

Industrialization of Heartland Agriculture
Reaction: Consequences for Community
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I am pleased to have been invited to participate in this event. It has stretched my mind and expanded my understanding. Some of my concerns were allayed, others have been confirmed. Thanks.

I see my task as representing the most common social institution in rural America, the 200,000 churches. They count among their adherents 80 percents of the residents of non-metropolitan America. Most of these congregations were in place by 1920. Their founding mission sprang from the Jeffersonian dream of a nation peopled by yeoman farmers and shop-keepers. The plan called for the placement of a settlement about every six miles across the nation. Here would cluster the social institutions--stores, schools, churches and services--to support the work of the farm families settled on farmstead up to three miles away. Most American born before 1920 came into just such a six-mile world.

Historically, the settlements came from three sources. One was COLONY. This was particularly common in the upper-midwest. Often a German, Russian or Scandinavian village would be transplanted from the Old World to the New. Included would be a congregation of the established church of the sending nation--usually, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Reformed, or Mennonite. (Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon is somewhat unique in that it has both a strong Roman Catholic and a strong Lutheran congregation, and in that the Southern Baptists have not yet opened a church there.) A second source was the COMPANY opening a mining or a milling town. Here the ownership would often plant two church--one for management and one for the workers. The third, and the most common, was what I will call CONQUEST. Often a community would erect a meetinghouse and several denominations would alternate Sundays in holding worship. Springing from revivalistic impulses and sense of manifest destiny in our USAmerican spirit a host of missionaries, circuit riders and local preachers worked to form congregations in each township. The fruits of their labor is still very evident as one travels across the nation. In spite of the closing of about 50,000 congregations since 1920, new congregations are still being formed, and the churches are by far the most common and significant institution in rural America.

Yesterday both Sarah and Neal cited New Testament references in their presentations, so I am emboldened to do likewise. My reference is found in Mark 2:2. Here Jesus notes that one does not put new wine in old wine skins. His point was that his teachings related to the Kingdom of God could not be fitted into the forms of the then established religion. (We branch water Baptists are a little embarrassed by Christ's selection of this illustration.) By analogy the expansion of Industrialized Agriculture will not fit into the Jeffersonian community wineskins. This terrifies

many of us. We have come to be comfortable in the old. We see the new agriculture being cooked up as a new wine that will break the old forms with no appropriate provision for the new.

As a national denomination bureaucrat, I see the Wal-mart/K-mart store trade areas in rural America as being the most likely new centers for the new communities which the new Agriculture will create. But this seems to be almost by default. At least this seems to be the case for the short run before the full impact of the Information Age comes upon us. I do not see anyone in government or industry with a vision for what the new forms of community will be. What I have been saying to the churches is that they must break out of the six-mile mindset and become 30 mile churches. For some this will be to become the ecclesiastical equivalent of a Wal-mart, a full-service church serving the spiritual needs of many persons from all across their county. For others it will mean finding a niche--type of worship, ministry, or mission--for a select group. This will mean an end of parish or township thinking for the service area of a church. The churches in a county will likely become more like an ecosystem, with many overlapping relationships.

In this conference I have both heard and failed to hear a deep awareness of the importance of our getting about creating the new community wineskin that will make social life possible in the new age of industrial agriculture. Certainly, there is a prophetic task for the faith community and its friends to declare the importance of attending to the concerns that the new forms of community be

- *humanized
- *sustainable
- *truly responsive to the physical well-being of consumers
- *democratic and free

In this process the churches will need to be faithful to the biblical revelation and demand that the new agriculture and its resultant communities care about

- *the poor
 - *the widows (including today's manifestation, single parents)
 - *the strangers (including international workers)
 - *all of God's creation--animate and inanimate
- for this is the essence of true religion. (James 1:27)

Practically, this means that we must be busy about the formation of new larger community wineskins. We must carry the values and truths from the old and integrate them into the new, far better than we did so in the past. Certainly, this will not be easy. Often the communities of the past that will be integrated into the new will come with the freight of old antagonism. But the churches have some truth with which to address these problems. We have been told to

- *love our enemies
- *to select and carry crosses of service
- *to find in the death of the old, the hope of resurrection in a new and better form.

Finally, on behalf of the churches, I ask that you who also labor in the vineyards of agricultural science, economics, food processing and related activities will be patient with us church folk. Many of us have roots in prairie populist thought. In the past our people have been bruised by

railroad and banking interests. We have been treated as the backward and slow country cousin by traveling medicine show operators and by summertime Bible salesmen with Southern accents. Please make common cause with the 200,000 rural churches and their adherents in the formation of appropriate community wineskins for the new wine of industrialized agriculture. Pay attention to our values as we pay attention to yours. Lets work together to move through this hinge-time to new forms a community which build upon the good of the past to create still better forms in the future.