parishes.)

Note, also, the size of the Catholic parishes in St. Charles County. In the 50 years they grew from an average of about 1,000 each, large by Protestant congregational standards, to an average of about 5,000 adherents. With 13 in 1950, the total number of parishes grew to only 19.

The Protestant denomination that had the most marked growth in St. Charles County since 1950 is Southern Baptists. But today it is only a distant second in number of adherents. In 1950 the Baptists had only one congregation with 606 members. By 2000 there were 22 congregations with 20,527 adherents. Note, the Southern Baptists grew more rapidly than did the population. So, they gained market share. They did very well in the 1990s. I imagine that much of this growth was the result of both continued white flight from St. Louis and the movement of Baptists from the rural areas of Missouri and elsewhere into the St. Louis metro area. Throughout the 50 year period Southern Baptists have been second only to Roman Catholics in number of adherents in the state of

Missouri. However, on a given Sunday only 5,480 of the St. Charles Baptist adherents are found in worship. This is only a little more than one out of four. One cannot but wonder if the Baptist numbers then hide a lot of internal decay.

The second largest Protestant denomination in St. Charles in 2000 was the Lutheran–Missouri Synod. They reported 12 congregations with 11,287 adherents. Like the Baptists they have historically been strong in rural areas of Missouri, particularly in the counties along the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. So, the Lutherans benefitted from the growth of urban life and work. On a typical Sunday they have 2,953 worshipers in their 12 congregation. This is a ratio only a little better than that of the Baptists.

In 1950 there were six Lutheran–Missouri Synod churches with 4,470 adherents in St. Charles County. However, they have not grown at the same rate as has the population. Further, their membership has been plateaued since 1990. The other Lutheran denominations have moved into St. Charles since 1950. The ELCA now has four congregations with 2,077 adherents. They grew about 700 in the 1990s. The Wisconsin Synod had two congregations with 239 adherents.

The United Church of Christ also has an historic presence in the county. This comes from the old German denomination, the Evangelical & Reform which merged with the Congregationalists several years ago. In 1950 it had 10 congregations with 2,111 adherents. Today there are 13 congregations with 5,166 adherents. Growth, but not at the rate of population growth.

The United Methodists had 7 congregations and 1,361 adherents in 1950. Today there are 8 congregations with 6,596 adherents. So, the UMC has grown at about half the rate of the population. One cannot but wonder that if the Methodists had been as aggressive as the Baptists in the planting of new congregations, would their growth have not been much greater than it was?

The Presbyterians had 3 congregations in 1950 with just fewer than 500 members. Today there are four congregations with just fewer than 3,000 adherents.

The Episcopalians had but one small congregation in 1950. Today, they have two with 639 adherents.

The Christian Church (Disciples) had but one very small congregation in 1950. Today there are two with 739 adherents. And the Independent Christians (that separated from the Disciples about 1970) now have 5 congregations with 4,345. So, this portion of the Protestant church movement has grown much faster than the population growth of St. Charles. In the 1990s these churches more than doubled their adherents.

The RCMS researchers noted several large independent congregations in 1990, but did not continue to report them in 2000. Someone locally, will need to identify them and what has happened to this portion of the Christian family. (Should someone take on this task, we can put their report on the MSR website as a kind of addendum to this report.)

As the case in similar urbanized counties, there are several other congregations that represent the smaller denominations and seem to function as harbors for their people.

Certainly disturbing for orthodox Christians is the growth of the Latter Day Saints. They report 6 congregations with 2,138 adherents. They report rapid growth in St. Charles and elsewhere during the decade of the 1990's.

The data provided by the RCMS report makes it possible for national and regional judicatory leaders to see the results of urban sprawl over the past 50 years. It is important that counties like St. Charles and Gwinnett be analyzed. Here are some of the likely learnings:

First, do not depend upon the stock of existing congregations to reach the new people. The

Protestant denominations that did this in St. Charles generally did not grow at the rate of the county growth and lost market share.

Second, the new people need new congregations, ones that they have built and have a sense of ownership in. It is difficult to meld new people into an old rural oriented congregation.

Third, today the Southern Baptists have the most congregations of any denomination in St. Charles County and the most Protestant adherents. This allows for the Baptists to have diversity in their churches. I do not know the full story of the church planting that the Baptists did there, but I suspect that some of the new congregations were missions from St. Louis churches, others were churches that relocated from St. Louis, and some were congregations that were planted by the national denomination in cooperation with the area and regional judicatories.

Fourth, St. Charles County will continue to grow. Many new congregations need to be planted there. By looking over the past 50 years, one can see that church planting has worked across the years. This gives one hope for the future.

Fifth, in all likelihood there are Lutheran, Catholic, United Church of Christ, and Methodist congregations there that continue to be “rural culture” churches in the midst of a sea of urbanization. As long as there are people there that need this kind of a church, this is fine. But, they must not be “territorial” and try to keep their denominational family from planting urban oriented congregations there. If fact, as they sell off their farms for urban development, the rural people ought to give some of their profits to support the creation of new congregations.

Sixth, as suggested earlier for the full picture of the penetration of Christianity in St. Charles county the missing data concerning the independent and the African American congregations needs to be collected and stirred into the mix.

Finally, you can access much of the material gathered by the RCMS concerning the county where you serve and the denomination of which you are a part. Go to www.thearda.com and see what you can find. Analyze it. And draw upon it to strategize your work.

Conclusion

Much of the population growth in America is occurring in the micropolitan cities and in the suburbanizing counties adjoining metropolises. Often, as in the case of St. Charles and Gwinnett, these were rural counties less than 50 years ago.

Local congregations will need to consider how they should respond to this growth. There are several options:

- *change to appeal to the newcomers;
- *support the development of new congregations to reach the newcomers;
- *complain that things are not like they use to be.

Judicatory leaders will also be challenged with how to resource church planting to reach the new folk. We will return to this subject in Chapter 12.

Chapter 9

The Rural African American Church

Arnold Park

Over the years, sociological studies have stressed that other than the family, the African American church has been the most important and dominant institution in African American life playing a significant role in both the social and cultural life of African Americans for more than two centuries. From their earliest beginning, African American churches have served as the focal point of virtually every movement for change affecting African American communities. One clear example of the tremendous influence exerted by the African American church is the civil rights movement which originated in and grew out of the church. It has been suggested that the church not only provides a spiritual outlet for its followers but more importantly, gives them an avenue for recreation and relaxation from the physical stresses of life.

Famous African American sociologist and scholar E. Franklin Frazier saw the African American church as “A nation within a nation,” and credited it with being “the chief means by which a structured or organized life came into existence among the Negro masses after emancipation”. Finally, an African-American Baptist pastor has noted that the African American church cannot be understood in traditional theological terms because this church is a protective fortress behind which African-American people have shielded themselves from a hostile world. It is in other words, an instrument of hope and a weapon of protest in a world where the African American voice is muted.

For many African Americans, religion has offered a source of courage, strength and hope in the midst of bleak times when despair seemed to be the only reasonable alternative. Although, there are African Americans who choose not to believe or formally practice religion, most studies suggest that the overwhelming majority of African Americans identify with a religious community.

In this chapter Arnold Park, both a social scientist and minister, will present an introduction to the life of rural African American congregations. And he will take the reader into the culture of several congregations in the Little Dixie and Bootheel sections of Missouri.

Introduction and Historical Overview

The early rural African American church can be traced to the institution of slavery and especially to the end of slavery. The advent of this church transcended the former “invisible institution” or slave church where persons secretly practiced their religion. The resulting church merged into the institutional churches of freed blacks with some newly developed congregations being unaffiliated, local ventures. Many congregations resulted from a separation of the freedman members of a formerly multi-racial congregation. For example, near Carrollton, Alabama, one finds a community with a Springhill Baptist Church (white) and a Springhill Missionary Baptist Church (black). Others, became segregated affiliates of white-controlled denominations, sometimes with a white pastor and at other times with an African-American spiritual leader. A fourth variation of the rural African-American church was those which affiliated with other African American congregations either as regional associations or as

national denominations. Whatever, their nature or affiliation thousands of African-American congregations developed in rural areas following slavery.

C.O. Boothe, a freedman writing in 1895, noted that in the 30 year period since the end of the Civil War the number of African American Baptist congregations in Alabama had grown from three to nearly 800. What was true there was true elsewhere and among other denominational families. Certainly, this was the greatest church planting movement in American history. (Boothe's work is entitled, *Cyclopedia of Colored Baptists in Alabama*. It along with many other documents about the south including studies by W. E. B. Dubose can be found on line at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill library website.)

Statistically, rural African American churches in the United States range from one to over two hundred years old with the average age for most churches being about 85-90 years old. The few older rural African American churches are located in the south or on the east coast where newly arrived slaves first settled and eventually some of them purchased their freedom and established a place of worship. Churches in states such as Missouri were formed, for the most part, after 1865. There are no known examples of rural African-American church buildings in Missouri which date to the years of slavery or Civil War occupation. However, a printed history of the Paris Fork United Methodist Church located in a rural area several miles from Guthrie, Missouri mentions that this church was organized in 1850 and land was purchased in 1871. If this assertion is correct, then this church is the one exception to the notion that in Missouri the rural African American church did not come into being until after the Civil War.

Further, the data shows that rural African American churches in all the counties of Missouri where slavery was practiced. A few examples are Second Baptist Church in Huntsville, Missouri (1865); Miami Second Baptist Church in Miami, Missouri (1868); Second Baptist Church in Neosho, Missouri (1876); Liberty First Baptist Church (1867), and Saint Paul United Methodist Church located in New Bloomfield, Missouri (1881).

From this one can observe that the earliest African American churches in rural Missouri appeared in the Little Dixie area along the Missouri River where plantation agriculture was introduced with settlement. And that many of the churches emerged from a division of a bi-racial congregation after the Civil War. To the present, most rural African American churches in Missouri are found in Little Dixie.

A second concentration of rural African American congregations is found in the Bootheel section of Southeast Missouri. Much of the land there was swampy and was not farmed until early in the 20th Century when the swamps were drained. Thousands of African Americans moved there from the Mississippi Delta and became tenant farmers. (Note: Roman Catholicism was the dominant Christian faith in many of the Bootheel counties in the 1906 Federal Census of Religious Bodies. By the 1952 Church Membership Study, the area had become a Baptist, both Anglo and African American, Zion.)

In most cases, the rural African American church was organized by African Americans as a place of worship and refuge. Along those lines, one study found that among rural African American churches in the south about ninety-five (95%) percent were started by African Americans and only three percent (3%) by whites and others. Interestingly, in 1936, rural African American churches exceeded urban ones by 24,775 to 13,528, respectively. However, urban church members outnumbered rural members 2,701,988 to 2,458,988 reflecting the larger size of urban churches. The great exodus from the South to the Northern cities reversed this in the 1940s.

Generally, following the 1920's, the rural African American church lost some of its significance due to the migration of African Americans from rural to urban settings in search of a seemingly better life. Accordingly, the new urban residents started churches in their new areas of residence. Nevertheless, the rural African American church was still relevant because it was this institution that provided the religious, moral and ethical foundation for those persons who had migrated to the city. The religious traditions developed in the rural African American church during slavery and immediately thereafter included the praise meeting, the revival, the mourner's bench, the conversion experience and the emotionally charged preaching, singing and shouting during worship services. The traditions of the rural church helped poor African Americans hold onto a sense of value and a degree of hope in the bleak social setting of discrimination, segregation and racial violence.

Scarce Data and Information

In spite of its compelling historical and cultural significance the sociological study of the rural African American church remains an undeveloped area of scholarship and study. A thorough search of the literature reveals that over the past seventy years only two major studies have touched upon the rural African American church. In both cases, the focus was the African American church in general with the rural church segment merely an appendage to the larger work. One study was completed in the 1930's and the other more recently in 1989. However, the little known information about rural African American churches suggests that these institutions were and continue to remain the center of community life for African Americans who stayed on the land.

Very few rural African American churches have printed church histories. Attempting to get historical information is a painstaking and often disappointing endeavor. Three major problems persist in developing histories for rural African American churches. First, some pastors have short tenures at a church. In this case, without continuity this individual may not be the most knowledgeable person to assist with writing the history. Secondly, Since many rural churches are now over well over 100 years old, and since the founders were often not literate, there are few records of the early years. And thirdly, trying to discern and connect the pieces of history from a member who does remember historical information takes an interviewer who is adept and skilled in conducting oral histories. On the other hand, the few churches where either the pastor or a key member(s) is educated increases the likelihood that there is some type of published history.

Religious Affiliation

The early African American church was mainly Baptist or Methodist. The African- American denominations that prevailed in the early years were African Methodist Episcopal (AME); African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) and the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church. The latter church was established in 1870 and changed its name to the Christian Methodist Church in 1956. Other prominent early rural African American churches were those associated with the Baptist tradition including the National Baptist Convention USA established in 1880. This organization later became the largest African American denomination. And

finally, the National Baptist Convention of America was started after it separated from the National Baptist Convention, USA. While not as major a player as the latter mentioned denominations, the Methodist Church (now United Methodist) occasionally established churches in rural African American communities.

Quakers, Presbyterians and Catholics were the first denominations that attempted to recruit rural African American members, but to little avail. Mainline denominations such as Catholics, Presbyterians, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal and Lutheran historically, even today, are generally not present and are literally non-existent in rural African-American communities. The old Congregational denomination, now part of the UCC, was active beginning with Reconstruction in efforts to educate and evangelize rural African Americans.

Related to church affiliation in rural areas, the author of this chapter interviewed 510 rural African-American elderly in the three southern states of Arkansas, Tennessee and Mississippi in a 1988 study. While, the major focus of this study was rural black elderly and not particularly religion, it did inquire about church affiliation. The findings indicated that when one eliminates the seven persons who claimed "No church affiliation" a total of 503 of the 510 persons interviewed reported some type of religious connection. The predominant religious faith of the rural elderly interviewees was Baptist with 405 persons or 82.3% of the respondents reporting membership in this denomination. United Methodist was the next largest reported affiliation (51 persons or 10.4%). Eleven persons (2.2%) said that they were members of the Holiness faith and seven (1.4%) were Pentecostal. Just three persons were members of the 7th Day Adventist faith and one reported being a Roman Catholic.

Effect of the Great Migration

The rural African American church both in the southern United States and especially in southeast Missouri over the last century was severely impacted by the migration of African Americans from farms to the big city. The majority of early rural church membership among African Americans was comprised of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who paid rent to farm land owned by usually white landowners. Quite naturally, the church was affected when the main source of economic viability for its worshipers was disturbed. The 1890 census was the first census report to give an urban-rural breakdown for the African-American population. This report indicated that nine out of ten African-Americans lived in the South and more than 80 percent of them in rural areas in the southern United States designated as the black belt. However, this demographic had changed considerably by 1980, with 85 percent of the African-American population residing in urban areas and only about 53 percent living in the South.

The two factors which drove African American rural farmers off the land were a depressed rural economy and racial discrimination. Historically, in Missouri African Americans originally were brought to the state as slaves to work the hemp and tobacco farms along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. It is estimated that prior to the Civil War there were about 115,000 slaves in Missouri with Boone County, Missouri alone having an estimated 5,000-7,000 slaves. While, most slaves worked on tobacco farms along the rivers there was an exception in southeast Missouri where slaves were held on family farms. After emancipation, former African-American slaves who remained in rural areas within the state were primarily sharecroppers and rural farmers struggling to get enough food, clothing and shelter for survival.

About 1900 major land reclamation projects drained swamp land in the Bootheel region and more African-Americans migrated to Missouri from Mississippi and Arkansas to work the fertile cotton farms of southeast Missouri. With their migration to Missouri for farm occupations individuals established their roots in the outlying rural areas surrounding small Missouri towns including Caruthersville, Hayti, Sikeston and New Madrid. Along with the persons who settled in these rural communities rural African American churches were established to meet their spiritual needs.

As noted, the early rural African American church developed after the Civil War and served its purpose at that time. However, beginning in the 1920s a series of natural disasters including boll weevil infestations ruined the cotton crop which was a major staple of farm life in southeast Missouri. This was followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s. This condition produced economic misery for African-American share croppers and tenant farmers. Further, the boll weevil calamity caused the few African American landowners to abandon cotton farming and turn instead to dairy farming, or livestock production. Since these types of farms required less manpower than a cotton farm, thousands of African Americans no longer had the opportunity to work in agriculture. Many African-American farmers who owned small farms found it difficult to make a profit, either due to poor management or the lack of capital. Further, as more farms became mechanized, the need for manpower decreased, thereby contributing further to the migration from farms. Technology enabled irrigation in the western United States where cotton could not only be grown more cheaply, but also in the long-fibered variety which had become more popular than the shorter one grown in the South and southeast Missouri.

Another consequence found African Americans being pulled towards the cities by the expansion of industrial jobs in the North and the shortage of cheap labor due to the outbreak of World War I in 1914 thereby reducing the supply of unskilled laborers from Europe. Industries in large cities sent labor agents to the South and southeast Missouri to recruit black workers.

Finally, the pervasive system of racial discrimination which sometimes denied loans to African American farmers and the threat of violence against any African American who stood up to the system hindered the efforts of African Americans in rural communities to better their condition. As a result, people left the rural communities heading north. The vast migrations of African Americans from rural southern Missouri and the southern United States to big cities in the northern states was clustered around the periods of the two world wars and the Korean War. This migration transformed the demographic landscape for thousands of African Americans who relocated in search of jobs and a better life. In summary, migration led to the decline in significance and the eventual closing of some rural African American churches.

A Church in Decline

With each succeeding decade the landscape of the rural African American church in Missouri has changed, although, as recent as the 1970's many rural communities in Missouri still had an African American church. In many cases, those congregations were small and the last remnants of churches which at one time while small were still vibrant. For example, a 1976 study by Alberta and David Shipley of black Baptist churches in Missouri indicated that rural communities, such as Bunceton, Slater, Matthews, Dielstadt, and Henson had African-American Baptist churches. It would be interesting to do a follow-up study to see if these churches still

exist in the respective communities. Moreover, at one time rural Missouri communities such as Knob Noster in western Missouri and Glasgow and Ashland in central Missouri had at least two African-American churches. Generally, the churches were of the Baptist and Methodist faiths. A comprehensive survey conducted of rural African-American churches over a fifty-year time span (1950-2000) would probably yield a reduction of 30-40 rural African-American churches in Missouri.

The closing of rural African American churches was reported by the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Missouri-Columbia. In conjunction with the Missouri School of Religion/Center for Rural Ministry the university conducted a 1999 survey of rural churches in 99 Missouri townships. This survey was a follow-up study of the same townships studied by the university in 1982. The researchers found in the 1999 study a significant decline in African American churches in the three major denominations with sizeable memberships of rural African-Americans. The results are reported in the table below.

Table I
Decline in Rural African American Churches

Denomination	1982	1999
Church of God in Christ	5	1
National Baptist	9	3
African Methodist Episcopal	5	2

The data in the table is not encouraging. As noted, the figures show that 80% of the Church of God in Christ congregations in the original survey had folded by 1999; 67% of the National Baptist Churches had closed; and 60% of the African Methodist Episcopal Churches had ceased to exist by the time of the latest survey.

Another example of the changing landscape of rural African American churches in Missouri is evidenced by looking at California, Missouri. This community once had both Baptist and United Methodist congregations. Over time, the Baptist congregation lost its membership through either relocation or death. The last remaining person(s) attempted to deed the church to the United Methodist congregation. Although, the Baptist church was larger and more accommodating, the United Methodists elected to remain in their older building which had served them almost one hundred years. The Baptist church was turned into a commercial enterprise by a local entrepreneur. Interestingly, the United Methodist church is a one family

church which has held to the notion of continuing their tradition of worshiping in their own church and not merging with the larger white United Methodist church in that community.

Church Buildings

Considering the meager financial resources of its members most rural African American church buildings tend to be “relatively” well cared for and maintained. This special care and upkeep is probably a reflection of the pride which African-American individuals who live in rural areas exhibit in their houses of worship and the pivotal role which these institutions play in their communities.

Most rural African-American churches in Missouri, are simple physical structures. Generally, the Missouri churches are one-story, gabled roofed, rectangular-shaped buildings with a primary entrance on the gabled end. A few of the buildings have a side entrance which usually leads to a small room situated off of the main sanctuary. In terms of style the churches probably could be characterized as having “no-style” since they are merely box-like structures. This is in contrast to many rural African American churches in Tennessee. A recent study by Middle Tennessee State University concluded that there were 350 African American churches in small towns and rural Tennessee. Quite a few structures were architecturally prominent places of worship.

In a few cases in Missouri, the one distinguishing feature indicating the presence of a rural African -American church is a cross on the building. Further, based upon the simplicity of their construction most, if not all of the structures, would probably not qualify as “historical structures” under the qualifications for designating them as eligible for placement on the National Register of Historic Sites even though the church buildings are all over 50 years of age. However, due to their significance as community gathering places and the important roles which most played as meeting places during the civil rights movement the churches probably can justify their listing on this register under those conditions.

It appears that most rural African American churches were not built by formal drawings but rather were constructed in a piecemeal fashion by members and friends possessing some building skills. The church then took the character and design of those particular craftsmen. In a few instances, additions have been added to the buildings as the need arose. Again, this work was probably done without the benefit of formal drawings.

Pastors and Members

Rural African American churches are living testimony to the old saying which African-Americans that they have survived the atrocities of life because they have been able to “make a way out of no way.” This affirmation underscores the tremendous odds which African Americans have had to endure in order to survive. Instances have been cited whereby in the early development of the rural African American church many times Baptists and Methodists would worship in the same building until such time that one of the churches could afford to build its own facility. This process in some cases could take several years. In the meantime, it enabled each church community to worship in its own tradition.

Moreover, rural African American pastors are almost always are “bi-vocational” in that they need full or at least part time employment elsewhere in order to financially support themselves. Often they work in a city and commute on Sunday many miles to the church which they serve. And many serve multiple congregations.

Also, few if any have formal seminary training. For example, in the Baptist denomination most rural African American pastors have come to the ministry by way of a “calling”. Many times, these individuals are “trained” by a mentor. Through this process the person rise the ladder from member to deacon to pastor with sometimes assistant pastor being a stop along the way. On the other hand, the United Methodists in some rural African Americans churches in Missouri has in the place of trained clergy assigned a Certified Lay Speaker to lead a congregation. This individual receives about 15-20 hours of weekend training every two years in ministering to and caring for a congregation.

Success Stories

Even though many rural African American churches are either on the decline; closing; or have closed there are a number of success stories which demonstrate that there are still strong and viable rural African American churches and congregations. The ingredient which helps those churches to attract an audience to their rural fellowship appears to be the same factors which define the alive and growing church of any race. The narrative which follows gives examples of three such churches. It points to the distinguishing factors which appear to make them strong congregations in spite of their rural locations. Two of the three churches profiled are located in central Missouri and the third in the southeast Missouri bootheel area.

Oak Chapel Missionary Baptist Church (rural Guthrie, Missouri)

This church is located several miles from the rural community of Guthrie, Missouri in a wooded setting. A cemetery is located behind the church. Worship attendance averages 75-100 persons. Many college students are attracted to this church and attend when the local university (Lincoln University) is in session. The music director is a college student at that school. It appears that students are attracted to the church because of the worship style of the congregation which probably resembles the fervent worship style of their home churches. Also, many of the students who worship there suggest that the church members give them feeling of being family.

Most of the regular church members are sixty years of age or older. In many cases their parents were members of the church. While some persons don’t now reside in the immediate rural community near the church, they nevertheless commute there for Sunday worship. There are about six white members of this congregation and they attend on a regular basis. Structurally, the church has three associate pastors who attain this status by studying with the main or “senior” pastor. One of the three associate is female. The senior pastor is a biblical scholar who readily quotes versus of scripture. He interjects into most conversations the phrase “thus saith the Lord.” As with most rural African-American pastors, he is employed full-time elsewhere as a

Correctional Officer Supervisor at a state penal institution. The following are some observations concerning this church:

1. A monthly food pantry with food obtained from the nearby Columbia, Missouri food bank is provided.
2. A fifteen-passenger van was recently purchased by the church to transport students from Jefferson City (about 20 miles) and other persons living in outlying rural communities.
3. Every effort is made, when persons join the church, to keep them busy. Also, the church tries to make people feel welcome and at home by keeping the gospel simple. This is according to the pastor.
4. Becoming a pastor in the church involves a three-step process. First, an individual receives a "calling"; Second, the person is asked to deliver a trial sermon and Third, the individual is put in charge of certain tasks in order to see if they can carry them out in a Godly manner.
5. Only five families live in the immediate area of the church. Others come from Jefferson City, Columbia and Fulton, Missouri.
6. The church has a youth ministry which teaches youth the responsibilities for assuming the role of the elders.

Log Providence Missionary Baptist Church
(rural Columbia, Missouri)

Log Providence Missionary Baptist Church, located in rural Boone county near Columbia, Missouri, was organized in 1866. The founders were men and women who had been slaves and members of the New Salem Baptist Church and Bonne Femme Baptist Church which were both multi-racial congregations. After the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation the freed slaves thought it best to separate themselves from the Whites. The church is located approximately a mile and a half west of Ashland Gravel Road, and ten miles south of Columbia. The church is located on a four-acre tract of land acquired from Judge James Harris, who was a prominent citizen and a large land proprietor in that part of Boone County.

This first building was built of Logs (1500 Logs), cut and shaped by men of the congregation. These men donated their services, money and time for its construction. It bore the name of Log Providence from that time to the present date. Thirty-two (32) persons comprised the first membership. The membership increased in number, prosperity, finance, and church pride. The log church was eventually torn down and a new frame building was constructed in the early 1900's. After a few years, this second church was torn down and another church was erected in its place.

There appears to be several reasons why this congregation has been successful. Listed below are some of those factors:

1.The church has nurtured and grown a ministry team with a defined role for each team member. For example, each of the four assistant pastors has responsibility for a separate portfolio including 1). New membership development; 2). Preaching schedule; 3). Choir; and 4). Deacons. It should be noted that each of the four assistant pastors are without extensive seminary training. Rather, they are persons who have heard the “calling” and have been trained as deacons and groomed to their ministerial roles. These individuals assist the main pastor who is retired executive of a major corporation with providing for church outreach and growth.

2.Because the church is located in a rural community, it has developed an effective evangelistic bus ministry. The church owns a twenty-two passenger bus which brings members to the church on Tuesday nights for Bible study and Wednesday nights for choir rehearsal. Additionally, the bus transports persons from Columbia, Missouri, to Sunday worship services. Plans are to purchase another bus to transport members from Jefferson City. The bus ministry also travels with the pastor when he has preaching engagements at other churches.

3.The church has wide appeal to a diverse audience. It is racially integrated having two white families who drive each Sunday from Eldon, Missouri (about 100 miles round-trip) and their sister who comes every other Sunday from Kansas City. Recently, an attorney from Kansas City joined the church.

3.There is a strong outreach ministry. As a means of frequent contact with church members the membership role has been divided into six cells. Each cell has responsibility for the nurturing of 40-50 persons in that cell.

4.The music played in Sunday services is lively as in most African-American Baptist churches. Persons feel the spiritual presence when they walk into the church. The music ministry includes an orchestra consisting of organ; electronic keyboard; clarinet and percussions. The instruments are played during worship services.

5.Above all, it appears that the spiritual response through both word and music allows worshipers the freedom to worship. Also, the church has an ingredient present as in many rural African American churches whereby the pastor has the freedom to be himself and as the saying goes in the African American church “go in his own way as the spirit leads him.”

Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church

(rural Steele, Missouri)

Morning Star Missionary Baptist Church was established in 1920. In 1922, the church burned. Services were held in a tent until the church was rebuilt in 1923. When the church was completed, it served as both a house of worship and a school. In the 1950's the Maple Woods school was burned and area churches including Morning Star provided classrooms for children until a new school could be built. Next to the church is a church cemetery. The Morning Star church is currently in the process of building a new church because the present church can only hold around 100 people and does not have heat. Three out of four church Sunday School classes are held in the current sanctuary. The new church will house ministerial offices, a Baptistry, a fellowship hall and a new sanctuary.

There are several factors which appear to point to the success of the Morning Star church. The current pastor Rev. Larrie C. Bell assisted by his wife Wanda Bell came to the church four years ago and has made a tremendous difference in the growth of this congregation. Among the items signaling growth are the following.

1.The first year of Rev. Bell's pastorate the church went from having services on only the first and third Sundays to adding second and fourth Sunday services. Thus making it a full-time church. In April 2001, Pastor Bell started a fifth Sunday fellowship "The Independent Fellowship" which includes four other rural churches.

2.During the four-year pastorate of Rev. Bell 30 persons have rededicated their lives to Christ and 33 have been united in Christ by Christian experience. Also, 100 members have been baptized.

3.About 60% of the members are tithing. This seems quite an accomplishment for a rural African-American church if not for most churches.

4.Membership now stands at about 175 persons which is up from the 35 who were on the rolls when Reverend Bell assumed the pastorate of this church. Average weekly attendance is 65-80 persons with the majority of the worshipers being residents of the Steele community. However, a few persons commute from Caruthersville, Hayti and even as far away as Blytheville, Arkansas (about 45 miles). Incidentally, the pastor resides in Blytheville which is a fair size community.

5.About 35% of the membership is made up of young people. Plans are to officially launch a youth ministry for ushers and deacons.

6.On Wednesday nights there is a prayer service and Bible study. Plans are to begin a Sunday night service.

Conclusions

The rural African American church though conceived following slavery has gone through peaks and valleys in its years of existence. It has survived now more than 100 years. In some cases, due to low memberships some congregations appears to be fading from the scene. However, there should be no fear that the rural African American church will completely disappear in this century. There are shining lights for the continued existence of the rural African American church. The following points summarize the state today of this church:

1.There is some evidence of a return migration (however slight) of African American persons to rural communities. These persons are generally younger individuals who wish to escape the fast pace life of the big cities. Also, some persons are returning home to care for loved ones who are now in their senior years. While, the numbers of return migrants are not great there are enough to suggest hope for the future of rural African American communities as well as rural African American churches.

2. Rural African American churches such as the three profiled in this document appear to be attracting younger individuals from outside their particular rural communities as regular worshipers and even members. This bodes well for those particular congregations.

3.There appears to be a fast growing movement among Pentecostal denominations such as the Church of God in Christ to begin outreaching to rural African American communities. This is especially true in the southeast Missouri bootheel area.

4. Rural African-American churches which are alive and growing appear to have dedicated Christian leadership exhibited by the main “senior” pastor and the willingness on his part to develop other pastoral leadership among capable, willing and faithful members.

5. The growing churches have found their niche. Usually, this uniqueness means attracting persons who don’t mind traveling distances in order to participate in a fruitful worship experience. In many instances, the worshipers travel thirty or more miles to actively participate and are “young” persons or at least persons somewhat younger than the persons who still reside in the rural communities where the churches are located.

6. Pastors of successful rural African-American churches when asked the secret of their success indicated that the most important thing was “teaching the word of God.”

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Chapter 10

Sojourners in our Midst: Hispanic Ministry in Rural Congregations

In the fall of 2003 Alabama Public Television aired *Community at the Crossroads* a documentary about the development of an Hispanic community in the Southern Appalachian town of Collinsville, Alabama. For many years Hispanic migrant workers had cycled through the area working the harvest, then about 15 years ago some found regular work in a poultry processing plant. They settled, and their families joined them. Soon the children entered the schools. A girl who did well as a student and has gone on to college and a boy who excelled as an athlete were featured in the program. Businesses were established to serve the needs of the growing Hispanic population. Two of them were featured. And the efforts of “people of peace”, local residents who went out of their way to make the Hispanic welcome, were highlighted and interviewed. Further, the efforts of the churches to minister to the Hispanics were depicted in the documentary. What is happening in Collinsville, Alabama, is also happening in many small towns and rural communities. The push is poverty in Mexico and South America. The pull is jobs, often hard and dirty jobs, in the United States. (Copies of this video can be ordered via the internet from Alabama Public Television. www.cptr.ua.edu.)

In the Missouri rural church study two such communities were subjects of intense study. One is the southwestern most county, McDonald, and the other in a north-central county, Sullivan. In this chapter we will look at them and these counties, the towns of Noel and Milan, and at ministries of several Christian denominations to assist and evangelize the new Hispanic residents.

Joan Yeagley, a lay member of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church in Noel, Missouri, recalls how in 1995 she was walking down the street in the quaint little town of Christmas card mailing fame, and noticed some Hispanic young men approaching her. She smiled warmly and they returned her smiles. She lamented that her Spanish language skills were not what they once were, “fifty years ago when I was in college”, because she wanted to extend meaningful hospitality to the new residents. She soon enrolled in a conversational Spanish course in a nearby community college to “brush up” on her Spanish, then followed up with participation in a Spanish Language School in Costa Rica and at the Instituto Cultural in Oaxaca, Mexico, where she studied Latino culture and language. This was all done at her own expense because of her developing conviction that she and her congregation should reach out in missional hospitality to “these sojourners in our midst.” Her passionate commitment has resulted in an exciting multi-cultural ministry by the St. Nicholas parish, the story of which will be told later in this chapter.

Changing Demographics

The state of Missouri, like the nation, has seen phenomenal growth in the Hispanic population in the decade of the 1990's. The 2000 census data shows a dramatic increase from 61,702 Hispanic or Latino persons in 1990 to 118,592 in 2000 and a projected 137,000 in 2015. (These numbers may be much less than the actual totals, due to many Hispanics being in the country without documentation.) Much of the growth has been in out-state rural counties and is primarily attributed to the influx of agricultural workers who work in the poultry processing

industry in southwest and central Missouri and the pork processing plants in north Missouri.(see *Graphic #1*) The pattern has been for male workers to come initially, secure employment, work for a time to establish themselves here, sending much of their income to their families in their country of origin. Eventually they bring their families to join them. School systems have, therefore, had dramatic increases in multi-cultural enrollment, often for the first time in their history. (See *Graphic #2*). Congregations, often for the first time also, are faced with a multi-cultural mission at their doorstep.

Two counties with townships in our survey sample, have been significantly impacted. McDonald County, in extreme southwest Missouri has an Hispanic population of 2030, according to the 2000 census, almost ten percent of the county's population. In 1990, there were just 121 Hispanics in the county; by 2000, nearly 17 times that number. Sullivan County in north central Missouri, had 28 persons of Hispanic origin in 1990, and 634, almost 24 times as many in 2000. The challenge for all public institutions to address language, cultural and attitudinal barriers has been significant. It will continue to be so as the state increasingly reflects a multi-cultural demographic shift. Although currently, Hispanic and Latino Missourians account for a relatively small percentage of the state population (2.1%), it is projected that the proportion in the next decade will be substantially larger. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all institutions, including the church, to be diligent in their efforts to work toward a truly multi-cultural society, where the unique gifts of various cultures are affirmed and celebrated.

A Metaphor of Mission

Imbedded deep in the biblical tradition is the principle of *hospitality*, a key element in the Judeo-Christian story. Providing hospitality to the stranger or sojourner was recognized as a sacred duty throughout the ancient Mediterranean world and was observed more rigorously than many written laws. “The main practices stems from the nomadic life when public inns were a rarity and every stranger a potential enemy.”⁽¹⁾ After determining that the stranger was friend, not foe, they were treated with respect and honor. A traveler entering a city would come to an open place and there, unless they violated some important custom or committed some taboo act, someone would invite the stranger to their home, providing food and shelter to the stranger and the stranger's animals and water for the stranger's travel weary feet. Foot washing was the sign that the stranger had become a guest and was afforded the care and protection of the host. “Hospitality was to the bedouin what almsgiving was to later Jews - an expression of righteousness.”⁽²⁾

Jesus was dependent on hospitality for his daily care and lodging as he carried out his mission. It was assumed in Jesus sending forth of the apostles who were admonished to travel light, “no bread, no bag, no money”,(Mk 6:8) and in the missionary travels of Paul. Christians in their travels would be welcomed by their brothers and sisters in Christ in distant places who would afford their guests comfort and care, a place at table and by sharing the Eucharistic meal.

A contemporary Christian leader has said that an essential element of the church is to engage the world in acts of “*radical hospitality*”.⁽³⁾ That is an appropriate metaphor of mission for congregations in Missouri and elsewhere who encounter a new multi-cultural reality.

St. Nicholas Episcopal Church: A Faithful Remnant Bears Witness with Radical Hospitality

The Hispanic ministry of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church, Noel, Missouri, was begun in 1996 with an ESL (English as a Second Language) class taught by Joan Yeagley, lay missionary, introduced earlier in this chapter. In 1998, the ministry conducted a Summer School for Hispanic children and adults,. In two years this program had expanded and was taken over by the McDonald County School System, an excellent example of the impact of this small congregation on its community. The ministry has also conducted frequent and ongoing SSL classes (Spanish as a Second Language) in order to enable the "native" population to extend hospitality to the new residents, honoring and affirming them by making an effort to speak in their language.

Four components of the congregation's Hispanic ministry have evolved:

*** Literacy and Language**

The ESL and SSL classes are the main elements of this educational thrust but it also includes GED classes, Saturday activities and crafts for children and children's classes concurrent with the adult ESL classes. Various mentoring and tutoring opportunities which grow out of the relationships developed in the classes and other aspects of the ministry. For example, the ministry staff has tutored several persons as they apply for U.S. citizenship.

*** Immigration Assistance and Legal Aid**

A circuit court judge, an Episcopalian, in a nearby county provided legal assistance for several years to clients of the St. Nicholas ministry and worked with other Episcopal parishes of the area to development legal assistance programs. Now, St. Nicholas works through Legal Aid of Kansas City to provide legal assistance for immigrant workers. With the assistance of the Episcopal Diocese of West Missouri, the parish has established a legal resource no-interest loan fund through which the immigrants may obtain assistance for filing fees, attorney fees, and other legal needs.

*** Emergency Assistance and Advocacy**

A whole range of emergency assistance needs are addressed by the ministry - housing assistance, medical assistance, utility assistance and domestic abuse problems and issues. The ministry has been involved with the Noel ministerial alliance in developing a "Crosslines" emergency assistance ministry and has worked with the McDonald County Health Department in developing a bi-lingual community resource directory. The St. Nicholas ministry staff stands in solidarity with Hispanic persons who are incarcerated, encounter difficulties with local government agencies and provides a ministry of presence to them in all these situations. They also intervene as advocates of worker justice with the corporate employers, mostly the poultry industry, regarding fair employment practices and workplace safety because the rapid assembly line processing of chickens in a necessarily frigid atmosphere creates physical health hazards.

*** Spiritual and Faith Needs**

The spiritual needs of the Hispanic sojourners in Noel are being taken very seriously by the St. Nicholas congregation. The priest in charge, the Reverend Barbara Beam, is bi-lingual and has intentionally worked to develop a multi-cultural congregational witness. The congregation, with the assistance of the Diocese, called an Hispanic pastor/missioner, the Reverend Pedro Valdez, a Guatemalan, to further develop the outreach to Hispanics and to

develop a Spanish language service. His ministry was as a short-term ethnic ministry developer, working first with the St. Nicholas congregation, then with other congregations in the Diocese.

This strategy and the total outreach of the congregation has resulted in growth in both the Anglo and Hispanic communities. St. Nicholas now has two services of worship, one is traditional Anglo, the other a bi-lingual service where the cultures blend. Several Hispanic lay persons have been trained and commissioned as licensed lay ministers to serve in various parish and community ministries.

Barbara Beam, priest at St. Nicholas, witnesses to the richness of the congregation's ministry of outreach with a story of a unique baptism in the local jail which she and Fr. Valdez celebrated (name of inmate changed to protect privacy):

All the necessary information, the names of Jose's parents and so forth, was written on the back of a prisoner intake form. We had brought with us a small towel, the chrism blessed by the Bishop at last year's Chrismal Eucharist, and water in a bottle that formerly held a soft drink. We couldn't bring the Paschal Candle, but the light of Christ was certainly there. More than once we were interrupted by guards and prisoners coming through. Doors clanged, orders were yelled outside our room. Jose's baptismal garment was a green jumpsuit - standard prison attire. In fact, everyone present was wearing that except for me and Father Pedro. It wasn't your regular kind of baptism at all, yet the presence of the Holy Spirit has never been more palpable.⁽⁴⁾

The impact of the congregation's community ministry was enhanced by its participation in the Mc Donald County Multi-Cultural Committee which included representatives of two other congregations, Nativity of Our Lord Roman Catholic Church and the Nazarene Church. The focus of the Multi-Cultural Committee was to foster a true spirit of multi-culturalism in the area. Two annual projects helped to facilitate this spirit, a Cinco de Mayo celebration in the spring and a community soccer tournament in the fall. These efforts at cross-cultural community building, now carried out by a Community Improvement Association, and the inclusive witness of the congregation represent prophetic action in a community which has seen some racist activity as well. Street signs and an Hispanic housing complex have been spray-painted with the *KKK*, the abbreviation of the Ku Klux Klan.

Yet the congregation remains steadfast in its witness. It is interesting to note that this significant ministry is being undertaken by a congregation with a worship average of thirty-five and a total communicant list of eighty-seven, an increase of 42% in the past decade. They are, indeed, a faithful remnant of God's people bearing witness to radical hospitality.

An Ecumenical Approach to Regional Hispanic Ministry: Trenton, Milan and Green City

***Renewing Rural Missouri Project**

In 1997, the Missouri School of Religion Center for Rural Ministry partnered with the Center for New Community, a Chicago based community renewal center, in the *Renewing Rural*

Missouri Project. The pilot site was in Trenton, Missouri, where an ecumenical coalition of churches adopted the project as their community ministry strategy. The project employs a method developed by the Center for New Community which focuses on ecumenical Bible study and a process of congregation and community needs assessment surveys. The rationale is to intersect the biblical Word with community need and develop a ministry strategy consistent with this discernment process.

As the Trenton churches implemented this strategy, the survey process surfaced a need for attention by the whole community to educational needs including the passage of a bond issue for much needed building improvements. To the dismay of the church leaders, the issue of outreach to the new Hispanic residents did not surface in the survey process. (The Hispanic population in Grundy County, for which Trenton is the county seat, more than doubled in the decade of the 1990's). Nevertheless, the church leaders felt called to address what was clearly a critical need, a "prophetic issue" and a significant opportunity for a ministry of hospitality. In 1998 their Hispanic ministry initiative began with a series of listening and dialogue sessions with local Hispanic residents, gathering of household goods, furniture and appliances. These were made available to Hispanic newcomers who were in need of such items.

A list of persons in the community who spoke Spanish and could be used as translators by various agencies and institutions was developed. Considerable attention to housing issues in the community was given upon discovering that some land lords were placing several persons in small rooms and charging exorbitant rent.

They also had dialogue with some representatives from Premium Standard Farms (PSF), a major corporate hog producer/processor in the area, about the housing situation, transportation issues (since most of the Hispanics in Trenton worked 30 miles distant in Milan, the pork processing center for the area) as well as other worker justice issues.

The Trenton churches admirably looked beyond their own community to the community of Milan where, as noted above, most of the Hispanics of Trenton worked, either at PSF or Con Agra. They joined in support of the Hispanic Ministries Team, a United Methodist District ministry in Milan.

With primary funding from United Methodist sources, supplemented by additional funding from the Christian Church (DOC) of Mid-America, the Missouri Union Presbytery, Catholic Charities, Church Women United and local congregations, the United Methodist District called a Hispanic lay minister and his wife to serve the Hispanic ministry in Milan. Julio and Norma Bolanos, natives of Mexico, had recently moved to Milan with their young daughter, to work with Con Agra. Julio became the preaching pastor for the Hispanic congregation which met in the United Methodist Church building on Sunday afternoons. Norma provided music and educational leadership to the congregation and served as a translator for several community organizations and institutions. Both were involved in a whole range of servant ministry:

- * evangelistic outreach among a rapidly growing Hispanic population;
- * supervision of a significant food , rent and utility assistance program;

* transportation ministry - meeting incoming workers at the bus depot, medical transportation to hospital in surrounding cities and towns;

* supervision of the “Wait House”, an emergency housing facility the ministry operated for incoming workers;

* facilitation of “Workers Rights Training” using faculty from the University of Missouri, Kansas City.

Unfortunately, due to a combination of factors, including pastoral leadership changes and declining congregational interest, the Milan Hispanic Ministries Team has dissolved. However, the Renewing Rural Missouri Project maintains a critical presence in Milan through the ministry of Carlos Lozano, bi-vocational pastor of the Hispanic Baptist congregation in town, who also serves as the RRM director in Milan and in the adjacent town of Green City. Among the needs being addressed are worker justice issues, transportation services, translation/interpretation services, and advocacy, i.e., pressing for bi-lingual driver’s license examiners, for political representation of Hispanics in local government, and for county health ordinances which curtail the encroachment of corporate “hog factories”.

There have been tensions as rural communities who were once culturally monolithic adjust to the new multicultural reality. Sometimes the tension takes the form of apparent indifference. One interviewer quoted an Hispanic agricultural worker who said, “Anglos don’t see us”.

The ecumenical efforts in these northern Missouri communities indicate that the pursuit of radical hospitality remains an elusive hope.

Denominational Model of Statewide Ethnic Ministry: Missouri Baptist Convention

In 1987, the Missouri Baptist Convention called Mauricio Vargas to the position of director of language and ethnic ministries. His ministry assignment included church planting, refugee resettlement and migrant ministry. The primary focus of his ministry now is in multi-ethnic church planting. Mauricio, a native of El Salvador, is a naturalized U.S. citizen who has degrees from Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas and the Southern Baptist Seminary in New Orleans. Mauricio, who possesses a winsome personality, an ecumenical spirit and a passion for his ministry of outreach, has enabled the Missouri Baptist Convention to lead the way in ethnic ministry for well over a decade. Currently, the MBC has 150 ethnic congregations who worship in 24 different languages, various Latino, French, Asian and African tongues. They have 65 Hispanic congregations, many of which are in small towns, county seats and rural communities.

*** A Relational Strategy**

Mauricio has been a statewide ethnic ministry “circuit rider” for the MBC. His strategy is to go into a community, scout out the territory looking for Hispanic persons, perhaps at a Mexican restaurant or grocery or even in the aisles of Wal-Mart. He develops a relationship with a family, networks them with other Hispanic families and then brings together a group of families and organizes a Bible study. In time, the group looks for pastoral leadership, most often from within their own ranks, and Mauricio begins the process of pastoral leadership development.

*** Bible Institutes: Ethnic Ministry Centers**

The pastoral leadership takes place in various Ethnic Ministry Centers in several locations around the state, some of which are in stationary locations like Springfield, Kansas City or St. Louis; others have “floating” locations in small towns and county seats depending on the concentration of need. The Centers’ educational/faith formation program occurs in a Bible Institute, a three year curriculum covering 22 units of study. These Institutes are accredited by the Midwestern Baptist Seminary in Kansas City which provides a certificate to the student/pastor on completion of the course of study. The curriculum includes biblical studies, church history and doctrine, evangelism and discipleship and ministry studies.

*** Cross-Cultural Dialogue**

Mauricio observes that one of the significant challenges in multi-cultural ministry is “language prejudice”. He calls for the formation of cross-cultural groups in which there can be dialogue and collaboration around language, customs and cultural differences. In many of the communities where there are MBC Hispanic ministries these cross-cultural groups have been formed. An ecumenical strategy would be most appropriate in many locales.

*** The Mobility Factor**

Another challenge in Hispanic ministry is that “people are moving too fast” from community to community, state to state and frequent returns to their country of origin. The ministry strategy must take this mobility into account which may include an intentional networking among regional and state Hispanic ministry organizations in order to maintain contact with the migrating families or individuals.

*** Partnership and Funding**

The MBC ethnic ministry strategy includes a partnership in program and funding between the MBC, the Baptist Associations(regional church clusters) and the local congregations at the ministry site.

It is abundantly clear that the Missouri Baptist Convention, through the ministry of Mauricio Vargas, has sought to be faithful to its intended mission in ethnic ministry outreach and have pioneered a model which should be seriously considered by other denominations and faith groups who likewise desire to reach out multi-culturally in ministries of radical hospitality.

A Roman Catholic Model: Continuing a Tradition of Cross-cultural Hospitality

According to Sr. Sandra Straub, former Diocesan Director of Hispanic Ministry of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, roughly 70 percent of the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States is Roman Catholic due to the historic presence and dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in Spain and later in Latin America. Consequently, the Roman Catholic Church has often taken the lead in developing ministries with Hispanic peoples across the nation. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published a document, The National Plan for Hispanic Ministry in 1987, “a strategic plan for Hispanic Catholics in this country...which emphasizes the Church as missionary, communitarian, and participatory” and which has provided “important guidelines for pastoral agents and church professionals seeking to respond to the pastoral needs of Hispanic Catholics in our country.”⁽⁵⁾ The latest pastoral document of the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops, Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity, (2001) declares:

“Unity in diversity is the vision that we bishops, as pastors of the Church in the United States, offer to our people as they welcome the new immigrants and refugees to our shores....This diversity of ethnicity, education, and social class challenges us as pastors to welcome these new immigrants and help them join our communities in ways that are respectful of their cultures and in ways that mutually enrich the immigrants and the receiving Church....The presence of so many people of so many different cultures and religions in so many different parts of the United States has challenged us as a Church to a profound conversion so that we can become truly a sacrament of unity.”⁽⁶⁾

*** Welcoming Parishes**

The Springfield-Cape Girardeau Diocese has responded to this challenge by the creation of “*Welcoming Parishes*”, drawing upon the vision outlined in The National Plan for Hispanic Ministry document. Within a welcoming parish there are regular Spanish Masses, sacramental preparation and a person on site who is bilingual and can better serve the unique needs of the Hispanic population, especially those newly arrived in a particular community. The vision behind the *Welcoming Parish* model is to ultimately develop an inclusive, ethnically diverse congregation rooted in the gospel foundation of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”. Initially, however the energy of the *Welcoming Parish* is directed toward cross-cultural hospitality and enabling the formation of an Hispanic/Latino faith community within the parish.

For a time, says Sr. Straub, the parish will look like two churches on parallel tracks but the movement is toward an inclusive parish which honors, values and celebrates two cultures. The Diocese has seven welcoming parishes and six more parishes which offer Spanish Masses. One of the welcoming parishes is the Nativity of our Lord Church in Noel, Missouri, which, as

noted previously, is in a township in the Missouri Rural Church Research Project survey sample. Sr. Ayleson Maxwell, in assessing the tremendous growth of their Hispanic ministry remarked that she had eight children in her CCD classes in 1990 and today she has over 180, the majority of whom are Hispanic.

The Jefferson City Diocese has a variation on the welcoming parish model. Eleven congregations within the Diocese have significant Hispanic ministries directed by a bi-lingual coordinator and in many cases served by a bi-lingual priest, either in-residence or by one who travels the “circuit” monthly to conduct the Spanish Mass. Fr. Tom Alber, the priest in Milan, Missouri, at the time of the Missouri Research Project, is typical of several priests in the Diocese who have served in Peru through a mission partnership with a Peruvian diocese. Sr. Ellen Orf, current Parish Administrator in Milan, is bi-lingual and sensitive to the Hispanic/Latino culture. She fulfills an important role in the parish and the multi-cultural community which Milan has become. The Hispanic ministry coordinators meet frequently with Sr. Joyce Schramm, Director of Hispanic Ministry for the Diocese, for coordination of the wide ranging Hispanic ministry of the Diocese. The “El Puente” (the bridge) Ministry in Jefferson City seeks appropriately to serve as a bridge between the Hispanic and Anglo cultures and is staffed by three bi-lingual sisters in the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word order and an RN who serves as a community health advocate with special attention to pre-natal health care. Together, the El Puente staff engage in a whole range of service, education and advocacy ministries.

*** Hispanic Gifts to Anglo Culture**

In commenting on the unique gifts that Hispanic persons bring with them to share with the Anglo culture, Sr. Maxwell spoke of their deep piety: “Their faith transcends their whole lives.” “A lot of their faith expression is family-centered,” adds Fr. Bill Hodgson, who works in Hispanic ministry for the Springfield-Cape Girardeau Diocese,... “most homes have a little altar and often there will be a family rosary.” The rich piety is also reflected in the colorful celebration of the Spanish Mass. Sr. Straub observed, “If I am looking for something that is a little more spontaneous, a little more alive, a little more relational...the deep (piety) of the Hispanic person rings very true” in their celebrative worship style.

A strong sense of family is another appealing Hispanic trait which can be an important witness to the contemporary culture of the United States where talk of “family values” is rendered hollow by the disintegrating fabric of family life. The strong sense of family permeates Hispanic culture and has been brought with them as they have sojourned north. “In a lot of parishes we see large extended families together”, observed Fr. Hodgson. “They value living close, usually in the same neighborhood-aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents and grown brothers and sisters.” The U.S. culture has much to learn from these sojourners, many of whom will be among us permanently.

Sr. Straub testifies to the richness of the multi-cultural encounter: “ It has been a rich experience because it has broadened...our own sense of who God is and how God lives within a people. It is a gift the Church has. We are a universal Church, so all of the major cultures are represented. If we, as a people, could be more open to diversity, we would be so much richer in our concept of God.”⁽⁷⁾

Reflective Summary

The phenomenal growth of the Hispanic population in the state of Missouri and in the agricultural Midwest generally provides a unique *missional opportunity* for the church. Literally, the mission field is at our doorstep. It always has been, of course, but when it takes multi-cultural shape and hue, it is, or should be, more apparent to us. It presents a *missional challenge* as well since small town and rural culture, indeed our whole society, is so imbued with racism. The prophetic *missional strategy* is to engage our communities, culture and world with radical hospitality. Such hospitality includes acts of mercy such as food, clothing, shelter, medical and transportation assistance as well as the warm embrace of a new culture and language(s), which it behooves us to learn. Radical hospitality also carries the mandate to “do justice”, as Micah suggests, such as engaging the “principalities and powers” of corporate agriculture, giving attention to workers rights and worker justice issues, ministries of solidarity and advocacy and public policy initiatives.

The ultimate *missional celebration* is to gather with our brothers and sisters in Christ at the Eucharistic *WELCOME TABLE*, in anticipation of that day when “*people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God.*”(Lk. 13:29) This, indeed, is radical hospitality!

Case study of Two Rural Counties

In 1950 urban packing houses slaughtered most of the steers and pigs for American consumers. Kansas City, St. Joseph and St. Louis all had major packing plants. I can still remember the “blood and gore” which I (Gary Farley) saw on an eighth grade field trip to Armour Packing Plant in Kansas City. But these stockyards are no more. Apparently following the lead of the poultry industry, the meat packing industry moved closer to the producers. Major processing plants opened in towns like Garden City, Kansas, Livingston, Nebraska, and Milan, Missouri. The Iowa Beef Packers, (IBP) became a major player.

In the poultry processing industry smaller regional processors were consolidated into national and multinational corporations. The slaughter plants grew from small operations to huge ones, like the Tyson plant in Noel, Missouri. (Note: Tyson also owns IBP now. This is illustrative of the further consolidation and vertical integration of the food processing industry. Something that worries many thinkers.)

As these changes emerged, the workforce became increasingly international. (Actually, many of the packing house workers in the first half of the 20th Century were also immigrants, but they came from Europe, not Mexico, Central America, or Asia.) Both of the rural Missouri operations mentioned here rely on Hispanic workers. In this report we will examine the changes in congregations, denominations and adherence that have occurred over the past 50 years in the rural counties of Sullivan and McDonald.

Christian Denominations in Sullivan County

In 1950 Sullivan County was like many agricultural based counties in North Missouri. The demand for grain and cattle had been strong during the 1940s. The sons of the land had returned from the war, married, and started families. Many also started farming, or took over the operation of an aging parent or relative. Commodity prices were good. Most had the highest income of their lives. The 1950 census for Sullivan County reported 11,299 persons.

But by 1960 population had declined into the 7,000 range and continued to drop until in 1990 only 6,326 persons lived in the county. In 2000 the numbers had grown back to 7,219. However, these figures hide a dramatic change in the racial and ethnic makeup of the population as was noted above.

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	3	77	2	120/100
Catholic	1	233	1	100
Christian	11	974	4	688
Presby	3	152	2	87/46
S. Baptist	13	1,425	8	1,447/332
U. Methodist	13	1,311	3	463/152

The first statistic that demands analysis is that of the Catholics. Only in the last decade did the adherents numbers dip much below 200. But with the growth of the Hispanic population, why the decline. (As we will see in McDonald County, there has been a tremendous growth in the Catholic church.) I understand that many third and fourth generation descendants of Catholics from Europe left Sullivan County for urban settings. So, the Catholic community in Milan experienced a real turn over in the heritage of its membership. (*John, please get confirmation on this.*)

Second, the United Methodists pattern of closing churches and losing membership in rural Missouri counties continued in this setting. Sullivan County, like many of the rural counties in North Missouri, had more Methodist churches and adherents than any other denomination at mid-twentieth century. But today Southern Baptists have replaced the Methodists as the primary denomination in most of these counties.

Third, the Christians have done very well in the face of the demographic changes. And fourth, the Baptist here, as elsewhere, experienced a significant slippage between their adherence numbers and the participation in weekly church services.

The township where Milan is located was included in the MRCS project. It was also selected for intensive ethnography study in the 1998-99 replication of the study. It will be reported more fully in a projected volume. Across the half century the MRCS researchers have found 12 congregations there. Eleven of them continue. Many of the churches have actively

sought to minister to the Hispanics who have come to Milan to work in the meat packing plant. Apparently, the workforce is constantly changing and the ministry has been very difficult.

Christian Congregations in McDonald County

McDonald County is located in the Southwest corner of Missouri. The people are fiercely independent. Across the years the county leadership has threatened to secede from the state of Missouri and join either Oklahoma or Arkansas. US Highway 71 runs through the county. It is currently being improved and will become a four-lane linkage between Interstates 40 and 70. The upscale planned retirement community, Buena Vista, lies just south of the county, between it and the world headquarters of the Walmart corporation.

In 1950 McDonald County had 14,144 residents. In 2000 the number had increased to 21,681. The growth in the 1990s was nearly 4,000. Much of this growth was the result of Hispanics coming to work in the poultry industry.

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	0	0	1	711
Christian	3	303	2	336
Episcopal	0	0	1	35/14
Presby	1	20	1	18
S. Baptist	14	2,095	16	4,659/1,008
U. Methodist	6	894	7	846/323

The most notable feature of this set of data is the growth of Catholicism in the county. This is due to the growth of the poultry industry there. As in the past, the hard, dirty and dangerous work in the American economy has fallen to new immigrants. In this case it has been Hispanics. Here there was no previous Catholic parish. So, there were no traditions to deal with. This was strictly a missionary enterprise. As with Milan, the township where the town of Noel with its processing plant was included in the MRCS sample. It was selected for more intensive study in the 1998-98 replication. It will be published by the researchers soon. But for now, we must simply note that the effort has been very effective.

What has happened to the various mainline Protestant groups generally tracks what has happened in rural places across Missouri. The newer holiness and Pentecostal denominations are well-represented in McDonald County. Here, as in many other counties we have looked at the Churches of Christ movement appears to be in decline. (Note there is a Mormon congregation present with 285 adherents.)

The MRCS researchers have found a total of 16 congregations in Noel township. Only one has closed during the past 50 years. Across the years congregations have been added in Noel. Several have had exemplary ministries with the Hispanics. This story was told at the beginning of this chapter.

Conclusion

As one looks more deeply into the data concerning rural church life, one is impressed with the diversity and complexity of the picture. To generalize about rural church life over the past decade or half century is to distort. Only by examining the data from the various contexts can one even hope to understand what has been happening. And even then, many questions are raised by the data. This is illustrated as one looks at these two counties. They have the common experience of having had an influx of persons from a different culture. But the contexts were different and the results have not been the same.

1. "Hospitality", Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Abingdon, 1962.
2. "Hospitality", Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Abingdon, 1962.
3. Bruce Ough, Bishop, West Ohio Conference, United Methodist Church.
4. Barbara Beam, priest, St. Nicholas Episcopal Church, Noel, Missouri. From an article in the Diocesan newsletter of the Episcopal West Diocese of Missouri.
5. Roberto O. Gonzalez, foreword to Hispanic Ministry: Three Major Documents, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D. C., 1995.
6. Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001) ,1-2.

Quotes above, unless otherwise cited, are from a Special Report on Hispanic Ministry by Melissa Gray, *The Mirror*, a publication of the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, July 20, 2001, 10-11.

Transition

In the past six chapters we have looked rural churches from two different perspectives. The first four chapters sought to paint a picture in broad strokes of the current situation in rural churches and communities by region and denominational family. The last two chapters have looked at specific ethnic churches and mission. Now against this backdrop and that furnished by the initial four chapters of this study in which we shared both historical perspective and the general finding of our half century study, we will now move to two additional chapters in which we will suggest a course for the future of rural ministry.

Given our criticism of the presuppositions and the mixed results of the efforts that inspired the initial study back in 1952, we do this with humility and some fear. We may be wrong. But I hope that we will not be wrong headed.

Chapter 11

Rural Church Viability

Gary Farley

The driving purpose of the research reported in this book was to see if we could find some leads concerning what makes for viability, or sustainability, in the life of a rural church. For me and the others this has been a work of love. We care deeply about the viability and the vitality of rural churches. It is to the task of sharing our findings and observations that we now turn.

I believe that most of us view the church, both generally, or universally, and in its specific local congregational expression, as being a divine-human institution. Humanly, it is governed by the same sociological laws as other organizations. But it is also unique in that it has a divinely appointed mission, is granted special powers by God, and has special accountability to God for the “rightness” of its work. Therefore, a consideration of viability or sustainability for a local rural church will need to consider both sides or dimensions of a church, the human and the divine. Here I plan to do this in a general sense and then look at the findings of the Missouri study of rural churches. As an on going study of a large sample of rural and small town churches (over 600) spanning half a century (1952 to present), this study offers a “real world” check on the theorizing of both theologians and social scientists.

The Human Side

As human, a church is subject to the same factors that determine the viability of economic, recreational, governmental, educational, fraternal, and other organizations. Many helpful studies by social scientists have identified what these factors are. Their lists will include such things as leadership, mission, resources, appropriate organizational structure, corporate culture, social and cultural context, and the effective navigation of the forces of change as they impact the organization.

Those of us who were introduced to social science studies in the 1950s and 1960s were influenced by the Structural-Functionalist paradigm which taught that a social organization (or system) needed to address effectively four basic areas—adapt to its environment, set and achieve goals, be well-organized and integrated internally, and guard itself from its present and potential foes. I still find this a useful model for looking at a local church, or even a denomination. (See Paul Harrison, *Power and Authority in the Free Church Tradition*. He applied this paradigm to the live of the American Baptist Churches denomination.) In more recent times this paradigm has been adopted and adapted, it appears, by family therapists as they talk about family systems. It has also been employed to analyze and assist local churches.)

In many instances there are several ways open for an organization, or a set of similar organizations, to address these four basic needs. Let me illustrate with a brief look at a local church: First, it needs to find a way of relating to persons and to other social organizations in its environment. This would play out in the United States in terms of relating to those who are not a member of the church—tolerance, evangelizing, and shunning are among the options; to churches of other denominations—competition, conflict, cooperation, coexistence; to schools, industries, stores, civic clubs, governmental, recreational facilities and organizations; and to organizations

external to the immediate environment that impact the life of this church. The denominational structure to which the church relates comes to mind as one of these, popular culture is another, but there are many others as well. An analysis of these relations can be very complex and will not be undertaken in this setting.

Further, note should be taken that the way a Mennonite church deals with its environment is very different than the approach of a Roman Catholic, or United Methodist, or Assembly of God, or Southern Baptist. Any one of these ways may fail, or may succeed. *Take a few minutes and list the many organizations to which the church in which you participate must relate. You will find it both a lengthy and an interesting list. Then reflect upon the way that your local church relates to each of these.*

A significant change in the social or institutional environment will call for adjustments in how the local church addresses its environment. And it will also call, as well, for adjustments in how it addresses the other three other organizational concerns. For example, if another church in the community closes, or if another church is opened there, the existing church would be impacted. It might gain some members, or lose some. It might take up some ministry that the other church had carried. Expand this to consider the impact of the closing of a school, a business, the loss of a physician. Expand this by considering the impact of change in the leadership at the school or schools attended by the youth in your church.

Second, a church needs to set goals which are in keeping with its core values and attain them. For some this will be providing pastoral care to the members. Others will focus on evangelizing those who are not part of their congregation and discipling those who are. Still others will focus on ministry to the disadvantaged, or impacting issues of social justice, or dominating the other institutions in its environment. Some will work on several of these goals at the same time. Generally, for a church to be viable, according to this sociological perspective, it needs to feel that it is achieving its goals. It needs to be doing so in actuality as well. If it fails, it will need to change its goals and/or its means of reaching the goals. Otherwise, its future may not be bright. For example, if providing pastoral care for the membership is a core value, then it must organize in order to see that this is accomplished. An interesting case is how the Roman Catholics have deal with the shortage of priests. With priests not available for every parish, in some rural locations lay persons have been trained and assigned some pastoral care tasks with the support of a resident church administrator. *Again, identify the core values of your church. Consider how well the church is performing to achieving them. If not so well, consider changes that might be made.*

Third, a church needs to be appropriately organized both to accomplish its goals, and to bond the members to the organization. There must be a set of benefits that it provides to the members; things that they value—value so much that they find the costs of obtaining these benefits suitable. Usually, there is some tension between goal attainment and integration of the group. Another way of looking at this tension is to note the possible conflict between a focus on doing tasks and building and maintaining relationship. For example, an evangelical church may become so focused on gaining new members, that it neglects to keep the relational bonds within the congregation strong by discipling the new members and involving them in significant roles in the life of the church. Another church may focus so much on enjoyment of relationships that it neglects the important task of recruiting and incorporating new members. For sustainability, a church, like any organization, will need to balance its focus on doing tasks with building

relationships. How this balance is worked out may need to be adjusted from time to time as the environment changes, some goals have been achieved, and new opportunities present themselves. *Consider your church. What is it doing to reach new persons? What is it doing to assimilate new folk? What is it doing to address the needs of the current members? Are changes in what is being done needed? Define.*

Fourth, a church, from the human perspective, needs to guard itself and be maintained in the face of competition from competitors. These may include other churches, other religions, Satanic forces, popular culture, and/or secular institutions. What these are is primarily a matter of definition by the church itself. But poor definition may threaten viability. So may a bad plan of response to a perceived threat. Sociologists categorize the possible responses as conflict, direct competition, cooperation, co-optation, or simply to ignore. *In our current age with a high value on toleration, this function, when applied to a church, may not be popular. However, like it or not, a church, your church, is in competition with others. To not compete well may result in death. Consider how your church is doing in this area.*

In considering the churches studied in rural Missouri, one might contend that those who have continued during the period studied have dealt with these four structural-functional requisites of viability successfully. And one might also contend that many of those who died failed to adapt, failed to meet goals, failed to organize effectively, and/or were unable to compete effectively with other institutions. While this summary and application of the Structural-Functionalist perspective on the viability of a church is far too brief; hopefully, it suggests some very important “human” factors in the viability, or sustainability, of a local congregation. And as a “human” organization a church might continue to live and even prosper after its “divine” nature has been defaced, denied, or even destroyed.

The Divine Side

The New Testament addresses the divine nature of the church in several ways. One is by using language images such as “Family of God”, “Temple of God”, “Body of Christ”, “Bride of Christ”, and “Army of God”. All five of these appear in Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus. These are powerful images that speak of a special relationship to God, interdependence and shared work by the members, the lordship of Jesus, the importance of deep, spiritual worship, and conflict with the Satanic evil. They declare that while a local church is similar to other social institutions, it is much more. Its connection to the divine makes it special. The church, or a church, has a mission from God and has moral commands from God which should focus and direct how it deals with the human or sociological side of its existence. And as a divine institution, the church has powers that transcend those of human organizations.(The church universal has struggled with what this means for its relationship to the other social organizations, or social orders. And there is still division of opinion, often along denominational lines. One can consult the classic study by H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. because it provides a typology of how the churches have struggled at this point. See also Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*.)

It seems to me that it is important in the consideration of the viability of a local church to examine how well it is living up to the five images of the church cited by Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus. Such things come to mind as interpersonal bondedness, true worship, cooperation in doing the mission, holiness and opposition to evil. What I want to say is that for a

church to be viable from the perspective of its divine side, it must be pleasing to God. I think that it is reasonable to contend that if a church is displeasing to God and continues to be displeasing that in time it will bring God's judgment upon it. I need to hasten on to say that few if any of the churches in the sample which died since 1952 did so because of God's judgment. It is more likely that many of the contributing causes lay on the human side of the congregation.

Perhaps, you as I, note some harmonies between the four sociological requisites of an organization and the five pictures of the church from Paul. *Army* suggests task focus and maintaining boundaries with enemies. *Body* speaks of integration and appropriate organization. *Temple* speaks of a goal, as does *Bride*. Temple, as a living, not static, reality also suggest to me adaptation to context. And *Family* has an adaptation element as well as an integrative one. This is as it should be. The human and the divine are sides of the same reality. They are integrally related.

Reflect and mediate about your local church and its expression of the images of the church found in Ephesians. Read and re-read what Paul says here. Pray for your church and its leaders. Commit yourself to helping make the nature of your church to be more in keeping with these pictures.

There are other New Testament passages that speak to viability of local churches. Drawing upon the Gospel of St. Matthew, and informed by the Baptist perspective, I have identified the following list of expected behaviors of a viable, for the divine side, church:

1. Announces the reality of God's rule or Kingdom, 4:5-10, 17; 11:4-6;
2. Uses the power of the Kingdom to address needs of persons, 4:5; 16:19; 18:23-34; 28:18b
3. Builds upon, but is not bound to, tradition, 5:17;
4. Moves the believer from the common culture concerns for status, position, power, and "face-saving" to deep servanthood, 5:21-26; 18:1-5; 20:20-28;
5. Teaches people to pray, praise, give of their resources, fast and serve, 6:1-8;10:38-39; 11:26-30;
6. Sends messengers to other people who have not heard and/or understood to "harvest" and to "shepherd", 10:1-23;
7. Declares that God wills to be worshiped and obeyed by transformed (born again/heart changed) persons who live and work for (in) a just social order, 12:15-21;
8. Understands the Kingdom of God is full of surprises, so the church knows to "hang loose", 13:1-58;
9. Finds the essential foundation of the church in the confession of Peter, 16:13-18;
10. Deals intentionally with problems in the fellowship (noting that this is set in a context which stresses forgiveness and restoration), 18:15-20;
11. Disciples folk to center their lives on love, faithfulness, and justice, 23:23; serving as "cross bearers", 16:24-27;
12. Announces judgment to come and its criteria, 25:31-46;
13. Acts missionally, 28:17-20. The concept of being missional sums up the other 12.

Persons looking at the Gospel and/or other New Testament writings might come up with some other divine demands, and may interpret certain of the demands that I have cited in a somewhat different way. My list is intended to be more illustrative than authoritative in this context. *Reflect upon this list from the perspective of your faith family. How is it the same? How is it different? How would you assess the effectiveness and faithfulness of your church in*

addressing these 13 characteristics? Pray for your church and its efforts to serve the mandates of its Lord.

A third source for comprehending the divine side of the church is found in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of The Revelation. Here a vision of Jesus dictating letters to seven churches located in first century Asia Minor is recorded. Here He talks about the qualities He wants in a church. The following characteristics seem to stand out:

1. Patient,
2. Opposition to evil,
3. Pure,
4. Perseverant,
5. Faithful,
6. Ministering,
7. Steadfast,
8. Remembering its roots,
9. Watchful,
10. Careful to deal with spiritual matters as they arise,
11. Repentant,
12. Responsive to opportunities provided by God,
13. Not gullible,
14. and over all giving evidence of being blessed of God.

Read the Scriptures from which this list is taken. Spend some time mediating on the subject of how your local church measures up. Pray. Consider how shortcomings can be addressed and the nature of the church become more pleasing to its Lord.

In a fuller treatment of the divine side of the life of a church, one would need to continue with a study of the ecclesiologies of the various faith families. I will not do this here, but rather I will return to an insight from Lyle Schaller which has become increasingly significant to me as I have worked on understanding church life. Recall he spoke of the Western European Heritage and the Made in America versions of ecclesiology. The former includes those with a heritage of being a part of the state-established church in Europe. As such they have a heritage of seeing the church as one among several orders or institutions of society that make up the social system. They, then, tend to see themselves as addressing the spiritual dimension of life within a bounded geographic territory—the parish. The focus of these churches is on pastoral care of members and social order in the community. They tend to focus on the Great Commandments—to love God and neighbor as evidenced by doing the acts called for in Matthew 25:31-46. Their worship tends to focus on God the Father and operated from the liturgical tradition.

The alternate ecclesiology was born out of or propelled by the frontier revivals of the 19th century. It focused in much more on the individual. It called for transformation of the person. It gathered persons from within a geographic community, and beyond, to form a spiritual community. This church is a witness to the larger community and addresses it primarily by changing people with the hope that they will address the evils of society. It tends to focus strongly on the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20. It tends to focus on Jesus Christ and/or the Holy Spirit in its worship. The sermon tends to be the center-piece of the worship event. It is either a very well crafted oral essay, or a dramatic, dynamic, entertaining event.

To my mind, the Western European Heritage churches are a much closer fit to the sociological understanding of society than are the Made in America ones. But the Made in America churches have criticized them for adapting too much to other organizations and neglecting the divine side of the being of the church.

Because of the unique expectations for a local church from each of these perspectives, we must realize that viability as perceived by Western European Heritage Christians and churches will be somewhat different than that of Made in America Christians and churches. Further, there are consequences from each perspective. Specifically, the Western European Heritage church may be weak on calling for and enabling transformed lives, or new birth. And the Make in America church may operate with a weak and flawed understanding of its role in the community. Is it possible, as we work to re-church rural America for both ecclesiologies to learn from the other and become better.

Typically, in times of conflict the combatants go to extremes in their positions. This has happened in American Christianity. As we seek to re-church rural America, we need to incorporate the strengths of both the Western European Heritage and the Made in America ecclesiologies. It should be a both/and, not an either/or. Interestingly, Episcopalian, Loren Mead in *The Once and Future Church* seems to be calling for Mainline Protestants to act more like the “Made in America” churches. We are in a mission field again. Evangelism is required. But Gary Farley from the other side of the house believes that the Made in America folk need to give more attention to the emphases of the Western European Heritage churches. We really need to find a midway.

Essential Functions of the Local church

It has been interesting to me to find that many denominational families, on both side of this ecclesiological divide, agree on the following six functions of a viable church.. While the faith families, or denominations, may not define each of these the same, and while methods of addressing each may vary, there appears to be wide acceptance of them as basic things that a viable church must address. Certainly, I can see how the divine and the human sides of the church come together in addressing these functions. They are as follows:

- *Worship
- *Evangelism and outreach
- *Ministry
- *Fellowship
- *Nurture and discipleship or spiritual formation
- *Missions

Those of us who study a local church from the perspective of theology and biblical studies will often focus on the divine side and look for evidences of these qualities, behaviors and pictures. Effectiveness in each of the functional areas is grounded in social factors, including social psychological ones, and from the faith perspective, divine mandates as well.

To illustrate, consider the first, *worship*. The Bible is full of statements about what God expects in worship—humility, reverence, awe, and sacrifice. He also expects that worship issues in good conduct by the worshipers. Beyond that the worship experience must address the senses of the persons involved, the expectations that they bring to the event, and their cognitive faculties. Where we find the functions being addressed in abundance, we see a church that has

spiritual health. Crucial here is praise of God and prayer. To my mind God must be the focus of worship. And prayer is the glue that bonds worshipers both to God and to one another.

Further, it is a “no brainer” that a church must *replenish* its membership if it is to be sustainable. This process has several sources—biological, transfer of a member from another congregation or faith family, and conversion from no faith.

Generally, *ministry* is seen as a consequence of a church responding to its Lord. Jesus ministered to human need, so the church, His body and bride, must do the same.

Fellowship among the members has great sociological significance, but it also has a biblical base in references such as John’s to the vine (John 15) and Paul’s to the body (I. Corinthians 12).

The function of *nurture* points to the need to indoctrinate and move a member from a casual relationship on the fringe of a church’s life toward the core of the congregation. And mission has to do with the goals and the work of the church.

David Ray, among the most perceptive analysts of the life of sick churches, prescribes involvement of a church in *mission projects* beyond its locale as a cure. He says that a sick church becomes too conscious of its own ailments and turns its attention inward. Mission involvement will redirected its focus outwardly. It will do something that it feels good about. This will start it on the road to recovery. (See, *The Big Small Church Book*.)

Therefore, any consideration of the sustainability of a church should give attention to how it is performing these six basic functions. Are they getting done? Are they being approached in ways that are appropriate for their context? Are there some changes that need to be made so that their performance of the functions will be more effective from a sociological perspective, and/or more faithful, from a theological perspective?

Again, spend some time in prayerful reflection on the life and work of your church. Is it addressing all six of these functions? Is it addressing them well? Are there some gaps? Are there some programs, events, and projects of your church that need to be modified by addressing one or more of the functions that are not now being given adequate attention?

The Tension

We would contend that a local church may be very viable from a sociological perspective, but be dying spiritually. We would also contend that church may be very much viable from a spiritual side, but due to environmental factors find its continued existence as a social institution to be threatened.. The issue is to be viable humanly, or socially, and spiritually, or from the divine perspective. So, to come to a statement about rural church viability one must embrace both sides and live within this tension.

One such effort which has received wide attention and support and wider discussion in recent years is the work of Christian Schwartz. In *Natural Church Growth* he reports that he has studied about 1,000 congregations around the world and has identified eight basic characteristics of healthy churches.

1. Empowered Leadership
2. Spiritual Gift-oriented Ministry
3. Passionate Spirituality
4. Functional Organizational Structures
5. Inspiring Worship Services

6. Holistic Small Groups
7. Needs Oriented Evangelism
8. Loving Relationships

Looking at this list and reading his book, I find that he has mixed human and divine elements in the list that he has developed. My assessment from the Structural-Functionalist perspective is that he is weak in addressing the adaptation to context element. But goal attainment, and organizational considerations are strong in his work. Viewed from what we have said about the divine side it seems to me that Schwartz, although a German, is looking at the church and its health from a perspective that is informed by the Made in America understanding. This may be because of the surging effectiveness of Evangelical processes around the world, or what some are calling the Post-Christendom era which seems to make the approach to church taken by Evangelicals more necessary today.

Findings of the Missouri Rural Church Study

Recently, several of us who have been involved in this study--sociologists and theologians, field workers and consultants--attempted to create of list of viability factors based on our observations and analysis of our data. Our list is as follows:

1. Permeability or openness to the stranger
2. Visionary leadership
3. Clarity of mission in context and appropriate structure and activities (Programs, Events, and Projects) to address this mission
- 4 Obedience or faithfulness to God in the present moment, coupled with dependence upon God for the future
5. Congregational self-esteem
6. Development of appropriate facilities for context
7. Rethinking the catchment, or service area of the congregation and its place as a full-service church, a denominational presence, or a niche church
8. Making do with the resources at hand, with the hope that more resources will come.
9. Addressing the basic functions of a church, appropriately

This is still a list in process. It has much in common with Schwartz. But it takes context more seriously. We need to look at the divine and the human sides of the church as expressed in this list and compare it with the lists that I have cited in this study. And we need to see if we are developing a list that reflects the divine-human nature of the church, a church.

Again, consider the congregation in which you worship. How does it rate in each of these nine indicators? What changes, or improvements would you recommend? We will welcome your comments and stories concerning these factors and how they are played out in your church. For example, your church may have been one that has not be very open to “new and/or different” people. But after having read, reflected on this book and after having prayed to God for leadership and others have effectively addressed this issue, write and tell us of your story. We would like to put it on the webpage at the Missouri School of Religion. We plan to use this webpage as a way of extending and expanding the life of this book.

Finding a Niche, or Signature Ministry

Our study of the rural churches of Missouri shows that the most “endangered” churches have been those in open country settings. We have found mostly sociological sources of this which include: declining population base, more limited resources, inability to compete with town churches in programming, and the decision of judicatories to consolidate and consequently close the church. Often they have become small and old and lack both the “critical mass” and the resources to continue.

We found that some of the continuing rural churches have had the wisdom or good fortune of identifying a ministry that they do well and are now drawing participants from beyond their former six-mile, or township church field or parish. Let me list some categories of examples of niche ministries which we have observed:

- *Liturgical worship
- *Charismatic worship
- *Strong music program—Southern Gospel, Bluegrass Gospel, Contemporary, Classic Christian
- *Support of Home Schoolers families
- *Youth events
- *Senior ministry
- *Passion Play and drama
- *Ministry to the Mentally Handicapped
- *Trail ride ministry
- *Continuation of a disappearing tradition
- *Divorce recovery program
- *Grief recovery program
- *Prayer and Healing

In one sense, it seems to me, this is a transitional strategy for viability. The primary reason that many rural churches have closed is that they were put in place at a time when a certain form of community life (township and small) was in vogue, but subsequent changes in transportation, the development of a regional market and now a global economy, mechanization of agriculture, and urbanization have made that form of rural community obsolete. New forms are emerging. Christians and churches must be players in the formation of these new patterns. And then the rural areas must be re-churched, with some intentionality to address these new patterns and the people who dwell therein. It seems that the churches with a Western European Heritage, which has focused on contributing to community life, may be naturally equipped to provide leadership in this effort. However, some of them may be hindered by their tradition of ethnic exclusivism, and by a parish mindset that has not allowed them to expand their field of work beyond the geographic limits of an earlier time.

For the next couple of decades, I believe, we will see the development of larger congregations in the larger rural trade centers, what are often called the Wal-mart towns, patterned after the mega churches of the urban places. They will be “full-service” churches. Most often they will be evangelical congregations. (In those areas where an ethnic heritage and a Western European Heritage culture and church continues to dominate, this will not be so.) People will come to these churches from up to about 30 minutes distance. The other churches in its catchment area will be diminished or die, or find some niche or “signature ministry” that will sustain them. For some it will be their denominational affiliation. For others, it will be the

intimacy of a small congregation. For still others, it will be observance of a heritage. But for many it will be finding a ministry that it does well such as was suggested above.

This means that we will move from the old picture of churches with discrete “church fields” that their sister churches were not to trespass upon, to churches with overlapping fields. Persons will have choices. Persons will be evangelized by several congregations offering contrasting programs and ministries as well as theologies. (Many of the theological differences hang on debates of a former time that have little relevance for today, at least in the minds of most persons.)

If you worship in a small rural church, consider and seek to identify either its present niche or signature ministry; or, if there is not one, what it might be? In the latter case consider what gives God has placed in the lives of the current members. Consider also the needs of those who are not Christians, or who are not involved currently in the life of a church. Pray. Talk. Pray. Seek to identify what God has for this church to do in a unique way for the extension of his Kingdom’s work.

Bring into your reflection here the material that you read earlier in the book, chapters two and three, about changing patterns of life and changing settlement patterns in rural America. Think about what is happen where you are. Consider what this means for the mission of your church.

Conclusion

The church is both human and divine. As such, the consideration of the viability of a church must address both. There are some sociological rules with which it must comply. It must adapt itself to its environment; it must set and achieve goals that are important to its constituency; it must be well organized internally both to pursue its goals and bond its members to it; and it must guard itself from competitors and enemies. There are divine mandates to which it must conform. There are certain functions it must perform to please its Lord.

The changing context for rural ministry seems to suggest that many rural churches will be viable only if they find their niche and serve it. And there is a need for some to intentionally move toward being the “full-service”, mini-mega church in a Wal-mart town. Further, it seems that we are at the end of the Industrial Age which has really reshaped rural communities. And we are in the early years of the Information Age. It holds promise of the possibility of repopulating some rural areas and introducing still newer forms of community life.

New forms of community have emerged in the past 50 years even while some of us have called for a return to the old forms. This is not going to happen. The future may mean that the forms that have emerged are also rather transitory. So the churches need to be actively involved in the formation of new patterns, speaking a prophetic word. And the churches will need to re-church the current and emerging forms of community, reflecting both sociological and theological principles and norms. This is a daunting, yet exciting task. For many in rural ministry they will find that the role of pastor has been transformed from being that of one who managed a system which was already in place (like the manager of the local McDonalds franchise) to being an entrepreneur who is developing exciting new expressions of the Bride of Christ.

Appendix I:
Rural Church Evangelism.

Introduction

Southern Baptists and other Evangelicals have produced several fine training programs to help folk be effective witnesses of the Christian Faith. I have profited from the training. However, it seems to me that these programs presuppose that the person or persons to whom one is witnessing is either a *rank stranger* or at best a slight acquaintance. In seeking to be witnesses of the Christian faith we must deal with what my friend Joe Smith of Oak Hill Christian College in Minnesota calls the “intimacy factor”. This can be as great a barrier to being an evangelist as is the rank stranger factor in suburban evangelism.

I. My Setting

The first of January 1998 my wife and I moved to a small town in west Alabama. Our community lies between Columbus, Mississippi, and Tuscaloosa, Alabama. It is 30 miles to the nearest Wal-mart. That is rural. In town we have a Southern Baptist, two African American Baptist, a United Methodist, a CME, a holiness, and a Church of God congregation. Within a few miles there are rural congregations of black and white Baptists and Methodists. There is a Roman Catholic church about 10 miles away. It is also 10 miles to an Episcopal and a Presbyterian church. About 3,000 persons live with a five mile radius. About half are white and half are black. We also have some recent Hispanic immigrants.

II. Your Setting

Consider who lives in your community. Discover what churches are serving your community. Begin to think about who, and what categories of persons are not being reached by the churches.

III. Who the Lost and Unchurched People are in my Community

Reflecting upon those I have gotten acquainted with whom claim to be unsaved and/or unchurched, I came up with the following list. Any given person might fit in more than one of the following categories. Some of them are:

1. Reject the Gospel outright. Classic Atheist/Agnostic.
2. Accept the Hardshell (hyper Calvinist) doctrine and believe themselves to not be viable prospects for salvation; i.e., predestined for damnation
3. Are unwilling to give up their sinful life at this time, but want to be saved later
4. Believe that being a Christian is being “sissy”
5. Have not truly “heard” the Gospel story
6. Good folk, morally, but with no personal relationship to Christ
7. Involved in a cult or an apostate church
8. Dealing with deep guilt and do not believe that God will forgive them
9. Too busy with material priorities or leisure activities
10. Apathetically planning to get around to it one of these days
11. Blaming God for bad things that have happened to themselves or others

12. Have fallen out with church leaders or with family members in the church
13. Have been burned out with church work, the “55 syndrome
14. Divorced person whose ex-partner “got the church” in the settlement
15. Have found socioeconomic barriers to their involvement in the church
16. Believe that the financial “dues” of church membership are too high for them
17. Children who are not yet aware of their sinfulness and their need for salvation
18. Ethnic and minority people who may not fit into an existing congregation
19. People from a non-Christian religion
20. Hard livers
21. Generational barriers around worship style
22. Wayward family members
23. Children to whom access is blocked by lost parents.

IV. Who are the Lost and Unchurched People in Your Community?

Consider and discuss with others the categories of persons I identified in my community. Are there others that you would add? Which groups are present in your place? I am building toward a discussion of strategies for evangelizing persons from these categories. So, begin to think about this.

V. What does it mean to be a Christian?

From the perspective of Evangelical Christianity, it is important that rural evangelists have clarity about what it means to be a Christian.

1. What does one need to know and believe? The core of our faith.
2. What happens to a person when he or she becomes a Christian?
3. How is one to acknowledge he or she has become a Christian?
4. What is the process?
5. How is becoming a Christian and joining a church connected?
6. What changes should be evident in the life of a person who has become a Christian?
7. What are the means, purpose, and process of Discipleship?

Consider the meaning of terms that we use a lot such as–New Birth; Transformation of Mind, Heart and Will; A personal relationship with Jesus; being a Child of the King; Making Peace with God; receiving and being filled with the Holy Spirit.

VI. How is being a Christian defined in your faith family?

VII. Some Commonly Suggested Strategies for Evangelism

For our purposes I want to help you see that strategies fall into four primary categories—cultivative, personal or interpersonal, event and ministry. Further, some strategies are person-centered, some are group or church, and some are multi-church or parachurch. I will list below several common suggestions for strategy, and then we will consider which category each one falls into.

1. Create and maintain a cultural climate where being a believer and practicing Christianity is normative behavior.
2. Develop prayer groups that will focus on specific lost/unenlisted persons.

3. Systematically present the core Gospel to every person in the community.
 4. Be realistic and recognize that some will not accept.
 5. Make sure that everyone is presented the Gospel in ways that he or she is likely to see and hear.
 6. Minister to physical and material needs of persons as a point of contact.
 7. Be involved in hobby or leisure activity groups in the community as a point of contact.
 8. Be consistent in our Christian walk so that we will have authenticity about our witness and earn the right to speak.
 9. Train church members to be intentional, “lifestyle” evangelists.
 10. Establish a church or an expression of church that is accessible to the “hard liners” and “under-life” persons of the community.
 11. Involve lost persons initially on the fringe of the church in terms of things they can do for the work, and then move them toward the center and salvation.
 12. Have a big revival meeting or crusade and work hard to get all of the lost around to attend, depending upon the Holy Spirit to do the needed work.
 13. Modify an existing congregation to be open to an unreached people group in the community or area.
 14. Decouple conversion from church membership, as it was in the 19th century. Focus on evangelization for the Kingdom, then help the person find a church that will nurture them.
- You may well be able to think of other strategies that ought to be added to this list. Do so. Consider where each of these approaches best fits in the four categories identified above.

VIII. My Place in Personal/Interpersonal Evangelism

:

1. Being known and accessible.
2. Being in places where a conversation can turn to spiritual matters. (Some inquiries have come via the internet.)
3. Living a consistent Christian life. Be both holy and loving.
4. Giving attention to the mores or rules, expectations, and values of the community. I am old enough now that I do not have much motivation to be a rebel.
5. Recognizing that transformation often happens in connection with some personal crisis, I want to be ready to be there and focused on spiritual matters at that time.
6. Depending upon and being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit as to when, where and to whom to share the Gospel.
7. Keep becoming a Christian and joining the church “decoupled”. (Non-evangelicals will have an issue with this point.)
8. Staying focused on evangelism/restoration as a goal in these relationships, but perhaps not the most visible one. (“I like you. I like our common interests. I am your friend. And as your friend I cannot do other than be concerned about your spiritual condition.”)

Certainly, there are many aspects of this list that apply to a very close relationship as well. I sense that sometimes we are afraid to witness to close persons either because we fear that this will somehow damage the relationship, or because we feel guilt because we have not always lived a consistent, transformed witness before this person.

“Control” is an important issue here. We need to care about persons, not try to control them. Many persons have rejected God because they do not want to be controlled. And when we seek to evangelize them, they react by characterizing us as seeking to control them. Sometimes, we slip into this mode. We must ever be aware of the other person’s freedom, as well as their responsibility. Control is God’s business. And it is expressed through the Holy Trinity. Not you and me.

IX. Your Place in Personal/Interpersonal Evangelism

You have your testimony of what God has done in your life. He has transformed you. He has given you assurance of this. You have peace and joy today. You have hope for a bountiful life in the world to come. You know how all of this has happened.

Consider folk that you know who are lost/disengaged. Make a list. Pray for them every day. Enlist others to join you in prayer. Be their friend. Model Christian integrity in your relationship with them. Speak out of your faith and the Christian understanding of life in your conversations with them. Ask the Holy Spirit to inform your conversations. It is usually best to not get into an argument. Only seldom is confrontation a good strategy. (There are some folk where this is needed, but rely upon the Holy Spirit to direct you.) Be patient. Be open to the direction of the Holy Spirit. When the friend or kinsman whom you are trying to win to faith “opens the door of opportunity” breathe a prayer and walk in.

X. My Church

Carrollton Baptist is a good church. Its members include some very fine people. They are people that I am very comfortable around. They are holy and loving. It is a good place to be. They are folk like me. Many of them I see during the week in community roles, at the post office, in the Town Dinner, in my office and elsewhere. One man in the church has recognized that most of the “folk like us” are already churched, already saved. So, he has started a Sunday School class for persons who are not like us. It includes some folk with long hair, a mixed race family, loggers and others. This class has been an “entry point” for some folk who would have been uncomfortable coming through the main door.

Of course, as an Associational Missionary I am out in many churches across the county. I have come to see the association as a kind of “eco-system”. We have some diversity in our churches. Some are town churches, others are country. They sing different songs. The messages of the pastors are delivered in differing styles. The worship styles are different. Dress codes are not the same. Socioeconomic status is not the same. We have *plantation* churches and *hill* churches. There was a time when the denomination declared there to be “one best way” of doing church and strove to make all of the churches alike. (This is sometimes called “fordism” drawing upon the assembly line, standardization of Henry Ford. A good way of putting it, I think.) But we have finally come to realize that while diversity can have some problems, standardization is not the only answer. We have backed off and focused on helping churches reflect from time to time on what the basic functions of a church is—worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, ministry and missions. They are now encouraged to put together a set of programs, events and projects that reflect who their church is, the setting in which it works, the people who need to be reached with the Gospel, and the gifts that God has given to the persons who comprise the congregation.

Specifically, Carrollton, while it does well, needs Stansel, Crossroads, Pleasant Hill and other neighboring churches if the Kingdom is to be expanded here. And we all need the Pine Grove, New Providence, Infant, and Salem if the African American persons are to be reached in large numbers as well.

One role of our association is to plan and promote some larger, multi-church events that supplement the work of the churches in the county. Youth events, senior adult events, revival events are among the types. We will return to this shortly, but now consider the place of your church in evangelism. Beyond this, we will also work with the larger faith community in ecumenical endeavors.

XI. Your Church

Who are the people it is trying to reach? Who are the other churches in the community seeking to reach? Who are the unreached? What can we do about this? Our church? Cooperatively with others?

XII. Event Evangelism

Here is a list of some of the kinds of events that are being used across the nation and can work in a rural community, I believe. It is not an inclusive list. It is offered to trigger some thinking.

1. Distribution of the Jesus Film with a follow up.
2. Revival meeting.
3. Trail ride.
4. Have a musical presentation by people of the church.
5. Have a musical group come and make a presentation.
6. Offer parenting skills classes, perhaps at a community site.
7. Classes on caring for the elderly, responding to death.
8. Café church
9. Having a presence at a community event such as a fair, homecoming, rodeo, etc.
10. Friendship Sunday
11. Dramatic event such as “Heaven’s Gates/Hell’s Flames”
12. VBS
13. Wild game supper.
14. Fall Festival.
15. Block party.
16. Health Fair

XIII. Evangelism Events and Your Church

Consider what you are now doing. Consider what your church might do on its own. What it might do in cooperation with other churches in the community. Consider how use can make use of the events to do personal/interpersonal evangelism.

XIV. Ministry Evangelism

Many rural churches have developed on-going ministries for persons in their community that reach and disciple persons. The list below is again illustrative. You can probably think of

others. About a decade ago I developed a set of models taken from actual rural churches. It is called the Kando material. Take a look at www.pickens.net/~pba. Then look at the e-documents tab.)

1. Food, clothing, and shelter.
2. Counseling
3. Prayer
4. Tutoring
5. Child care
6. Meetings for home schoolers
7. The monthly newsletter of the church becomes the community newspaper
8. Senior adult center
9. Connect with community ministries such as “meals-on-wheels”
10. Jail ministry
12. Camp ground ministry during the season
13. Worship tape ministry
14. Ministry to migrant workers
15. Christian Women’s Job Corp

While access to the ministry is not dependent upon being evangelized or even being open to it, the workers must never lose sight of the fact that they must be concerned about the spiritual, as well as, the physical needs of the persons to whom ministry is being given.

XV. Your Church and Ministry Evangelism

Look at this list. What is your church doing in regard to this strategy? What needs do you see in the community that the church might address through a ministry evangelism project? What ministries might your church do through cooperative efforts? Again, consider how you can make use of these ministries to do personal/interpersonal evangelism.

XVI. Creating and Maintaining a Christian Environment

Much of what Jesus had to say focused upon the coming of the Kingdom of God. I take this to mean the reign of God in the lives of persons, families, communities, churches and even nations. Certainly, a project of evangelism should be changed persons, changes families, changed communities, changed churches and changed nations, even a changed world. Real change begins and is sustained by local change. We must not focus exclusively on change of the state, the nation or the world. My church is working with other churches to have a good community. What is being done by your church?

Conclusion

This has been an effort to think through elements of rural evangelism. It began with the belief that the nature of relationships in a rural setting are different than those of suburbia. Thus, materials that are being developed by denominational agencies to service evangelism needs in suburbia are not directly transferable to a rural setting.

We are not without help. There is a long and very effective heritage of evangelism in rural America. But times have changed. The task is not completed.

I hope that what I have done here is just the beginning and that it will stimulate others to think on this subject and to develop materials that are more appropriate for rural settings. Please let me know of your suggestion. gfarley@pickens.net.

Appendix II

Sustainability of Rural Baptist Churches

A Case Study

Looking back over the 20th Century I find that Pickens County, Alabama added seven rural and village Baptist Churches affiliated with the association. (This excludes three others that were formed in the small towns of Reform, Gordo and Aliceville.) During the same century Unity, Mars Hill, Zion, and Big Creek closed. So, there was a net gain of three rural churches. This occurred in spite of the fact that the rural population of the county declined about 50 %. Today the association counts 26 of its 33 churches as being in rural settings. (Two of these rural churches came into the association at the point of transitioning from one century to the other. One is an older church; the other is new. One is in another county.) Of these 26 churches, 17 have celebrated their centennial.

While I do not have all of the data to provide exact numbers, it is evident that there has been a significant decline in the number of Presbyterian and Methodist congregations in the county. (The 1971 count was 6 Presbyterian and 16 Methodist churches in the county.) The Primitive Baptist movement also suffered a significant decline during the 20th Century. What is true here seems to be repeated across the nation. We have sustained in the rural places well, better than most.

Why? Some might answer decisively by declaring that God has blessed Baptist because of our orthodoxy and evangelistic effort while cursing other groups for their liberalism. But, one might also want to consider the possibility of some sociological factors contributing to the sustainability of the missionary Baptist movement in this rural setting. Below I will suggest some of these factors. Please consider them and add others that come to your mind.

1. Locally Owned and Managed. Each of these rural churches is autonomous. Each is operated by the folk who hold membership there. They may have put up the building. They maintain it and improve it. They select the pastor. They decide what the church will do and when it will do it. Often the pastor is not a resident of the community, so the lay leadership provides much of the pastoral care of the church. If the church were to close, they would have to accept the responsibility. All of this is to say that there are some very deep emotional involvement with the church that contributes to sustainability. This is not the case with other forms of church connectionalism.

2. Indigenous Preachers. In by far the majority of instances these churches are pastored by persons with little formal training for the ministry. Most experienced a call to ministry as adults, or surrendered to it as adults, and did not go to Bible College or Seminary. Their training has come through mentoring, private study, reflective experience, and local study programs. They understand the needs and concerns of the people in the rural churches and the unchurched

in the community served by the church. Their style of preaching and pastoring fits the expectations of the people that they serve.

3. *Brand Recognition.* The Baptist movement has been strong in this county since the period of settlement prior to 1840. Of course, it seems that the missionary Baptists have gained market share across the years. The Baptist theology is familiar to most people here, although sometimes in a perverted view. Certainly, many folk are sort of predisposed to be a Baptist. Becoming a Baptist Christian is reasonably acceptable. The Baptist way and the local culture seem to intermingle. It is understood that success breeds success. But it also breeds contempt. There are some persons in most rural communities dominated by the Baptists who will never become a part of the movement for this very reason.

4. *Family Chapels.* Typically, rural churches over time evolve into family chapels. Through the process of marrying in a community, often the membership of the church will develop a good many kinship ties. It is common to find four generations of a family in the church and 4 or 5 more buried in the graveyard beside the church. So, the fertility of a kinship line is often an important factor in the sustainability of a rural church.

5. *Multibonded Relationship.* Usually, the core members of an older rural church have been in the church for many years. They have experienced joy there. They have worked through conflicts and tragedies. They have worked together to hold events and to complete successfully projects of the church. This is the coinage of ownership in a rural church. These bonds make it very difficult for a person to walk away, drop out, or move their membership elsewhere.

6. *Connectionalism.* Baptists churches connect through local associations of churches. The association has no "church" power. This means that it has no authority over a local church. Rather, its role is to provide services to the local churches and to provide opportunities for cooperative efforts by several churches. There are two other areas of connectionalism, state conventions, and the national convention for our churches. The churches belong directly to these conventions. They do not go through the association to connect with them.

7. *Associational Missionary.* I hope that I am not seen as self-serving in this point, but I deeply believe that the associational system of the missionary Baptists of the south has contributed much to our sustainability in rural settings. Early in the 20th Century denominational leadership noted the decline in the number of rural churches. They denomination was poor and could not really do much about this until after World War II which brought prosperity to the South like it had not known before. Between 1945 and 1950 most associations hired a missionary to work with the churches and adopted a plan called the Long Range Rural Church Program.

Within a decade most of the rural church which had had worship only once or twice a month began to have worship every Sunday. Likewise, they added additional programs and activities to complement the Sunday School program. And they trained workers to improve the quality of the Sunday School. This was true here in Pickens. All of this was very fortunate in its timing. Hundreds of thousands of rural Baptists had a mission to improve the life and work of their church. They invested in the work of their church. The missionary promoted resources, held events, helped out in weak churches and kept a focus on the tasks of missions and evangelism. He or she served as a friend, confidant, and consultant close at hand and accessible. His or her

authority was relational, not structural.

8. *Evangelism.* The Baptist movement rose to prominence during the frontier revivals of the early 19th Century. Emphasis on evangelism has continued to be our hallmark. Revival, baptisms and additions to the membership continue to be normative expectations in the life of the

rural churches. While some may question the effectiveness of these efforts, it seems to me that they have had a positive impact upon the sustainability of the rural churches. There is a commitment to witness, to do outreach, to be open and inviting toward those who are unchurched. And when additions are made positive reinforcement comes from the missionary and from the association.

9. *Missions.* The support of missions through prayer, financial support and the sending of their own sons and daughters has been of great importance to rural Baptist Churches. (Pickens has sent 17 to the foreign missions fields in the past century and a half.) It seems that a focus on missions can help a church look outward with hope, rather than look inward in despair. The church is involved in something great, important and biblical.

10. *Church Extension.* Baptists seem to just keep on planting new congregations. Here some replaced older dying ones. Others were started where there was no church of our faith present. Some were born out of controversy. The creation of new congregations, regularly, seems to contribute to sustainability of the movement.

Many of these ten points reinforce one another in the everyday life of the churches. For example, the revival becomes an occasion when the members are inviting others to come. They act as hosts. Their sense of ownership is enhanced. The family is expanded. Other characteristics of rural churches might be noted. However, this list of characteristics seem to contribute most to explaining, from a sociological perspective the success of missionary Baptist churches in rural areas. Here you have my assessment. I welcome your comments, questions, additions and so forth.

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Chapter 12

Thoughts about the Rechurching of Rural America

As we stood on the cusp of the new century and millennium, the research team conducted a series of conferences across Missouri and Iowa to report the early findings of the study. To set the stage at these conferences, I presented a review of a book Lyle Schaller had just published, *Discontinuity and Hope* (Abingdon, 1999.) Schaller has surely consulted with more churches of more faith families than anyone else in America over the past 50 years. This is to say that he has seen a lot, he has reflected upon and analyzed what he has seen, well. And he has published widely. In *Discontinuity and Hope* he pulls together and summarizes much that he has learned about congregational and denominational life in our nation. I drew from his many observations 10 that seem to identify trends and issues for the *Rechurching of Rural America*. In doing so I wanted to address those who were responsible for leading local congregations, those in judicatories and denominational offices that service these churches, and all those who care about religious life in rural communities.

You will note that these 10 subjects have been woven into the text of this book and have served as a foundation for our interpretation of data and for our suggestions regarding the future. Then in 2002 The Missouri School of Religion Center for Rural Ministry issued a video entitled, *The Rechurching of Rural America*. It tells the story of churches that have effectively refocused their ministry, others that serve effectively as a remnant, and still others that are new. This production also was informed by the 10 points Schaller makes. Let me now share them with you.

1. Schaller distinguishes between two primary ecclesiologies that inform us concerning “how to do” church. One he calls the “Western European Heritage.” The other he calls the “Made in America Heritage.” (See Chapter One.) The European churches are those with roots in the old Roman Catholic “parish” arrangement where the church was the center of a small geographic community. It had close ties to the government and other institutions (social orders) of the community and the state. The most obvious examples would include Episcopalian, United Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Lutheran, and Reform groups. The Disciples of Christ, although founded in America, would fit best here, also. (United Methodists’ placement in this list is interesting in that its history in the USA is closely tied to the expansion of the Western frontier and revivalism.) For many of these groups ethnicity was an important bonding element.

The Made in America churches are for the most part products of revival movements or Great Awakenings in America. Most Baptists, Old and New Charismatics, Independents, Churches of Christ, and Holiness denominations fit here. (Often they are grouped under the label, Evangelical.) They have never been the “established” church. Their origins generally were in a movement to *restore* elements of New Testament Christianity which they saw as having been either damaged or discarded by the larger church. Locally, congregations of this heritage group often were bonded by a *covenant* to which the members subscribed. This covenant was the basic for disciplining of the membership. Typically small and intimate these congregations were gathered from the larger community. Consequently, their understanding of how they related to the larger community was not the same as that of the Western European Heritage churches. The focus was on helping people be righteous and holy.

To understand rural and small town church life and ministry in such places, it is important to understand this difference of perspective. Schaller does not go on to note, but we should, that the Make in America churches are not equipped, and have an uneasy conscience in being the dominant church in a small town community, and the Western European Heritage churches are not equipped to operate in a setting where they are not dominant. Specifically, it may be difficult for a Southern Baptist church to assume the role of being the primary religious institution in the social order of the community. (Often it is helped by the fact that through inter-marriage with persons from the other tradition, there are lay leaders in the church that understand this role and are comfortable with it.) On the other hand, an Episcopal, United Methodist, Disciples, or Presbyterian church in a town which may have once exercised this role, may experience difficulty in settling into secondary role.

2. Generally, Schaller continues, the Western European Heritage denominations have been in decline during the past half century. And many of the Made in America denominations and independent congregations which have that kind of ecclesiology have been growing. Schaller sees these as being more comfortable with the *consumerism* of our culture, less focused on professionalization of the clergy, and devoting less energy to ecumenism, and thus more competitive in reaching out to potential members. They also stress experiential worship and the certainty and validity of the truth they proclaim. We need to remind ourselves that one of the goals of the Rural Church Movement was to improve the *professionalism* of rural and small town pastors. Because of his pragmatic way of looking at church life, Schaller seems to be critical of this professionalization. It has not worked very well. Ecumenism, in the sense of organic union and the creation of Federated churches in rural places, was also a goal of the Rural Church Movement. And the data from the Missouri study seems to support Schaller's observation. There is, however, a strong grassroots, cooperative kind of ecumenism present in many rural communities, even when organic union has been dismissed.

3. Schaller argues that we are in the midst of a Fourth Great Awakening in American Christianity. He relates much of this to the rise of mega churches, parachurch movements, and new worship styles. He also takes note of the emergence of prayer as the point around which Christians are now coming together (without any concern for organic union); migration of people from one tradition to another; new patterns of cooperation and competition; rising expectations for personal ethics and for the worship experience; increasing interest in polity and less in doctrinal niceties; more lay involvement in ministry; shift in women's organization from missions education to personal wholeness and piety development; and churches "gathering" people from across a wide area, rather than being the church for a smaller, "parish" area. He continues that the role expectations for pastors has also changed from being a "lover" to being a "leader". By this he means that for many congregations the old task of providing pastoral care is not longer the dominant activity. Rather the pastor is expected to "grow" a church in the sense of it adding members, programs and facilities. *Quest* more than *comfort* will characterize these emerging congregations. Finally, he notes that these churches will not be relying for resources on denominational publishing houses or agencies. Some will create their own. Others will shop around.

Because of the socially conservative bent and traditionalism of rural people, these trends may be less pronounced in rural places than in the suburbs, but I believe that we can see glimpses of these presence in rural and small town communities and their churches. If the current models of social change continue, spread of innovation from cities to the country-side, then we can expect this adaptation to grow.

4. Schaller, who was trained as an urban planner, has always been sensitive to the impact of governmental policy on shaping the context in which churches operate. In this new book he takes note of seven such developments in policy:

- *From Inflation to Deflation
- *From Neighborhood to Region
- *From Community to Marketplace
- *From Small to Large Scale
- *From Old to New South
- *From Relationships to Competition
- *From Producer to Consumer

From this list I want to take note of two trends of interest for rural churches. One is the possibility of the rural mega church. Second, the mid-sized church, like the mid-sized grocery store, is the most threatened by the changes. The small store, or church, has the advantage of intimacy. The large has the advantage of many choices. In the Missouri study we seem to be finding that left to their own devices, small churches have been very resilient and hard to kill. Second, visual inspection finds the appearance of a growing number of small-town versions of suburban mega churches in some of the Wal-mart towns. Sometimes, they are older churches that have been transformed. Sometimes, they are new starts or splits out of old churches which have patterned themselves after well-known mega churches.

5. Schaller declares that the old denominational structures are in for hard times and will need to change or will die. Much of what drives his discussion here is the formation of networks and affinity groups as the major way that leaders connect and relate to one another, often across old denominational lines. Increasingly, the local church will become the focal center for religious life. The churches will be less the “local” outlet or franchise for a denominational family. Judicatories—national, regional or area—will need to serve local churches more than be served by them. Increasingly, teams will come together to work on a project or an issue; do it; and then disband. Offices with on-going programs and big budgets will tend to pass off of the scene.

Schaller has a lot to say about training and staffing for the emerging mega churches. The trend will be for them to build their ministry team from within, relying upon gifted persons who will work part-time and/or be second career. The seminary system as we know it, seems to be obsolete. Some seminaries will team up with the mega churches to do training.

Personally, I wonder if Schaller may be describing what will ultimately be seen as an over-reaction with American churches once more coming to rely upon more formal and continuing patterns of connectionalism. (Remember that students of the history of social change use such grand models as linear, cyclical, spiral, and alternating swings.)

I fear that local (actually a regional) church may suffer from a spiritual myopia that will need correction in a couple of decades. Just as all truth and insight does not lie in the centralized headquarters, neither does it lie in the local. I believe that things will work better when there is a creative tension between the two. (This is the reason that Jesus carried his followers to a mountain and only then gave them the Great Commission. They needed a greater field of vision than the local. They needed to live in the tension between local needs and opportunities and global responsibilities.)

But for the present, it would seem to be wise for judicatories to work at creating affinity networks where pastoral leaders with similar settings and opportunities can share and mentor one another. *Fordism*, the concept that there is one best way of doing things, the denominational offices

know what this is, it has been packaged for the churches, you can buy the program package from the denominational publishing plant, and they will field service it for you, is dying.

6. Much of what Schaller has to say about the desires and interests of the rising generations may be more metropolitan, than rural, in their expression. However, because of the impact of media, we need to consider his observations here in designing rural ministry. Quality, new experiences to be collected, and choices are primary ones. Will the youth of rural areas be more accepting of the traditional ways of doing church in their context? Or will their definition of quality and the desirable be more mundane? Do rural churches need to become like mega churches in the cities and suburbs, or can they find some middle course? This is an area that needs some careful discussion. The internet and the use of DVDs and CDs is making those resources that were once available only to the mega churches and the big denominational events available to small town and rural churches across America. Teleconferencing is growing in acceptance, and this will further these trends.

7. Schaller goes on to stress the importance of providing ministry for children. He seems to be arguing that this will be a key concern for churches that have vitality in the coming decades. He describes the kinds of things that a mega church might do. How might this play out in a small church where kinship and history are important, or in a bigger church in a small town? Will ministry to children; for example, day care, schools, support of home schools, recreational activities, tutoring, or “release time” activities be key elements in the emergence of small town versions of mega churches? Will the churches in a small town or township cooperate around ministries for their children even more than in the past. I am seeing this and seeking to promote more of it. Again, this is an area for discussion for those of us who are in rural ministry.

8. Schaller notes that in many towns in the past half century a Western Europe Heritage church has been supplanted by a Made in America church as the dominant congregation. While this is true, what does the future hold? More circulation of the elites? I believe that this is what he sees as he notes that the Made in America churches began as *covenanted spiritual communities* within and somewhat withdrawn from the larger community, and have evolved into *voluntary associations*. This is not good. It typically means that they are losing their high demand characteristics. Historically, as this has happened, a new *restorationist* has arisen. We saw that the Methodists were dominant in much of rural Missouri at the end of the nineteenth century, but were replaced by the Baptists in the twentieth. Will this happen again? How or what will be the new dominant—Assemblies, Independents, Non-denominational?

9. He seems to be optimistic about small churches that will focus on what they do best and address this niche market across a region more than within a narrow community. I have discussed this in terms of being a church with a 30 mile field or draw. It is the church that does a worship style, a ministry, or holds a doctrinal perspective that draws people. It no longer seeks to be all things to all people within a narrow parish area. It realizes its market area overlaps that of others and is overlapped by others. It is not for everyone. It is for some ones, intensely. Such churches will need leaders with good personal skills, more than technical knowledge. Again, I believe that I see this happening both by intent and by accident across rural Missouri.

10. He seems to suggest that the wise judicatory will focus on serving the churches by helping them be Great Commission Churches. (This is particular interesting in terms of Schaller’s recent distinctions between First and Second Great Commandment churches—those that focus on worship of God and those that focus on loving service to others.) Again and again he stresses the importance of keeping very focused on what a church or a judicatory does. This seems to be

supported by a growing literature calling for churches to be missional.

As the title suggest, Schaller finds great changes in the context and the way of doing church since mid-century. He sees pastoral ministry as much more demanding and difficult. Yet he also believes that we are in the midst of a Fourth Great Awakening. If this assessment is correct, then we can expect American churches to change, for some to decline and new ones to be born. This is true both of local churches and of denominational families. It is critical, then, that those who love the Gospel, want to see the Kingdom of God develop, care about the local church, and care about the future of their faith family, need to be processing the information from the Missouri Rural church study, the foundational observations for Lyle Schaller, and seeking a vision from God for the future.

Now, let me summarize what I hear Schaller saying as it relates to the future of rural churches. First, the “Make in America” evangelical church has become dominant in most parts of rural America. Second, this effectiveness can be viewed as the consequences of being rather pragmatic about how to do church. This is to say that these congregations have been willing to be flexible in how they have staffed their pulpits, how they have worshiped, and in the focus of their beliefs. Third, the current set of dominant congregations may be replaced in coming decades, particularly if they ossify and are no longer pragmatic in these realms. Fourth, there is a danger in being pragmatic, however, and the churches may come to reflect cultural more than Gospel. Fifth, Schaller does not say it, but I think that he should, there is a danger that in focusing upon growth and exciting worship, ministry to the community will be lost. Sixth, there is hope for vitality in the life of those smaller churches that find their niche and serve it well. Seventh, the ecology of rural and small town church life will likely change. Mega like congregations will appear in many of the larger trade centers and micropolitan places. These will offer quality, choices and new experiences. But they will struggle to offer the levels of relationship, ministry, and service to others that are found in the smaller congregations. Eighth, the resettling of rural America by immigrants, ex-urbanities, returnees, and others will challenge churches to respond and reach. Some will change the nature of their congregation. Some will support the formation of new congregations for the new people. Some will fail and wither, at least for the next generation, but be a faithful remnant, and some will die. Ninth, rural churches have a heritage of doing things for children well. This is a value that can tapped for change. Tenth, focusing on the Great Commission (Matthew 28:1-20) as well as the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) will be the key to sustainability by rural churches, if they are indeed faithful to the faith.

What does this all mean for the leaders of the local churches, the pastors, and the judicatory leaders who serve rural and small town churches?

A Vision for the Rechurcing of Rural America

Now, building upon all of the data and information that we have presented in this volume to this point, I want to share the vision I have for the Rechurcing of Rural America. I realize that it is not an infallible vision. I hope that it will encourage others to formulate and their vision for the Rechurcing of Rural America. I hope that it will stimulate discussion that will issue in a broadly shared vision that congregations, judicatories, denominations and others will undertake.

Back in Chapter three we shared the vision for rural church life that drove Mainline Protestantism during much of the 20th Century. And we assessed its successes, failures and blind spots. We also presented a more contemporary vision, one formulated and shared in 1997 in *Rural*

Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come. I participated in the group that drafted this vision. I believe in it. It is a vision that addresses, church, community and public policy. Here I will not revisit the policy issues, but I do want to look again at the goals for church and community life.

In Chapters one through four we have shared what has happened over the past half century to rural life, including the life of the churches that serve rural populations. I hope that as you read this material you reflected upon what has happened in your rural community and church. Chapter four was pivotal in that it shared the findings of the researcher concerning rural church life now and how it had changed since 1952.

Then in Chapters five through eight we folded in data from another study, *Religious Congregations and Membership Study*, and looked at what had happened to churches and religious life in several unique rural areas across Missouri. I tried to demonstrate the interplay of history, denominational presence, economic change and demographic changes have played out in each of the areas. I hope that you found an area similar to the one in which you live and work, and that you reflected upon the data and applied it to your context.

Chapters nine and ten focused on two demographic categories, African American and Hispanic. One has a long presence in rural Missouri. The other is rather recent. We looked at changes and how churches and denominations have responded. Again, I hoped that you would look at your context and do reflective thinking.

The intent of Chapter eleven was to present ideas, sociological and theological, about the nature, life and work of a local congregation. And again, it is my hope that you have taken this material and used it to reflect upon the life of the rural church where you serve. My hope is that you will use it, in concert with others, to make your local church healthier, loving, and effective.

Now, I want us to think together about the larger church, the “communion of saint”, and of local congregations in a given context. It seems to me that the most efficient, and I hope the most effective, way to proceed is to do a casestudy of a rural county. I have chosen the Pickens County, Alabama, where I have served since January 1998 as the director of the association of Baptist Churches. You will find a brief sketch of the “churching” history of this county at the end of Chapter four of this book. Please review it now.

Pickens County has just under 21,000 residents. It lies between Columbus, Mississippi and Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Because of a lack of local employment opportunities, a high percentage of its work force commutes to one or the other of these cities. Many of the residents are retired. Many others are disabled. African Americans make up about 42 percent of the population. There are about 500 persons of Hispanic origins living in the county. About 40 percent of the residents live in the six towns of the county.

In the past two decades nearly 2,000 factory jobs have been lost to the county. The primary work opportunities are in the timber industries and poultry raising. The average family income is well below the state average.

As best we can determine there are about 150 Christian congregations located in Pickens County. More than half of these are Baptist—Southern, National, Free Will, Primitive, and Independent. The Methodists—United and CME—have about 30. The various Presbyterian denomination have 10 or so. The Roman Catholics have a congregation and the Episcopalians have a mission congregation. There are a good many pentecostal and independent congregations. Most of the congregations are small and are served by a bivocational pastor. There are fewer than 25 fully supported, seminary trained pastors in the county.

The four larger towns have good ministerial associations which work together for community events and to provide ministry to transients and others in need. The Pickens Baptist Association, which I serve, is the most active judicatory. We house the community food pantry, clothes closet, chaplaincy programs, a thrift store and other ministries. Each has ecumenical involvement. Because of my position I serve on the boards of several social service agencies. Several of the churches host small group ministries for target populations. Others are housed at the associational office. It is the policy of the association that we are to serve the larger Kingdom of God.

I have actively worked at building relationships and partnering with the African American congregations in the county. I have learned that partnering is the key concept. I do not plan for, tell, or lead. I, and the association, are in teamship with. A second term is modeling. On several occasions, I have noted, the African American churches have picked up on programs and projects that we have done and had one of their own, often improving on what we did. Here as in all of life TRUST is crucial. (Last year a Pentecostal church had a vision for a countywide revival. I talked to them about the need to build trust and involve others in the planning. They were impatient. They pushed ahead. It flopped.)

The Roman Catholics, the Episcopalians, and the Southern Baptists have begun work with the Hispanic community. It has been difficult. The community is fluid. There have been some successes. An element of a vision for this county, and many others, must be effective work with Hispanics. This includes evangelization, congregationalizing, ministry to physical needs, education, and inclusion as good citizens in the larger community.

There are other groups in the county who are not churched and who are living personally destructive lives. We have a good many single mothers. We have drug problems among young adults. We have racial tensions and hatred. We have many persons who are disabled. Others who are diseased.

Some who are churched, seem to hold to perverted and/or limited views of the Christian faith. For some it is all about going to heaven when they die. The commandments of Jesus have little impact on their everyday lives. For some it is about God making them rich, or healthy. The pulpit of popular culture is getting a better hearing than the pulpit of the church.

Some of the bivocational ministers that I have come to know, while having tremendous “people skills” and great faith in God, have a very limited understanding of the “whole counsel of God”. Every sermon seems to be a revival sermon. They may talk about loving one another, but scant attention is given to such themes as social justice, environmental stewardship, corporate sin, political corruption, and world peace.

I believe that God wants all of these matters addressed. And I believe that they must be addressed in arenas beyond the local church.

So, in my work I am concerned that there be diversity of churches, both within my denominational family and within the larger Kingdom of God as expressed in this county for which I feel a peculiar responsibility. I want to see lives changed by persons coming to recognize Jesus Christ as Lord and as Savior. I want to see the physical and spiritual needs of persons addressed. I want resources to be available to minister to them.

I try to look upon the “body of Christ” as an eco-system within the bounds of my service area, and beyond. Over the past few years I have learned to cast a vision, to challenge, to be sensitive to the leading of God’s Holy Spirit, and to wait on God to open doors and provide leaders and resources in His time. It is a matter of living in a place of tension between what ought to be and

what can be. It is a matter of having a vision for what ought to be but having the wisdom to not push ahead before “the fullness of time”.

I hope that you will take the vision statement found in Chapter three and what I have said here about my place of service and prayerfully consider what needs to be done for the Kingdom of God where you live and serve.

For some this will mean focusing on helping existing churches be healthier. This is certainly part of my work.

*For some this will mean planting new congregations. I am doing this with the Hispanics.

*For some this will mean adding small group ministries for persons with specific needs.

*For some this will mean working to strengthen cooperation among existing congregations across traditional barriers. (Recently, our assistant County Agent retired. He is a deacon at the Infant Missionary Baptist Church. At his retirement reception I asked him about the next chapter in his life. He told me that he wanted to work on developing an organization that will strengthen cooperation between the “white and black” churches in Pickens County. I believe that he has the connections to make this happen. I intend to support him in it.)

*For some this will mean providing training for lay or bivocational pastors and rural church leaders.

*For some this will mean actively evangelizing the unsaved.

*For some this will mean developing programs and events that involve youth, newly married, or the elderly from several congregations—providing a ministry that no one church might be able to provide.

*For some it will mean working at formulating community in those rural areas where the old patterns have broken down in the wake of the changes described in Chapters two and three of this book. Early in my ministry, I came to the understanding community is central in the Gospel, in God’s purposes, and in human life. The church must be community. It must build community in the place and among the people where it is.

Living as I do in the rural South, there is a long history of “dual” or “parallel” communities. This is a challenge to me. I realize that I will not solve it. I am often tempted to forget it because the forces arrayed against it are formidable.

Let me conclude this book with a discussion of community and the understanding that has informed me when I have been most faithful. I believe that the reformulation of community is a very important task that rural churches must address in the present and coming decades. To do this we must build upon a strong biblical base. Of particular help to me in this has been the writings of three scholars. One is Reinhold Niebuhr. Another is Wendell Berry. And the third is Robert Banks.

Christian Realism and Biblical Norms for Community

Reinhold Niebuhr grew up the son of a German Reform minister in the small town of Wright City, Missouri, at the beginning of the 20th Century. Wright City was west of Saint Louis at a point where the German Ozarks, Little Dixie, and the Mineral Belt come together, just west of Saint Charles County which was the subject of a study in Chapter 8. He came to be recognized as one of great theologians of the century. He served on the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

As a young pastor in post-World War I Detroit, he saw the bankruptcy of the Social Gospel

Movement. His analysis was that it did not take the depth and power of sin seriously enough. But, he recognized the partial truth of the movement—mankind longs for community. So, he began a reformulation of the relationship of the Gospel to society which came to be called Christian Realism. The experiences of the Great Depression, the evil of Nazi Germany, and the abuse of power in Stalin’s Communist Russia further shaped his thinking.

Niebuhr took as the cornerstone of his thought the dialectical fact that we are all selfish and consequently sinful, but we are also desirous of community with others and thus willing to act unselfishly, at least some of the time. We are pulled both by egoism and by self-giving love. Even while we put ourselves before others, we want to live cooperatively with them. This is to say that the desire for community puts a check on our selfishness; howbeit, an imperfect one.

Utopian communities cannot be established and maintained in this age. Even in the ideally designed community, selfishness will break out and destroy order and harmony. Further, he notes that the desire for community can, itself, lead to the sins of ethnocentrism, the attitude of “us” and “them”.

So, he asks that the Christian, in hope, tempered by realism, call for love one toward another, for social justice, and for peace and cooperation. Yet, even as he does this, the Christian realized that evil will break out again; hate will re-appear, injustice will occur; power will be abused; and, conflict will re-emerge.

The Christian must also be realistic about the fact that each of us looks at truth from the position of our own past experiences, values and interests. This will color what we see.

Niebuhr came to believe that abusive power must be met with power, but in reality this exercise of countervailing power will ultimately lead to further abuse of power. The persecuted often become the persecutors when they gain control of the society.

Informed by this perspective of Christian Realism, Niebuhr offered insight into the biblical principles which should inform efforts at establishing and maintaining community life. In the next several paragraphs, I will attempt to digest these insights from his many books and articles.

Any community is to be seen as composed of individuals and groups with special interests which they will pursue. For example, I am interested in the well-being of myself, my family, my real estate and possessions, the organization for which I work, the church I attend, the sports teams that I follow, my civic club, my circle of friends, my church, my community, my nation. I like to see my interests prosper. Frequently, this means that the interests of other people, organizations and groups will suffer. When I win; they lose.

If my interests are always successful over the will of my neighbor, he or she may decide to leave, or to destroy me. Or, I may be tempted to place my neighbor in servitude so I can be in control and not have to work or play so hard. In any case, community, something that I desire deep down is destroyed.

Here I want to digress for a moment and define community more fully. I will draw upon the work of Sociologist Robert Nisbet, one of many leading mid-20th century scholars influenced by the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Nisbet sees community as representing four basic human needs:

Place—rooted in surroundings which are familiar and hospitable. This is “my” place.

Turf—a feeling that I am in control in this place. I can cope. I can manage.

Security—I can depend on the support and peacefulness of others. This is home base, a resting place.

Truth—all is not relative. In community, there are eternal values upon which one can count.

I find this list reminiscent of the affirmations of David in Psalm 23. He was finding community in his relationship with God. Perhaps, this is a reason for the popularity of this Psalm. It strikes a responsive chord in the hearts to men and women; because, deep down, we do indeed desire community. (Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community*.)

Now, getting back to Niebuhr, the Bible story, itself, can and should be read as a tale of the loss of man's community with God, the offer of its renewal through the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus. The picture of the full realization of its restoration is beautifully drawn in the final chapters of *The Revelation of John*. In the meanwhile the church was established to be a place where community with God and one another can be experienced and modeled.

The human problem is sin—of inordinance. As Niebuhr declared in his first major book, “However much human ingenuity may increase the treasures which nature provides for the satisfaction of human needs, they can never be sufficient to satisfy all human wants; for man, unlike other creatures, is gifted and cursed with an imagination which extends his appetites beyond requirements of subsistence.” (*Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 1)

Thus, because of my sinfulness, it is almost impossible for me to comprehend and respond appropriately to the needs of my neighbor. Even more so, it is impossible for special interest groups and organizations to respond to the needs of those with whom they compete for the scarce resources of this life.

Consequently, life is characterized by strife. Individuals and interest groups seek to dominate others and to slice the community pie so they receive the “lion's share”. What is more, they seek to rig the game so that opposing interest groups must compete with initial handicaps. A prime example is unjust, discriminatory laws.

Some have declared that the answer to this is either revolution or more regulations. Niebuhr took a dim view of both. Such solutions usually have ended in only the “circulation of elites” and the restraint of freedom.

Throughout his career Niebuhr struggled with the dialectic relationship of freedom and community order. In one of his last works, he wrote, “In principle the Christian faith holds that human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses and that the former is stronger than the latter.” (*Man's Nature and His Communities*, p. 39) Both must be affirmed. The weaker must be aided; the stronger restrained. And as he stated earlier, “Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice make democracy necessary.” (*Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, p. xiii) He saw unchecked freedom issuing in injustice, while on the other hand, societies are tempted to purchase order at the price of justice.

How, then, shall we now live, according to Niebuhr? He suggests the following requisites for a vital community:

- (1) Unity and solidarity of community, sufficiently strong to allow for the free play of competitive interests without endangering it;
- (2) Believe in the worth and the freedom of the individual;
- (3) A tolerable harmony and equilibrium of social, political and economic forces necessary to establish an approximation of social justice.

Because of our nature and condition and the condition of most communities these are not a given, but something to be sought diligently.

The fact is that my groups do not have all truth. And my groups are not totally virtuous and our competitors totally evil, despite our rhetoric to the contrary. So frequently have the persecuted

become the persecutors, that the temptation of power must be recognized. Thus, community must be based in our religious faith, which recognizes the errors of the past and teaches us tolerance.

As Niebuhr once wrote, "Genuine community is established only when the knowledge that we need one another is supplemented by the recognition that 'the other', that other form of life or that other unique community, is the limit beyond which our ambitions must not run and the boundary beyond which our life must not expand." (*Ironies of American History*, p. 139) And again, "Democracy is an ultimate norm of political organization in the sense that no better way has been found to check the inordinancy of the powerful on the one hand and the confusion of the multitude on the other than by making every center of power responsible to the people it affects; by balancing subordinate centers with other centers to prevent injustice; and by denying immunity from criticism." (*A Nation So Conceived*, p. 127)

Although Niebuhr wrote with nations and states in mind, what he said is applicable to small communities and to churches as well. We need community. But we must work at it. We do this by checking power abuses, by being responsible in our use of power and by listening to the interests of others so that settlements can be negotiated with which everyone can live. Incidentally, this is why we must champion democracy in both church and community even when our side is "defeated". And in victory we must not become so enamored with celebration that we fail to make our peace and seek to maintain community with the defeated. Victory that destroys church, a community, or a nation is hollow indeed.

Christian Agrarianism and Rural Community

Essayist, poet, novelist, lay theologian, and farmer are all descriptive of the life of Wendell Berry. For more than 40 years he has lived on and worked a small farm in Kentucky. His roots are generations deep in this place. He knows its soil, its people, its stories. He is bonded to place and those who people it. He believes that urban living is rootless and dehumanized. He continues to preach the Jeffersonian dream for America and its people with the passion of a latter day prophet. He declares that the best life is one lived in harmony with the earth as a good steward in responsible relationships with neighbors and kin. The central purpose of life is learning to love as Jesus loved. And this love is expressed in all of the relations of life.

Berry is very critical of modern industrialized agriculture. He is impressed with the practices of Amish and Mennonite farmers who use animal power, who raise and process most of their food, who build up their land, and who share work in community. He contends that people can still live well and long in a community which practices good general agriculture on a scale that is mostly self-sufficient. I say "mostly" because while Berry is a champion of the free and responsible individual, he is also a champion of people being bonded in a network of community relations. He seeks a mid course between "rugged individualism" and "communalism". He grounds this in the teaching of Jesus. Now nearly 30 years old, his *The Unsettling of Rural America* continues to be a must read for anyone seeking to understand what happened to rural life during the 20th century.

Berry has studiously refused to be cast in the role of Moses or even the Messiah for rural life. He will not say, "do as I do", nor will he lay out a plan for the future of rural America. Operating like an Old Testament prophet, he rather points out the failing of the present.

Recently, he has been very critical of the "global economy." He believes that everyone would be better served by what he calls a "local economy". He does not define this extensively.

But I would see it as designing the food system in a nation so that most of what was consumed in the catchment area of a metropolis would be grown and processed there. For example, This would mean that in Missouri most of the food for Saint Louis, Kansas City, and Springfield would be products of farmers, dairymen, others from within 100 or 200 miles of each of these cities. Granted that some regions of the nation and the world have “comparative advantage” on growing certain products, and that we have a food system currently organized by huge multi-national corporations with strong influence with the governments, such events as the recent “mad cow” crises would be better contained if we had local or regional economies, rather than global ones. Many of Berry’s essays on rural life and economy have recently been collected and published in *The Art of the Common Place*.

Through the years Berry has valued good character. His novels are filled with persons who are less than perfect, but among these are those who value truth, fidelity, justice, mercy and love. The characters often grow in their morality through the experiences of everyday life. In many instances they are careful to consider the needs and wants of their neighbors, friends and kinspersons in their decision making. In his poetry and in his essays he also deals well with issues of good character, and bad.

In 2000 Berry published a novel, *Jayber Crow*. It is an account of the life of the town barber and sexton. In these roles Jayber is at the center of male life in the village of Port William. It is the story of a man learning to love—himself, other men, and a woman. Here as elsewhere Berry is critical of what local churches and pastors often do formally and professionally. But the true role of Christianity, and of church, and of the Christian life shines through as Jayber grows in his capacity to express love in godly ways. When I read the book I could not help but wonder if the initial of the title character were not intentional, because in the end he takes on Christlike characteristics. In what I take as a sort of autobiographical comment he has Jayber saying that he reads the Bible literally and struggles with its application to everyday life.

Berry has long lamented the destruction of community life in rural America and with it the enslavement of agriculturalists by the structures of the global economy. He finds this ruining the character of individuals, tearing the bonds that hold communities together, and destroying the land. Again, like the prophets of old he holds up eternal values and asks that we find a way back or forward to their implementation in personal and community life. He does not offer a blueprint. He does not offer to be our Moses. Rather, he very simply declares that he is going to continue to do what he believes to be right.

To me what Berry is saying rings true. He makes his point well. But, how does a local preacher draw upon it to help build community where he or she ministers? Here are my thoughts:

- (1) Realize that globalization rules the day, but that it is flawed. It is hurting many, even in rural America today, and one day its flaws may become evident to the majority of us;
- (2) Minister to the hurts that it is causing;
- (3) Preach the ideals of biblical Christianity—love, justice, righteousness, mercy and the like.
- (4) Note that the current structures of the economy, of church life and practice, and of community life are not in line with the biblical mandates;
- (5) Help folk confess their sins;
- (6) Be ready to help folk prayerfully a better way when the majority comes to see the flaws and the sin in the current practices.
- (7) Read and put into practice the ideas that Robert Banks presents from his study of the life of the

New Testament church in the life of the church that you serve.

The Local Church as a Model of Community

Robert Banks is an urban Australian. His focus has been on transforming local churches into models of community and for community life. His study *Paul's Ideas of Community* has become something of a classic. He has sought to implement these ideas through the very urban “house church” movement.

Banks writes, “The purpose of the church is the growth and edification of its members into Christ and into a common life through their God-given ministry to one another (1 Cor 14:12, 19, 26)(page 90). Some may find this a little narrow. Evangelicals would want to add the “winning of the lost” and would stress the ministry of word and sacrament. But surely all would see this as a major purpose of the church.

He finds the analogies of “body” and of “family” to best describe the life of a local church. The members are given gifts by the Holy Spirit which they are to use for the edifying and growing of the church. Ideally, these improve the fellowship among the members. Like a family, the individual members care for one another.

The goal of the individual Christian is spiritual maturity. This is accomplished within the life of a church. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. There one ministers and is ministered to. The picture that comes to mind is one of people who are sensitive to one another’s needs. They learn to put the other first. Each feels responsible for matters of organization, welfare, discipline and growth. The church’s well-being becomes central to their lives.

Banks notes how the churches of the New Testament era were able to overcome social and cultural differences. They forged bonds of unity. They were bands of brothers and sisters. These churches were a witness to the larger world of the benefits of Christian living. They found a mid course between the demands of the individual and of the community. Both were blessed of God.

Perhaps you have experienced something like this in the life of a rural or small town church. I have. It is wonderful. I have never been in one that was absolutely perfect. But then the churches with which Paul dealt also had their struggles. These experiences give me hope for the church and for Christianity.

As you work with a rural or small town church, I hope that you will hold the standard up for all to see. I hope that you will work to see it realized. And I hope that you will not be too disappointed when it falls short.

The rural church is alive. Some are battered. Some are thriving. Rural communities need to be reconfigured. There is challenging work to do. With God’s help we can do it. I hope that you will read the authors I have shared in this chapters and others. Learn from them. And do what you can, where you are. Among the remarks of Wendell Berry which have impacted me and my ministry is one in which he recast the bumper sticker comment of Christian sociologist, “Think Globally; Act Locally” as “Think Locally and Act Locally.” Both are true, I believe. But Berry’s says to me that I must know where I am; I must know it in light of biblical teachings about church, the Christian life, and community; and I must be sure to do what I can to witness and work to impact the place and make it more like what God wants it to be.

Let me say then, that the answer to our question of rural church sustainability is to for a congregation to be true Christian community, model community to those outside of it, minister to its geographical community, invite those who are not a part of its community to unite with it, and keep constantly before itself a desire to be renewed again and again.