

**Rural Churches in America**  
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**for the Encyclopedia of Rural Sociology**

The white clapboard meetinghouses with spires puncturing the sky of New England, modest red brick tee-shaped structures with wrap-around cemeteries across the South, grey rock and stained glass transplanted European village churches across the upper Midwest, earth-tone adobe chapels in the southwest--such are the images of the rural church across America. Reality is far more diverse. The rural church is probably the most common social institution found in rural America. In 1990, the Glenmary report counted 116,872 congregations in non-metropolitan counties. Unfortunately, many African-American, independent, and fundamentalist congregations did not cooperate in the study. And there may well be half that many more that see themselves as "rural" although they are located in metropolitan counties. (Of course, many of the congregations in the larger towns or rural cities of the non-metropolitan counties do not readily identify themselves as rural.) It is probable, then, that there are well over 200,000 "rural" churches. The churches in the non-metropolitan counties claim 31.5 million adherents. This is nearly 60 percent of the non-metro population.

Most counties are dominated by a specific "faith family" or denomination. In New England and the Great Lakes region it is the Roman Catholics. This is also true along the West Coast and along the Southern border all the way back to New Orleans. The upper Midwest is dominated by the Lutherans. The inter-mountain region is the empire of the Latter Day Saints. The domain of the Methodists runs from Maryland to Colorado, in a strip through the midlands. Portions of this region are shared with the Disciples/Christian churches. And in the South and much of the Southwest lies the heartland of the Baptists. Elsewhere, about 200 hundred scattered counties are dominated by various mainline (United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, and Reformed)and immigrant denominations. However, most non-metropolitan counties offer greater diversity in denominations now than in 1970.

**The "Churching" of Rural America**

During the Colonial Period, most colonies established and supported a particular church. Revivalism, immigration, the home mission movement, and territorial expansion modified this considerably since the formation of the United States. Revivalism on the Western frontier in the early 1800s sparked rapid growth of Methodists and of Baptists. It gave birth to the Disciples movement. Indirectly, it birthed the Latter Day Saints. Immigration in the mid- to late nineteenth century brought floods of Roman Catholic and Lutheran farmers to the Midwest and miners to the midlands and Great Plains. In their wake came thousands of pietistic and peace-oriented sectarianists. In that great century of westward settlement, home mission societies strove to plant congregations in the new farm service towns, mining towns, and mill towns that were springing up. Paramount was the American Mission Society, supported primarily by the Congregationalists and the Presbyterians. Second to it was the Northern Methodist Mission Society. This was not an easy task. At first many towns were served by more saloons and brothels than by churches, but in time this usually changed.

Six primary patterns developed. Often the community constructed a building in which a Union Sunday School was held, and several different denominations held worship on successive Sundays. If the community grew, then one or all of the denominations formed a separate congregation. Second, a mission society or religious order in Europe or in the East financed the construction of a church house and funded a mission pastor or priest. Often this was an element of the immigration process and a colony would be transported from the Old World to the new. Third, an itinerant preacher came to a community, held a revival meeting, gathered converts, and formed a church. Fourth, an existing congregation encouraged some of its members to form a new congregation in a nearby community and provided financial support. Fifth, earnest lay persons formed a congregation and then asked a denomination to provide a pastor to them, or called one from among their own flock. Sixth, a mining or mill company would provide churches as a part of the amenities afforded in the company village.

Among African-Americans, examples of all six of these patterns can be found following the Civil War. However, they relied largely on indigenous efforts. By 1900, most of the former slaves and their children had become church members. Elsewhere in rural America, some scattered synagogues appeared to serve the many Jewish merchants who settled in the growing towns. Most of the denominations carried on mission activities among the Native Americans on tribal lands seeking to win them to the Christian faith.

In the decades on either side of the beginning of the twentieth century, several new Christian denominations emerged in rural areas. One set sprang from a reaction of modernity, calling for a return to the "fundamental" doctrines of Christianity. A second variety stressed personal holiness and moral perfection. The third stressed the importance of the "gifts of the spirit" particularly the gift of speaking in "unknown tongues." And the fourth were the millennial sects that actively anticipated the coming end of time and the return of Jesus to the earth. (The Churches of Christ, the Church of the Nazarene, the Assemblies of God, and the Seventh Day Adventists respectively are prime examples of each of these groups.) These groups soon splintered off of the Mainline Protestant denominations. These groups drew heavily upon rural persons, even when they formed city congregations. Almost all of their adherents were poor in beginning. Over time, many have prospered; today, many worship in beautiful church buildings.

Each of these four movements have continued to splinter and to grow down to the present. For example, the Assembly of God denomination ranks third behind United Methodists and Roman Catholics in the number of counties where it has a congregation.

### **The Rural Life/Rural Church Movement**

The social gospel movement was launched to respond to the poverty, filth and crime of the center cities in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. It focused on improving social conditions, addressing social policy, and ministering to personal needs. It sought to apply the Golden Rule to the social order. Soon rural leaders were contending that similar attention should be addressed to rural areas. In 1907, President Teddy Roosevelt called for the Country Life Conference. This became a landmark event for the Cooperative Extension Movement and for the discipline of rural sociology, as well as for the churches. The issues of tenancy, public education, inadequate farm practices, dirt roads, poor hygiene, and the weakness of social institutions, including the churches, were among those addressed.

Most of the major denominations quickly opened a department of rural church work. They addressed social reform and community improvement. They worked with Cooperative Extension in many states to form summer schools to train rural clergy in the social sciences. Many denominational seminaries added staff to teach about how to pastor rural churches and how to work for community development. The denominations opened high schools and colleges in remote places. Where there was more than one congregation for every 1,000 residents, efforts were made to form a federated church serve several denominations concurrently. Comity agreements were made assigning particular territories to specific denominations, particularly in the West. They cooperated with the area Soil and Water conservation districts to promote environmental stewardship. It seems that the Jeffersonian agrarianism paradigm was wed with a dream that access to the best conveniences of urban America could be made available to rural people. Only much later did the leaders come to realize that the changes they supported were resulting in the depopulation or "unsettling" of much of rural America, in a very real sense destroying what they were working to preserve.

It was this movement that caused Charles Galpin to discover rural sociology. Much of the work of rural sociology in the 1920s was sponsored by the denominations and directed by Brunner and others.

### **The Era of Mass Society**

The pull of city jobs and the push of agricultural mechanization drove millions of persons off the land following World War II. Coupled with this were improvements in mass communication and distribution of goods and services that seemed to remove differences between urban and rural life, and the birthing of the Civil Rights Movement that refocused American society on the problems of the cities. Soon seminarians were reading Bensman and Vedich's *Small Town in Mass Society* and concluding that the bloom was off of rural ministry. Differences between rural and urban people would soon be erased. Rural pastoring would become a "maintenance" activity. Consequently, the rural departments of the denominations were cut back and rural programs in the seminaries were dropped as the professors reached retirement.

However, the fact remained that most of the congregations and many of the members of most denominations were still town and country folk. They needed assistance, too. It came in the mid-1970s with the first of what is now a small library of books on small churches. Recently, several additional books on churches for poor people have also appeared. The churches seem to be learning that while there is now more sameness at one level, there is also more diversity. It has become recognized that there are many different kinds of rural communities, rural churches, and rural peoples. No one program will serve them all. Staff persons in national and regional church offices with responsibilities for small churches, or poor churches, or poverty have come to realize that they must know about rural issues and culture as well.

## **Trends**

While there are still many churches in non-metropolitan America, many of them are no longer rural in a traditional sense. Many are well-staffed and well-housed. Yet, many are small, and many are poor, and probably most are not well-led. In some instances, this is the result of whom they serve. In others, it is because of where they serve.

Demographic shifts threaten the continued existence of some congregations in rural settings. Some agricultural and extraction-based communities have lost so much population that once very effective churches find their survival threatened. Others see a surge of new and different people around them even while their traditional membership pool is shrinking. In many rural places, there is a need for urban-style congregations to be formed.

This may mean refocusing existing congregations, or the planting of new ones. Denominational officers with assignments in rural, small, and poor church work have formed the Rural Church Network. It shares resources, presents joint conferences, and advocates for rural concerns. Several seminaries have added again rural church programs. A consortium works with Appalachian Ministries Educational Research Center (AMERC) in Berea, Kentucky, to provide training for pastoral care of rural and poor congregations. Austin Seminary now offers a D. Min. degree to prepare pastors for the larger town and small city congregations. Others will likely follow. Texas A & M Cooperative Extension launched a Rural Social Science by Education program in 1989 for pastors already in town and country settings, and this is used in many other states. It employs the reflective, small peer group model for education. Courses on community, church, family and development of community are available.

Difficulty in finding pastoral leadership for many small, poor congregations has been experienced. In 1990, studies indicated that it cost between \$60,000 and \$100,000 to operate a church with a full-time pastor. Many rural churches are finding themselves "priced out of the market". Several strategies are being employed by the denominations as follows:

- 1. Train a leader from within the congregation to function as pastor.**
- 2. Find retired or bivocational pastoral leadership.**

3. Yoke churches in a larger field or parish including from two to ten or more congregations. Often these are of the same denominational family, other times they cross these lines. In some of these arrangements, a staff of ministers with complementary skills are employed. In others, a single person will have a multi-point charge.
4. Federations of churches of different denominations are being created to serve a community which can no longer support two or three congregations.

Since Vatican II, relationships between Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations have been much improved. This is particularly true in poor, small, declining rural settings.

Many rural ministers seem to be anxious to be involved in community development activities. They can be a valued advocate in such efforts. Often the minister brings a different, more diverse, set of experiences to the process, some extra-local resources, and some credibility to the effort. Further, a pastor may be able to be heartbroken for divergent interests in a community.

In much of the South and the Midwest, there seems to be an emerging pattern of micropolitan cities (20,000 to 50,000) having a large (mini-mega) congregation, the ecclesiastical equivalent of a Wal-Mart. Initially, this has had an adverse effect on some of the smaller churches in the city and in the village and open country settings within its trade area. Now some of these congregations which used to service only a township are developing their own "signature" ministry, one that becomes the hallmark of that congregation that draws persons from across the trade area. But in spite of this, many village and open country congregations continue to be family chapels. They focus on relationships among the people rather than on being intentional, directional, and goal-seeking. They are more interested in being than in becoming. They cannot be closed, and it is difficult to get them to expand their circle to include new members.

Another very visible feature of the contemporary rural church is the spread of very conservative, non-denominational congregations. Since the pastor merely has formal training, the quality of leadership varies considerably.

Rural people, historically, have been more likely to be connected to a church, and attend with some regularity, than have city people. This continues to be the case. There is evidence that numbers of congregations and membership are increasing and the ratio of members to the general population is improving.

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