**File 1104**

**THE PASSING OF THE SIX-MILE PARISH**
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March 1996
For *The Anglican Theological Review*

Most Christian congregations were planted across time with an intention to serve a particular place, a parish. It was expected by both ecclesiastical authorities and community leaders that the place would continue to be much the same for generations to come. Until well into the current century this expectation held up, for the most part. In rural areas of England and USAmerica, this model was typically given concrete expression as a church, or set of churches, established in a farm service village or crossroads hamlet. The primary pattern in USAmerica was to create a settlement about every six miles. Ideally, the community contained about 50 merchants, crafts persons, professionals, pastors, teachers, governmental officials, and their families, mostly in the village. They would serve the need of 100 to 200 yeoman farmers, and their families, who lived mostly on a farmstead within a three-mile radius of the village. The total population of this township would be between 1,000 and 2,000 persons. Most of them lived out their lives within this little six-mile world. By 1920 more than 50,000 such communities could be found located across USAmerica.

The Industrial Revolution brought change to this stable agrarian model of community and church life. Farms were mechanized and did not require as many workers; many parishes lost population. The workers released from the land often found employment in urban factories. Further, industry required fuel and vast quantities of natural resources; so, mining villages were formed in some rural districts. Many factories also created villages for their workers. Consequently, mill and mine village churches joined farm village churches in the stock of rural parish congregations. Similarly, the mine and mill villages waxed and waned as resources were exhausted and/or technology or taste changed. Stability of rural community life was replaced by the flux of change. Ultimately, new patterns of transportation, communication, social organization and economic exchange made many former farm service communities obsolete. Others were swallowed up as the cities grew and grew out into the territory of former rural parishes.

Founding paradigms die hard. While these major changes were occurring, most ecclesiastical leaders still worked within the old six-mile church parish paradigm. Some worked harder to provide more pastoral care and increase the level of participation in their shrinking congregations. Some sought to enable their community to diversify, bring more persons to their villages. Most of these efforts were not highly successful. Decline continued in most settings. Still others sought to "modernize" their congregation, at least in terms of adopting the Industrial Age ways of organizing their work.

Many parish churches lost financial viability. Soon judicatory leaders were seeking ways

to address this problem. Closure, yoking, blending and a variety of other responses were attempted. Decline continued. In sum, too often they worked to repair the old paradigm, rather than to explore creatively and fully the implication of the new Industrial Age paradigm for church life in rural areas.

In time some observers came to realize that many rural churches were attempting to serve a place which had lost its magnetism. Most rural people no longer lived in six-mile worlds. Modern means of transportation had undercut the traditional functionality of the villages. Almost unconsciously rural people shifted their allegiance to a market town ten, fifteen or even more miles away. Here the villager and the yeoman farmer and the rural, non-farm dweller looked for merchandise, services, recreation, and employment. The hold of the village, and of its church, perhaps, grew weaker. Now, at the end of the Industrial Age, rural USAmerican people dwell not in six-mile, but in thirty (or even sixty) mile worlds.

Parenthetically, just as we are coming to realize that the rural six-mile parish is no longer the center of rural life, the coming of the Information Age may spell the demise of the thirty-mile Industrial Age community that has replaced it. This seems to suggest that not only must one help the many six-mile parish churches rethink their field of service and their mission, one must additionally assist them in creating a new sense of community in their real thirty-mile world, work out relationships with other congregations in that world, and begin thinking about the implications of the Information Age for life in rural places and in smaller congregations. These are the topics I will attempt to address in the remainder of this paper. (1)

## FROM BOUNDED TO CENTERED PLACES

The old concept of a bounded parish/place is being replaced with one of overlapping parishes and places. The Agrarian Age model was one of a rural county comprising a set on townships whose boundaries also served as parish boundaries. In USAmerica this usually meant that a church was to seek to enlist, evangelize, nurture, and provide pastoral care for persons who lived within the township, or within three miles of the church doors. The practical reason for this arrangement was that the average speed of walking for humans is about three miles per hour. With this arrangement no yeoman family would be more than an hour's walk from a center of business, culture, and religion. In reality, variables such as the quality of soil, streams, and hills kept this pattern from being perfectly realized. And later the routes of railroads and highways influenced the growth and decline of rural communities very significantly. (2)

In any case, most congregations in rural USAmerica recognized the boundaries of their parish as co-terminus with the boundaries of their township community. This has been true even of the Baptists from the free or gathered church tradition across the South. This worked well. The people living within the township shared other institutions and concerns with one another. The children in Sunday School were also classmates in the township school. The farm families found their lives tied to a common rhythm of seed time and harvest. The craftsmen and merchants of the town found their livelihood tied to the success and/or failure of the yeoman farmers whom they served and with whom they worshiped. Even in those communities were four or five different denominational congregations might vie for members, the residents lived multi-bonded, interdependent lives. Once settled many lived out their lives in this six-mile world. Perhaps they

might venture forth to the county-seat town six, twelve or eighteen miles distant a few times each year for special occasions, but the focus of their lives was in this place where they were creating their lives and legacies. Neighbors married neighbors. They share work with one another. Intriguing patterns of cooperation, competition, and conflict developed. Some failed and moved on. Some prospered and sought still "greener pastures." But many, if not most, stayed and patterns of order and stability developed.

Often the church(es) emerged as a major force in the life of these rural communities. On Sunday, important information was exchanged. Where there was a sickness made know, the community would rally to do ministry. Where there was a violation of moral standards, various methods of sanctions might be discussed and agreed upon. Births, marriages, and a variety of successes would be celebrated. Deaths would be mourned. Worship would focus upon a common world view that was widely shared in the community and provided a template for seeing and interpreting the events of everyday life.

Such is much less common in rural areas today. With industrialization the scale of life changed. Many farm operations grew from 40, 80 or 160 acres to 500, 1,000, or 2,000 acres. Consequently, fewer people tilled this soil. This meant either that the population of the township dropped and the village crafts persons and merchants no longer had enough customers to stay in business, or farmers and farm wives found employment off the farm. They became a part of that dominant census category, "rural/non-farm." Often while they continued to live in the old community, their interests and concerns came to be bound more with the larger community where they now worked and shopped and where their children went to school. In either case, the old rural community became obsolete. There are literally thousands of these little villages with boarded up stores, schools, and churches all across the nation decaying and sinking into oblivion.

This sweeping change was reinforced by the growth of "ruralism," a much too little recognized form of prejudice which is as pervasive in USAmerican culture as is racism, genderism and ageism. Rural persons were stereotyped as ignorant, provincial, backward, and generally inferior. Only those rural persons who either adopted the ways of the urbanity and the Industrial Age in their rural place, or those who escaped to the cities and the city way of life, amounted to much in the eyes of the national culture. (3)

It has been of very real interest to me to look at the efforts of my denomination, Southern Baptists, to "modernize" the rural churches following World War II. We took the structures and language of the factory and superimposed them upon the lives of many rural churches. The leader of the Sunday School became a "superintendent." The meetinghouse became "the church plant." The various activities of the church were formalized and a "standard of excellence" defined the "one best way" of doing these activities. Church volunteers were "trained" as "workers" so that the product would be standardized. One could attend a Southern Baptist church anywhere across the nation and find the members singing from the same hymn book, studying from the same Sunday School quarterly, and celebrating same special denominational emphases. But while we were trying to remake the Agrarian Age churches into Industrial Age churches, we failed to see that the Industrial Age would result in a different configuration of communities. We were so focused on dealing with one manifestation of change, that we failed to see another. We changed the congregations internally, but we failed to help them see the changes in the parish they were to

serve. We were not alone in this. Many persons who loved the intimate relationships of rural community, could only lament its passing and demand its return.

Today, most rural persons participate in the life of several "communities." While they may live in some old township community, they may work in another, and participate in school, civic and recreational activities that stretch across their county and into others. They depend upon news that comes to them in print and electronically from the regional city that dominates their rural place. The point is that the discrete community boundaries of an earlier time are much diminished in power. Rural people live out their lives in multiple communities, as do most city dwellers.

For local churches this means that they can no longer expect people to attend them because of the fact that they sleep most nights within three miles of their front door, because they identify with that "faith family," or because they share common beliefs. Increasingly, rural persons select a congregation for the ministries it provides and the needs it addresses, more than for where it is or for the label it bears. The same hour's time that formerly was a barrier that called for a community and a church to be planted every six miles when people walked or rode a horse to church, can now be stretched to 15, or 30, or even more miles. And it is happening. Many rural worshipers now drive past many, many churches, often several of the same denominational family, on their way to a church that "fits."  And in this "centered" rather than "bounded" place, they will worship with people that they know from where they work, or attend school, or play, or shop.

 Taking a county as an example, let me summarize by saying that in 1896 it might have contained 24 discrete community squares, or townships, in which its citizens dwelt. Today, there may be 10 to 30 overlapping circles, so that most persons are impacted by three or four or more communities, to which they have some important attachment and identity.

Some may criticize this as disloyal. But it is reality. And it is reality because of changing forms of transportation and of community life. So, rather than lamenting a lost past, church leaders need to get on with responding effectively to the new situation. One response is to close down the old six-mile churches and consolidate them in a central place, usually the county-seat town. A second is to try to prop them up for a while longer with non-traditional types of ministerial leadership. The third, and what I am proposing here, is to rethink the purposes and the parish orientation of these churches. This will be developed in the sections which follow. It is premised upon a vision of the churches as having overlapping rather than discrete parishes-- become centered, rather than bounded congregations. They will gather a congregation more in terms of their ministry focus than in terms of the place where they are located. (4)


## FINDING A "SIGNATURE" MINISTRY

Most local rural churches have seen themselves as the equivalent of a general store. They offer a standard variety of programs and activities as suggested by their denominational headquarters. The smaller ones struggle with this because the denominational planners are usually products of larger congregations and develop programs that do not really allow for the limitations that smaller congregations face. They are encouraged to be "full-service" churches.

What they discover, however, is that one or two congregations over in the county-seat town have been able to do this. They have become the ecclesiastical equivalent of the Wal-Mart. They have money, facilities and paid staff. Their programs really work. So when the smaller, rural parish church is compared to this larger church, they do not fare so well in the eyes of many.

With the concept of overlapping parishes it seems that it would be wise for churches to identify one or two ministries needed in the area for which they have been gifted by God, rather than being only generalists. (They will often continue to many of the things that churches of their faith family do, but they will not be focused on being the "franchise" for that denomination.) They do this ministry well. They become known as the church that does well . . . (You fill in the blank. It may be seniors ministry, youth ministry, prayer ministry, deeper-life, quality music, or high church worship, or one or two of a couple of dozen other needed ministries.)

In his autobiography, *Made in America,* Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, boldly states that general stores cannot compete with him in terms of selection or price. But they can in terms of *service*. So they need to find a niche that his giant store ignores, or fails to address, and put their emphasis there. To do so, means that this store will never be large, but it can be effective.

Similarly, I find many rural and village churches that have intuitively realized that they cannot compete program for program with the Wal-Mart style church in the county-seat, but they can do some programs and activities well that do not fit the work of the larger church. Briefly, here are the common steps that they take.

*First*, someone sees a need for a ministry; one that needs to be done; one that they have, or can get, resources to address. *Second*, they put it together and do it. *Third*, they feel good about it and better about themselves. *Fourth*, although initially they may have focused on their old parish, they find that others from across their county need the ministry and want to be involved in providing the ministry. *Fifth*, they come and the ministry expands. *Sixth*, the church becomes known as the church that does a particular ministry well.

For some churches this has generated significant growth. For others it has simply provided direction, purpose and positive feelings. But in most instances it has facilitated a kind of resurrection in the life of the church. (5)

## THE ECO-SYSTEM PARADIGM

As several churches in a county shift their focus from being a general church for their little parish to being a church with a "signature" ministry that reaches out 15 or 20 miles in each direction across a county or two, the picture of church life changes. Service areas overlap. Many different targeted ministries are in place. People, who might have tried a "general" church and not found much for them there, may now get excited about a church that addresses their needs and/or can effectively use their special gifts. The ecclesiological picture shifts from being one of many congregations in competition with one another, to one of many congregations complementing one another. An eco-system-like mutual interdependence emerges. Each of the churches will see that while there are those to whom they can minister very effectively, there are others they would be most faithful to in referring to another congregation.

This approach can carry ecumenism to a new level. It moves away from the error of

thinking that there is "one best way" for all churches to be, so organic unity is desired, to the more Pauline view of the body of Christ having many organs with many different functions. By affirming the *rightness* of diversity, the churches can become what Christ intended.

## BURYING OLD HATCHETS

Taking a common Midwestern rural county as an example of the concept being developed in this essay, one finds a county-seat town with most of the business, government and educational services centered there. Then, at six-mile intervals in each direction are the hamlets and villages that serve as the centers for the old six-mile parishes. Typically, there are 10 to 15 such communities. It is common for these villages to have a history competition and of conflict. They have gone to war on the basketball court and the baseball field. They resisted consolidation of the schools. They competed for highways, railroads and even the county-seat. Pastors will need to assist community leader in capturing a new vision which is based in the fact that further competition will be destructive.

To try to perpetuate six-mile discrete community thinking in the Industrial Age is a prescription for failure and decline. These old communities need to catch a vision of being a neighborhood within the larger community of the county. The ground work for this has often already been done. Consolidation has drawn people from the old communities into common arenas where communication has been fostered and some stock of trust created. Many organizations have been formed that draw their membership from across the county. Certainly, one important role of rural ministers must be to encourage the old communities to bury the old hatchets. This may involve the recognizing and confessing the sins of the past. And it may involve efforts to make up for past wrongs. But the primary focus must be on the realization that for one neighborhood to get something good does not mean that the others are somehow diminished. In this age of good roads and automobiles, in most instances one can travel across the whole county more quickly than one could travel across a township in 1900. (6)

## CREATING A NEW COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Learning to share and care for the whole has its roots in the Christian Gospel. Jesus taught and lived a life that rejected narrow provincialism. He demanded that his followers expand their definition of who was "neighbor." Granted, many of us need to set in concrete this definition in the place we call home. Yet, we need to draw a bigger circle than we drew in the past. While our sinful nature tells us to build our self-esteem by defacing the esteem of others, our Christian faith declares that we are to love all of our neighbors.

If a pastor takes as her/his focus the expanding of ones community from the old six-mile township to the 30-mile county ring, then his/her announcements, prayers, activities and rounds can model this larger circle. By example, the congregation is led to take pride in one's neighbors as well as in one own place. By example the pastor can find win/win opportunities for cooperation among former competitors. Being a real Christian neighbor should be a common theme in worship.

**BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST**

Then as we look at our continuing example, a Midwestern USAmerican county, we will find many different congregations serving the area. The population to congregation ratio may well be below 500, well below. The churches have moved beyond "one best way" thinking. They allow for diversity both within a denomination or faith family and across traditional lines. The churches come together around a variety of organizing principles, or stackpoles. Doctrine, race, vocation, location, sense of calling to a ministry, and worship styles are only some of these. The issue of inclusion is pushed, in part, to the larger arena of ecumenical life. The churches all affirm diversity and variety of gifts and graces.

Any person in the county will have many choices and many invitations from dynamic, missional congregations. Not all will accept. Not all will believe. But none will not hear and few will not find some congregation for which they have some points of commonality. The old excuses--they do not speak my language; they do not sing my songs; they are too fundamentalist; they are too liberal; or they do not want me--will no longer work.

**RESPONDING TO THE INFORMATION AGE**

In many ways what has been offered here is an effort to move out of the continuing understanding of rural church and rural church work as Agricultural Age activity, through the response of the Industrial Age, to consider what is needed as we move still further into the Information Age. The easy part will be in responding to the demand for choices, local involvement and freedom. The hard part will be to move beyond spatial thinking to see worshiping and ministering communities formed across cyber-space. We will need to accept the concept that persons will be involved in multiple worshiping, ministering groups. But we will not want to rely on cyberspace alone. We will need to continue to support the significance of some occasions of face to face interaction among believers. Cyberspace will offer exciting new possibilities for nurture and ministry. No longer will remoteness keep the very best the Christian faith has to offer from access by anyone. The implications for evangelism can be great? Time and space will not hinder witness nearly as much as in the past. No longer will the work of a small rural church be limited to its parish or its county for that matter. It can share with persons and groups everywhere. Old boundaries of place, denomination, and doctrine will be bridged. The "pecking order" of the experts will be revised. Revolutionary potentials await. Needs of rural churches can be addressed almost instantaneously. Ideas about good programs and approaches can be shared quickly.

**CONCLUSION**

The past half century has been a difficult time for many small rural churches. The changes brought by the "Industrial Age" have made their work difficult and often discouraging.

Often they have been left in the back water. The coming of the "Information Age" can change this. Space and time will become less of a limitation to effective ministry. Small rural churches can share their faith with people all around the world. The timid will be liberated. This can be as liberating for the common Christian and was the invention of the printing press.

"Ruralism" need no longer impede the work of the rural church. It can both access and share without permission. The old "gatekeepers" are dead. This can and should be the greatest time ever for rural ministry.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Most readers will recognize that this analysis is informed by the typology developed by Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave* (New York: William Morrow), 1980.

2. Currently, I am studying the development of churches since 1945 in what was then a rural school district which contains 32 square miles of territory, just slightly less than the 36 square miles one finds in the typical mid-western township. In 1945 the village near the center of the Raytown Consolidated School District, just east of Kansas City, Missouri, had three churches-- Baptist, Methodist and Disciples of Christ. A second Baptist Church served another village, Little Blue which lay about four miles south and east, just inside the border of the district. At the time about 5,000 persons lived in the district. Similar patterns can be found across USAmerica.

3. One might interpret the amazing popularity of country and western music and faux country attire and pickup trucks as a kind of counter culture movement.

4. This proposal, of course, fits the ecclesiology of the free church better than it does that of the state church tradition.

5. Several useful books have been published recently that provide an account of small churches who have found a ministry which has become the signature of their church. For example, see Robert B. Coote, *Mustard-Seed Churches* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1990.

6. I experienced some of this six-mile pettiness in the mid-1970s while serving as a college professor, bivocational pastor, and a county commissioner. We built a new high school in the middle of the county, consolidating four old ones. The school fronted on a road on the Jefferson City rural mail route. But the state highway along the side of the school was on the Dandridge rural route. Dandridge was the country-seat and the second oldest town in  Tennessee, but had less than one-third of Jefferson City's population. The Dandridge folk got the mail box placed at the side of the school, so it would be "theirs." I represented Jefferson City, and this did not bother us much. What we wanted was a comprehensive high school and the community building that it would provide. And that is what we got.