

Tobacco Church Conference II  
**THE SOCIOLOGY OF CHURCH AND COMMUNITY**  
Gary Farley  
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As a properly raised Southern Baptist boy, raised in Western Missouri where the refrain "We don't smoke; we don't chew; and we don't go with girls who do" was a foundation stone of our personal ethic, I was more than a little shocked when Ben told me about the title of the conference, The Tobacco Church. But then what was a "rightly-raised" Southern Baptist boy to expect from those Disciples anyhow. I remember that some of them also danced and played cards back home. However, I found in the published manuscripts from the first version of this conference some of the most insightful pieces, anywhere, on the life of rural communities and their churches.

#### INSIGHTS FROM THE TOBACCO CHURCH CONFERENCE I

Wendell Berry lay bare his very soul in that meeting. It is the loss of the multi-bonded community, typified by tobacco communities, that he has been lamenting in essay, poem and novel across more than three decades. Again and again in so many powerful ways he has reminded us that in our rush to embrace modernity and its God, Efficiency, we have indeed "thrown out the baby with the wash". Community, as he grew up knowing it in Port Royal, is the victim. **No longer** does a single rhythm pulsate through a community. **No longer** do neighbors all share common hopes and fears related to weather, markets, and bugs. **No longer** is there a common language of work, or a set of historical experiences that bind neighbors together. In most neighborhoods most of us get up in the mornings, scatter to unrelated activities, and drag back in at dark. We "neighbor" little because there are few common hopes and fears and occasions and opportunities to unite us. It seems that it takes an occasional flood or other natural disaster to remind us of our personal frailty and our need for one another.

And what insight Goff Bedford provided on the interior life of traditional rural churches and their relations with their pastors. The church is like a clan. The pastor like a pet dog, he declares. How **does** one pastor when she/he is not taken all that seriously? How can an apostle of rationality and modernity be effective when she serves as the chaplain to a family, when there is no real agreement about what his tasks are to be. Goff and his lay counterpart, Dorothy, lamented the demise of the Tobacco church as much as Wendell lamented the loss of the community it served. Declining population, increasing competition, and secularization in general seem to have taken their toll.

Goff also provided a useful typology of social class in tobacco communities--low and high tenants, small and large land owners. He adds to these two newcomer groups--exurbanites and Mexican farm workers. It is from these six social groups that a church must draw its members in much of Burleyland. And as Goff wisely notes it is almost impossible to bond more than two of these groups into a single congregation. Further, he notes that the first four groups are declining in numbers, and that mainline churches have not been very effective in reaching the low tenants, and that traditional Tobacco churches have had very mixed results in reaching the exurbanites. Reasons include the facts that they are not members of the clan, they do not live the culture, and their lives run on a different rhythm.

Reaching and bonding a person whose raising has not been in the tobacco culture to a Tobacco

church is certainly problematic. Perhaps, theology or place might provide a common stackpole, but that is highly suspect. Are there other possibilities?

### FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

When Ben first shared with me the papers from the first version of this conference for review and comment, I shot back that while I was impressed with the quality of their analysis, I was depressed by their pessimism and apparent lack of hope. Consequently, I feel responsible to sound a note of hope in this meeting. And, I am comfortable in doing this. Like any preacher I can find three reasons for almost anything, including, on this occasion, my hopefulness.

First, I recently completed an analysis of Southern Baptist churches in the non-metropolitan counties of the US and discovered that in the 1980s, we not only grew in number of congregations and in membership, but most significantly, we also gained **marketshare**. If we can do this, certainly the Disciples can. In fact you may have a distinct advantage in reaching the exurbanites. Why? Because many of them are "boomers" with little denominational brand loyalty. It is my sense that they are Stoneites, who only need to be told about their theological heritage.

Second, I have pastored four tobacco churches during my ministry. Each of them has transitioned from being a Tobacco church to being something else. Three of the four are growing and have a bright future.

I have to reach a little for my third point, so please work at following me. My mother's people were among the first settlers in the Bluegrass. The patriarch was named Rev. Benedict Swope. He served in the 1792 Constitutional Convention at Danville from Lincoln County. The records indicate that he was a land speculator and an church planter. Among the first act of the first legislature of Kentucky was to grant to him and two other men the right to conduct a lottery to raise money to construct a meeting house here in Lexington for the German Presbyterian Society. The location was High and Mill. In further research I have discovered six or seven other congregations with this unusual name at the end of the eighteenth century on across the Bluegrass. However, these congregations are not claimed by the Presbyterians of Kentucky, or by the German Reformed denomination, apparently, or even by the United Brethren, with whom he had some continuing relationship after he moved from Maryland to Kentucky during the Revolutionary War. He died in 1810 and the several German Presbyterian churches in the Bluegrass seem to have faded away by 1820. It appears that the German language had lost its usefulness as a stackpole for forming a church by then. Now, my point is just this. It may well be that changes in agriculture, in community patterns, and in demographics may herald the demise of most Tobacco churches, as such. But this does not necessarily translate to gloom and doom. God did on the frontier through the Cane Ridge revival what Swope had worked for, for over a third of a century, but in ways that he could not have imagined. The church rolled on. The site on High and Mill is now occupied by a church, howbeit, of another denomination (First United Methodist). It serves a different clientele and worships in a different language. You see, while the Gospel is about love and faith, it is also about resurrection, or hope.

As I reflect upon my experience with Tobacco churches, I find a death and resurrection theme there also. French Broad Church on Douglas Lake near Dandridge, Tennessee, is now reaching more ex-urbanites, people in or nearing retirement, than it is those ex-tobacco farmers, I once knew, with four or more generations buried out back in the church yard. Blending and bonding is occurring. It recently celebrated its centennial and the prospects for a bicentennial look bright. And the church in Surgoinsville, Tennessee, now finds itself reaching more and more families who where raised elsewhere, but who now lived nearby and work in the factories up US 11 W and in Kingsport. Gist's Creek Church continues to be a clan church. But expanded work opportunities in Knox and Sevier

Counties have allowed the children and the grandchildren to settle right there among the slate knobs. Almost every year there are some more Whites, and Reeds an McCroskeys born. Only Smith Fork seems to be in trouble. When it was my seminary church over 30 year ago it was thriving. It was then, actually, already an ex-Tobacco church. The first settlers on the Clinton County prairie of Missouri had brought the tobacco culture with them from the Bluegrass. And a century later there were fields on the Burr and on the Hughes places that were still called the tobacco patches. But they no longer raised it. Not for moral reasons because most of the men gathered out under the big walnut tree in the yard to enjoy a smoke and visit both before and after services. No, they had chosen to devote their energies to a different kind of agriculture. But now farm expansion has depleted the community. I doubt the church's viability, but I think that it could be viable given the right leadership with the understanding and vision I am about to share to you.

Yes, the title threw me until I realized the story of the Tobacco church is so very similar to the tales of cotton, corn and hog, dairy, and mill churches all across rural America. Further, as I reflected on the subject, I came to realize that across the years I have pastored several Tobacco churches. And while the Tobacco church, as Tobacco church, may not have a bright future, those who are willing to become ex-tobacco churches may well experience a vital future.

#### THE TOBACCO CHURCH AS A REMNANT OF THE AGRARIAN AGE

In order to prepare for the future, we must first come to understand that past forms of church and community life have historical, not eternal, sources. Most open country, village and small town congregations in America today are among the last remnants of the Jeffersonian Agrarian Dream for community life. President Jefferson, although himself a Virginia planter, had a vision of American being for the most part, a nation of yeoman farmers and village shopkeepers. It was for this reason that the Louisiana Purchase was surveyed out into six mile by six mile townships. Near the center of each of these townships, Jefferson saw a village being formed where craftsmen, teachers, shopkeepers, millers, ministers and the like would dwell. They would offer the services that the farm families living in the township would require, and would provide a "local" market for the surplus products of the farms. In this way no one would be more than an hour's walk from most of the goods and services he or she might require. For the most part they could live out their lives in a six mile world.

In time the standard farm would be a tract of 160 acres. And in time a network of roads, railroads, rivers and canals would link up the villages allowing them to be gathering points for crops to be sold in regional, national and international markets. Differences in soils and other environmental givens seems to have encouraged the concentration of certain crops and husbandries in specific locations. Today we call this "competitive advantage". For example, the soils and climate of the Bluegrass suited the raising of Burley better than most other places. Agricultural historians like Pete Daniel in *BREAKING THE LAND* share the interesting story of how this developed.<sup>1</sup>

Churches were formed to serve these six mile worlds, both in the trans-Appalachian lands that came to the United States as a part of the settlement of the Revolutionary War and in the Louisiana purchase lands. Across the nineteenth century interesting patterns of church cooperation, competition and conflict emerged. In some villages a single house of worship would be erected and a union Sunday school established, with four denominations rotating worship services. The Methodists, Disciples, Baptists and others would compete to evangelize the unchurched and even argue and debate concerning which denomination had the most biblically correct doctrines. Other townships were settled more like colonies, with most of the residents coming from a particular nationality and/or religious denomination. This was particularly true in the 1870s through the 1890s out on the Great Plains.

Since most communities tended to specialize in some agricultural product, such as Tobacco,

the churches in a given community tended to become tied to the economy of its primary crop. Among the most obvious ways included the rhythm of church's calendar of events and programs; e.g., revival after the crops have been "laid by." Another would be the rhythm and amount of income for the church. Good crops and sales typically indicated good income and some improvements of the facilities. Income might soar during the marketing season, but then fall off and be flat the remainder of the year. Public prayers addressed concerns related to the crops. Doctrines and ethical concerns were also influenced by economic concerns.<sup>2</sup> (Myriad are the stories of student pastors from Southern Seminary who lost their pulpit for attacking Tobacco, its use and cultivation.)

To focus on the Tobacco church, then, one can say that it is what it is because it came to serve a six-mile community (actually 36 sections) whose life was wrapped up in a particular kind of "agriculture". It was characterized by shared bonds of place, shared work, hopes, and dreams and well as theology and values. Three years ago Wendell, Dorothy, and Goff lamented the passing of communities where such bonding exists. So do I, and probably so do you. Only the most calloused advocate of modernity could fail to mourn its passing.

It is a victim of industrialization and urbanization. Few of us now live in the six-mile worlds of our parents and our grandparents. Our everyday life worlds stretch out 30 or 60 miles across and encompass a county or two or three. At the center is the Wal-Mart town where most of the services and trade is now centered. We have acquaintances that live in even wider worlds. It does not appear than we can go back, yet some of us, perhaps most, do not want to live in a world without multi-bonded community of relationships similar to those of the Agrarian Age. And the Tobacco church, as it once was, apparently is also doomed. Not only is its little world shattered, but the crop that it served is also in danger.

#### ELEMENTS TO INCLUDE IN THE CREATION OF INFORMATION AGE CHURCHES AND COMMUNITY--RESURRECTED FROM THE OLD

As I have looked at and thought about all of this for over a decade in my HMB role, I have come to wonder about the possibility of us trying to reformulate community and church around some stackpole other than Tobacco. Paaaradigm shift is happening and a response is in order. I have done this by encouraging churches to do these things:

- (1) Expand their understanding of their church field from six miles to 30 miles.
- (2) Identify a ministry that the church is gifted to provide all across this larger area.
- (3) Let this become its signature ministry.
- (4) Recognize that there will be those in its old church field who will not be comfortable with this ministry.
- (5) Encourage their connection with a congregation that fits them.
- (6) Recognize that people will be drawn to this ministry from outside the traditional church field. Some will come because they need the ministry. Some will come because it is a place where they can exercise their gifts.
- (7) Come to see the larger or universal church as an eco-system of many inter-dependent congregations, not as a set of discreetly bounded congregations.
- (8) Understand that in the Information Age most Americans live in multiple, overlapping communities, not discrete, six mile ones.
- (9) Networks, which extend beyond the old boundaries, are the new forms of community.
- (10) Seek to transmit the very important values identified in the previous conference by Wendell, Goff, and Dorothy to the new church and community forms.
- (11) Recall that the Master had to die to be resurrected. In a sense the old Tobacco churches and communities will need to do the same.

(12) The functions of a new church will be the same as the old, only the forms will be altered.<sup>3</sup>

(13) As an intentional community of faith, hope and love, the resurrected rural church can be both a model and an oasis of life for the emerging region and the peoples whom it serves.

#### CASESTUDY

The best way for me to expound upon this list is to tell the story of one of the many rural churches I have come to know which are experiencing resurrection. Its name is the Nashville Baptist Church. Originally it served a village on the Missouri River between Jefferson City and Columbia. After a flood a year ago, it moved to higher ground. In recent years the geographical community it serves has grown numerically from the settlement of families who commute to the two small cities near by. They dwell among the long-time farm families who have practiced general agriculture there for many years.

This is the second ministry for their pastor of about a decade, now, Kevin Collins. While in college he became enamored with the prospects of inner-city ministry. He joined our US-2 program and was assigned to Los Angeles. It was a disaster. He was a failure. He was a country boy at heart. There was no match. After rodeoing for a while, he got back into ministry and entered our seminary in Kansas City. Opportunity came for him to preach at Nashville church. A love affair of church and pastor followed.

Kevin is about as unpretentious as you can imagine. Shy, balding, quiet, not your stereotypical Baptist preacher. He and his church members did share a love for livestock, Southern Gospel music, Jesus, and people. They had burnt themselves out trying to be a standard Southern Baptist church with all of the programs, organizations and activities that come with this franchise. So, they just decided to be who they were--loving, caring folk.

Someone came up with the idea of having a trailride and inviting the community. It worked. Not only did some of the new neighbors saddle-up, but so did some more "urban" cowpokes from Columbia. An integral part of the evening camps were gospel music and worship. Soon, this grew into an on-going country band. With some intentionality the Nashville church was transformed from being just another six-mile, clan church, to being a 30 mile church with a signature ministry. Ironically, it became a "Nashville" church. They have blended the love of the rural church with the intentionality of an urban church. Laid back to be sure, but about as directional as the most programmatic church one can imagine. They have discovered who they are and find that within their 30 mile world there are many people who can identify with them.

The church is continuing to grow. Outreach is bifocal. They still work their geographical community, but realize that some of their neighbors do not like their music and do not share their love of horses. They encourage them to find a church nearby or in Columbia or Jefferson City where there is a fit. Networking has become an increasingly important approach to outreach. The members like what their church does. They talk about it on the job. They invite their friends and colleagues. Nashville has found a good niche and is working it.

Worship is celebrative. Kevin is not a bombastic preacher. He is biblical, and his love shine through his messages. Bible study is open, honest and relevant. Nashville is a very missional church. Their 17 piece band and their "groupies" are often in other churches for Saturday and Sunday evening events. In the past couple of years they have given over 100 performances. And they have helped outside their area in other ways as well. The fellowship is strong, and the members are growing spiritually. Not a few persons who were "turned off" by church as usually have found a home at Nashville.

## REFLECTION

What I see happening at Nashville can happen in many other places, but in their own unique ways. Let's reflect for a few minutes upon what has happened there.

**First**, they were blessed with a good marriage of congregation and pastor.

**Second**, they made use of the gifts and graces God had provided for the congregation.

**Third**, they colored outside the lines. They were not bound by traditions, denominational programs, or old community boundaries.

**Fourth**, they found a need, a niche, and serviced it.

**Fifth**, they do not try to be "all things for all people". They recognize that some people will not want to be a part of what they are doing.

**Sixth**, even while they broke the mold, they were careful to see that the basic functions of church remained in tack--worship, evangelism, nurture, ministry, fellowship, and mission.

**Seventh**, they have successfully blended the strength of the rural church, relationship, with the urban church, directional purpose.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that the Nashville church has experienced resurrection. It has moved from being a typical place-based, Agrarian Age church to being a networking, niche serving Information Age church.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, let me express this observation yet another way.<sup>5</sup> In 1989 the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band was honored by its having its Circle II recording chosen as the Country Music album of the year. The album begins with Johnny Cash singing "Life's Railroad to Heaven." Some of you know the words. They speak of moving with God through the temptations of life toward our Heavenly home, a kind of Industrial Age version of Pilgrim's Progress. The album draws toward a close with a choir of country music greats singing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." Again some of you know the words. It laments the death of a mother, but expresses the hope that in Heaven the family will be reunited. Then the album concludes with an instrumental version of Amazing Grace.

I have come to see this as a kind of parable of the life of country church, be they Tobacco, Corn, Cotton, or Mill. They have been great on the circle. Relationships and family have been focal. But often they have lost focus on purpose and direction. Sometimes we urban raised "preacher boys, or girls" have come in and sought to make them directional, but have mostly just broken the circle.

What is really needed is for them to become a circle on the rail. Relational and directional. Rural and urban. For many this will mean a kind of death and resurrection. Not necessarily a closing to reopen, but a breaking of old forms, so the functions can be placed in forms that are appropriate for our new 30 mile worlds. Difficult to be sure. Only God's Amazing Grace can make it truly happen. My text is found in Luke 5:37-39. If I, a basic Branchwater Baptist, understand this statement by Jesus, I see that he has indeed foreseen our task and its difficulty. But it remains our task none the less.

**ENDNOTES**

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1. Pete Daniels, *Breaking the Land*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1986.
  2. One sees this in the mining village towns of eastern Kentucky as well.
  3. Emil Durkheim in *The Division of Labor*. This issue has been a central one in sociology from the beginning of the discipline.
  4. I have dealt with the subject of the social psychology of a small church elsewhere, "Understanding the Dynamics of a Smaller Church", Chapter 11 in Thomas Sykes' book, *Field of Churches*, Atlanta: HMB, 1988.
  5. See Gary Farley and D G McCoury, *We're Family*, for a discussion of the nature of a small church and suggestions on how it can be resurrected. Nashville: Convention Press, 1992.