

Church planting is not complete in town and country places

Rural America Needs New Churches, Too

From Gary Farley, Center for Rural Church Leadership, Carrollton, Alabama.

We have all thrilled at the stories of the planting of growing, evangelical congregations in the great cities of America. We have all been challenged by the magnitude of reaching the cities for Christ. We all recognize that about half of all Americans live in the 50 largest cities, and only one of four of us lives in rural, small-town and small-city places. We support with our prayers, time and tithes the effort to reach the cities.

Further, we hear that the vast majority of our churches are in the rural areas. I fear, however, that these facts may lead some to an erroneous conclusion; that is, the work of planting Southern Baptist churches in town and country places is complete.

Not so. Thousands of new churches will need to be formed in the rural and small town communities if the goals of Bold Mission Thrust are reached. Based on my research across the nation, I have identified 12 types of places in non-metropolitan America which need new churches.

Many missions-minded churches will find examples of one or more of these types at hand. And any Southern Baptist churches, working through their association and state convention, can find many of these places in their state or in a partnership states that needs their assistance.

URBAN CHURCHES IN RURAL AREAS

A generation ago it seemed Americans had to make a choice to be either a rural or an urban person with all the cultural and life-style implications this implied. Today, increasing numbers of us will live parts of our lives in cities, parts in towns, and parts in open country. In retrospect, it seems the challenge of the 1950s was to form rural-type congregations in the cities and their suburbs for the young Baptist families streaming from the farm, mill, and mine to the factory and the office. Today we are confronted with the challenge of forming urban-type churches in essentially rural settings.

1. Intentional Retirement Communities.

Tim Reddin pastors our young church in Hot Springs Village, Arkansas. Its growing membership is comprised of bright, talented, affluent, retired persons. Speaking at a recent conference, Tim shared with us that this church, along with two others in similar settings, are leading Arkansas Baptists in Cooperative Program per capita support. He continued that other communities designed for active retirees are in the planning stage all across the nation.

Nearby traditional rural churches have not been successful in reaching these ex-urbanites. Barcelona Road Baptist Church has. So it will be starting a mission soon in another part of the village. Tim sees a need for a score or more such churches in the 1990s in similar communities.

2. Recreation Settings.

Communities on lakes and streams, in the mountains, and along the oceans, many of them essentially rural in setting, are being impacted by surging population growth. The people in these places can be categorized in four ways—old settlers, newer business and service people, retirees, and fun seekers.

John Farris, a director of Associational Missions at the Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri,

has proven himself to be an effective strategist in reaching all four types. He loves the traditional rural, Ozark churches and works with them to reach the local folk. He was instrumental in the formation of the Horseshoe Bend Baptist Church which targets weekenders and retirees. He has helped some of the older rural churches near Bagnal Dam to open themselves to the business people in this tourist setting.

And the association operates a very effective ministry in campgrounds and other tourist facilities and community events. What John Farris has done needs to be duplicated more than 100 times across the nation in the recreation-based rural communities.

3. Returnee Communities.

In the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, and the Ozarks one meets many persons who have returned home after working in the Northern and Western industrial cities. Often they have difficulty fitting into the down home churches either because they have changed or the church has changed. I do not know of any church targeted for these folk alone. I do know of some that have had the wisdom to draw upon their skills to make them feel at home in the church. They remain a significant unreached group in rural America.

4. Back to the Landers.

I thought that Director of Missions Charles Kellar was teasing when he introduced me to the pastor of the You Bet-Red Dog Community Baptist Church. He wasn't. The pastor, like his congregation, had burned out in San Francisco's fast lane life. He moved to rural Northern California and began drawing together a congregation of back-to-the-land folks. None came from a Southern Baptist background.

Subsequently, I met a whole cadre of pastors who had been through the hippie scene and were now pastoring their peers. What is true of the California mountains is true of similar regions across the country. Each contains pockets of very intelligent people who hold values that are biblical, even when they do not realize it, about the creation, human nature and relationships. How beautiful are the feet of God's messenger upon the mountain (Isaiah 52:7).

ETHNIC/BLACK CHURCHES

Southern Baptists have made great strides in aggressively forming churches with the new ethnics and with blacks in the past couple of decades. The Home Mission Board, state conventions, and associations are all expressing a deep commitment to expand work in these areas in the 1990s. But here again there is a tendency to rather myopically see this as a metropolitan need. No so.

5. Black Churches in the Rural South.

In helping rural South associations analyze census and church membership data, I have become convinced that the greatest need for mission work in many of these associations is among the African-American population. A too little followed example of this work is that of Clarence Hanshaw and the Savannah River Association in South Carolina. They have worked to strengthen the program of the black churches, train the black pastors, and develop a strong fellowship. In retirement, Clarence continues to work with a black church on Daufuskie Island.

6. Ethnic Churches in Rural America.

When Director of Missions Tom Wenig introduced me to our pastor at Lexington, Nebraska, I met a man excited about the prospects of his church and its work in that community.

A few weeks earlier a major food processor had announced that they were coming to this town of about 5,000 with 1,200 new jobs. It is anticipated that many of the workers will be Asian. We

strategized a response.

In Stillwell, Oklahoma, another food processor is hiring a largely Hispanic work force. A mission has started. There is every indication that the need for ethnic churches in rural America will expand in the coming decade.

PLAIN-FOLK CONGREGATIONS

Most Southern Baptists have made great strides in aggressively forming churches with the new ethnics and with blacks in the past couple of decades. This decade will furnish us with at least three areas of challenge for extending plain-folk churches in rural areas.

7. Mosaic Churches in Small Towns.

Our mission in Northfork, California, brings together red and yellow, black and white—all the children Mrs. Button taught me were precious in God's sight, almost half a century ago.

The story of Southern Baptist expansion in California is one of the miracles of modern missions—from just a handful to 1,500 congregations in just over half a century, from a sect to the largest Protestant denomination.

Today's challenge is to move from being a denomination dominated by southern migrants to one that embraces that mosaic that I experienced at Northfork. In this, California Baptists may well lead the whole denomination.

In my visits to our churches in the North and the West, I have often been impressed with the mosaic character of the congregation. Not only are the races brought together, but also status and class differences are frequently bridged. They seem to reflect the same social heterogeneity that typified New Testament churches.

8. Second Church in Bigger Towns. Conversely, my studies have indicated that in the Old Convention areas where a community grows up to 2,500 or so and the church breaks 500 in resident membership, the mosaic quality may be lost. As this happens, a second church, one that targets blue collar, or formerly rural, or rural yuppies, will be needed.

Changing patterns of industrialization, like the placement of major auto-assembly plants in rural communities in Kentucky, Tennessee, and South Carolina, will impact many small towns. Many communities in these states have gotten new industries which are suppliers for the assembly plants. Some of these will grow and experience a need for a second church.

9. New Institutions and Industries.

The Chaplaincy Commission at the Home Mission Board sees the spread of prisons in rural areas as a possible key to church extension. By getting Baptist ministers on the staff of the institution, a person who can start a church bivocationally is put in place. A new black Baptist church in Altoona, Pennsylvania, had just such a start.

Out along Interstate 80 across Nevada, Associational Missionary Tom Bacon sees a dozen or more micro-gold mining operations. He dreams of ministers who will work bivocationally in a mine and develop a church in the community that has grown up nearby. Many of these towns, like most boom towns in the West, will last only a decade or two. These pastors will not build big churches. They will only touch the lives of plain folks.

CONSOLIDATION/EXTENSION

Some of the most difficult and challenging areas of church extension in the 1990s will be in the heartland. Many rural counties in the interior of the nation are losing population. Real creativity will be called for.

10. Consolidation.

Recently, I have visited several of our churches in the former cotton belt of the Old South. Pines have replaced row crops. Pines do not take much work. So the population has declined drastically. Likewise, the churches. Membership is small and aged. Few, if any, viable prospects live nearby. Realistically, the future of these churches is not bright. A few have merged. Others have consolidated in a new location.

Our polity makes it difficult for anyone to approach the subject of consolidation with our churches. A few directors of missions have done so with mixed results. Yet the fact remains that consolidation will occur in many areas. If it is not done with intentionality, it will just happen, often with less than desired consequences.

11. Fields of Churches.

Noting a need, Tom Sykes of the New Church Extension department at the Home Mission Board has just recently published a book on how to do a field of churches. Typically, this means that a pastor is serving more than one congregation. This is one way of providing pastoral leadership in sparsely settled areas. Sykes sees this as a developing means of church extension in town and country settings.

A splendid example is that of the Emory Lussi family in Medicine Bow, Wyoming. He is the only resident pastor in a town of about 600. He also works with two mission congregations about 30 miles east and west. The family has become involved in the area and ministers to the whole community.

12. Rural Missionaries.

Last summer I spent time with Lavern Inzer in Nevada and Dennis Hampton in Nebraska. Both work in ranching areas. They travel long distances and have Bible study and Sunday School programs in ranch homes and in rural schools almost daily. Both must work 18-hour days to minister to 600 to 700 persons. Some of their work has issued in more traditional type churches. But much of it will always be small group Bible studies and special-event types of ministry.

We talked about how to use the media and special events more effectively to reach and disciple persons in sparsely settled places. The tribe of Lavern and Dennis must increase if rural America is to be reached for Jesus.

In our efforts to win San Francisco, let's not forget Paradise Valley, Nevada. In our efforts in San Diego, let's not neglect Coalinga, California. In our concern for the millions in Chicago, let's not fail to see the hundreds in Crawford, Nebraska. In our desire to reach New York City, let's not miss Hellier, Kentucky.

I hope that you have identified several of the types of communities that are discussed in this article where your church can be instrumental in forming a new congregation. Seek out and work with the missions development program leader in your church and your association. They can help you access resources from the state convention, or some other source.

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