

From Six-Mile to Thirty-Mile Church Fields
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Lyle Schaller has alerted us to the emergence of the 60-mile city. He notes that the freeway system in and around cities has spurred a sprawl that allows people to live as many as 30 miles or more from the city core, and yet actively participate in the life of that city. This is true not only of the major metropolis but of smaller cities such as Albany, Georgia; Springfield, Missouri; or Madison, Wisconsin.¹

Emerging Kinds of Churches

Schaller declares that this development has made both necessary and possible new forms of worshiping communities. One is variously labeled the "Mega," "Super," or "Regional" church. Its image is that of an aggressive, evangelical congregation of several thousand members. Typically, it is strategically located at a crossroads of the freeways. The congregation arrives from all across the city. It is not unusual for members to drive 15 or 20 miles, 20 or 30 minutes to such a church. Its "draws" include an attractive pulpiter, well-done music, programs that meet needs, and the aura of success.

A second type is the ethnic-cultural church. It, too, may draw from the 15-mile-or-more radius. Typically this is a much smaller congregation. Its draw is a common heritage which is affirmed within the group. Examples include Native American, Southeast Asian, Haitian, and African-American.

A third type is the "ministry/based" church. This congregation identifies a group of persons who need a ministry and provides it. Examples are the mentally handicapped, the hungry and homeless, senior adults, and the deaf. People who need these ministries, and persons called by God to perform these/such ministries are drawn together from across the city to form this ministering congregation.

The fourth emerging form of congregation networks through vocation. It focuses on the health-care workers, artists, transportation workers, or financial industry employees, for example, from across the city. The network not only provides for recruitment of members but the common base can give focus to Bible study and worship. Types two, three, and four are often called "special purpose" churches.²

The "Six-Mile Church"—A Relic of the Past

Schaller's message to urban church leaders is that they may need to move beyond seeing their church "field" in terms of a particular geographical community of 6 or 12 blocks in each direction and begin to think in terms of networking across the 60-mile city around a vocation or around a ministry.³

In my role at the Home Mission Board, I have been considering what rural/small-town application of Schaller's 60-mile city concept may be. I present these thoughts here for you to consider, critique, refine, and hopefully apply in your setting.

The title of this article includes the term "Six-Mile Church." This term reflects national policy in the 19th century which called for settling our land in six-mile communities. Particularly west of the Appalachians, surveyors laid out townships in six-mile squares for a total

of 36 square miles per township. The 1862 Homestead Act further subdivided each township into 144 tracts of 160 acres each. So, nearly every township, fully developed, would contain a population of 750 to 1,2000 persons. Each township might grow a town of two- or three-hundred persons comprised primarily of merchants, craftsmen, and professionals. They provided goods and services for the farm families from the homesteads surrounding the town for three miles in each direction. As the railroads reached like a spider web across the nation, many of these towns became points from which farmers could ship produce to the growing cities. The point is that well into this century, most Americans lived, worked, conducted business, and worshiped in a six-mile world.

Of course, this model never was perfectly realized. Differences in the quality of soils, rate of rainfall, and the natural barriers of streams and mountains interfered with the checkerboard arrangement. Some of the township towns became centers for manufacturing, education, recreation, and/or government, as well as serving farm families. They grew into much larger towns and cities, some reaching even across the boundaries of the 36-square mile township.⁴

The Home Mission endeavor of American protestantism between 1865 and 1920 was largely an effort at responding to this settlement policy. Thousands of "six-mile churches" were planted. Each one identified its field as about three miles in each direction.

On across the Corn Belt, Cotton Belt, and the Great Plains rolls this process of settling homesteads, creating towns, and planting churches. But this Jeffersonian dream of a nation of farm and village freeholders was not to be. By the end of the 19th century the nation was industrializing, and with industrialization came urbanization. Chicago, Detroit, New York, Boston, and other cities grew rapidly on a base of manufacturing, natural resource processing, and transportation of goods. At first these cities looked to new immigrants from Europe to run the machines and construct the buildings. But in the 1920s the focus shifted to absorbing excess rural American workers who were no longer needed on the farms because of the introduction of tractors and improved farming practices. In the years from 1920 through 1970 millions of rural-raised persons moved to the cities of America. Alvin Toffler has labeled this the second great migration wave. The first wave, the agricultural settlement wave, I had described previously.⁵

As rural Baptists moved to Atlanta, Dallas, Kansas City, or Fresno, they carried with them the "six-mile church" model. Typically, they staked out an area of about one square mile or 72 city blocks as their neighborhood. Often this was the area served by an elementary school. (Later with suburbanization and the resultant larger lots, the neighborhood church might encompass again six square miles as its field.)

Baptists were thinking in terms of the rural multigenerational church they had grown up in as they planted the neighborhood churches. Many had had three or four or five generations buried in the churchyard out back and sat on pews with three or more other generations. But this was not to be the case in their new homes. Few urban families remained in the same neighborhood for more than two or three generations. And few urban churches experienced a stable congregation across the decades. Not a few city church houses have served a succession of two, three, or more distinct congregations across the 20th century, as the racial and socioeconomic composition of the geographical community has changed. Most of the churches that have continued for 50 years or more have had either the good fortune, or the vision, to become 30-mile congregations.

Today's "Thirty-Mile Church"

In the city some of these neighborhood churches grew to become regional churches. Building upon powerful pulpit or well-done Sunday School and other programs, they drew people, not from a six-block or six-mile field, but rather from a 30-mile circle with people traveling up to 15 miles and up to 30 minutes to attend the regional church. Further, in the city even the smaller and mid-size urban churches typically no longer were primarily geographical churches. They, too, as special purpose churches, had become 30-mile churches.

Even as many urban churches have become 30-mile churches, many rural churches for a variety of reasons, need to consider following suit. To my mind the most compelling reason is that rural America is being reconfigured in terms of regional 30-mile towns. For example, across the eastern half of America a town is emerging as the center for trade, commerce, education, communication, and primary health care, about every 30 miles. Often it is a county-seat town. Usually it has good highway access in all four directions. Some rural sociologists are referring to this process of change as the "walmartization" of rural America. Often schools, at least high schools, have been consolidated in the same town—so, too, health care, governmental services, and other services. In the west, where population is less dense, the same thing is happening, only the circle is larger. On the coasts it may be a little smaller. These 30-mile towns are the rural equivalent of the 60-mile city. And they are the end result of the change the Industrial Age brought.

Unfortunately, the development of many of the 30-mile towns has been at the expense of those six-mile communities that lie between it and the next 30-mile town. Many of the places have found their population growing grayer and fewer. Many have seen schools, businesses, industries, and services closed out. Having lost the traditional function as independent communities, many old six-mile communities are now becoming neighborhoods within a 30-mile town. For example, since 1950 in Pettis County, Missouri, the former six-mile towns of Greenridge, Smithton, Dresden, Lookout, Hughesville, Lamont, Flat Creek, Longwood, Newland, and Cole Camp have become neighborhoods within the 30-mile city, Sedalia.⁶ Most have lost their former institutions. They are shadows of their former selves. Today they are a little more than dispersed places where Sedalia's workers/commuters live. Smithton folks are tied to Sedalia, often more so than in their town. The same pattern is being repeated all across the eastern half of our nation. I have seen this in Danville, Kentucky, in New Albany, Mississippi, in Shelby, North Carolina, in Shawnee, Oklahoma, and in countless other places.

In the case of Sedalia, the 30-mile cities of Warrensburg, Marshall, Clinton, Eldon, and Warsaw surround it. In the case of Shawnee, Oklahoma, they are Seminole, Ada, Prague, and Chandler.

What the Future May Hold

I am afraid the future is gloomy for almost any rural or small-town church that continues to focus on the six-mile field. But there is hope for those that think in terms of the 30-mile field and provide a service or a ministry to a significant group of people within this larger circle.

For the foreseeable future we will have a mix of first-wave six-mile churches, of 30-mile churches built around a powerful pulpit or a pulsating program; and we are beginning to see the emergence of 30-mile, information-age churches. For Baptists this will be a return to our heritage. Initially, we gathered persons around a common theology or belief system. They crossed "parish" lines to attend a Baptist church because they shared beliefs that deviated from

the established churches. Only after our great success in the rural and small-town South did we adopt the filed or parish concept.

So, in responding to the challenge of churching people in the information age, we will be regaining a part of our past. We again will become "gathered" churches.

¹Lyle Schaller, *Choices for Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 153.

²Carl Dudley and Douglas Walrath, *Developing Your Small Church's Potential* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1988), 42-43.

³Schaller, 169.

⁴Gary Farley, Text-reader *Rural Social Science by Extension* (Texas A & M University, 1989).

⁵Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam, 1980), 346-349.

⁶See map of central Missouri.