

Empowerment and Missions Among the Poor

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Baptist Missions with the poor of America, "the plain people," the people of the land, is a story of empowerment. Where other denominations sent missionaries to the poor to do good things for them, we sent missionaries that empowered and entrusted persons from their own ranks to be their pastors. This strategy was deeply grounded in our Baptist heritage--our central doctrine was the "freedom of God" which means that God is free to call whom he will to proclaim the Gospel. Lack of education was to be no disqualifier. It was the call that was crucial. Certainly, this is risky. Examples of excesses and ignorance abound. But, we have believed that God is free and this is how he acts.

Often God has used educated and well-trained Baptists to reach the poor. One example was Captain Richard Fuller along the Sea Islands of South Carolina a century and a half ago. But, like their model the Apostle Paul, they have had the wisdom not to settle in and pastor a little flock of poor folk. Rather, they have challenged leaders from the poor to hear the call of God, respond and become leaders. They mentored and empowered persons from the poor to lead their own.

Most of the persistently poor counties in the United States are also counties where the Baptist movement is dominant. This is true among Anglos, African-Americans, and many Native Americans in the South and the Southwest. One might look at this and conclude that the Baptist faith has failed its adherents. Unlike a stricter brand of Calvinism, which is associated with the rise of Capitalism, it has not lifted the majority of its adherents out of poverty. However, one must note it has been the Baptists and their imitators who have historically targeted the poor for the gospel. So, attribution of cause and effect may not be formulated easily.

As M. Weber, E. Troeltsch and H. Richard Niebuhr have documented, renewal and revival movements among Christians typically start among the poor. They call for active confession, not assent to a creed. But, across time these movements are tamed. They become wealthy and come to "ape" the way of the established churches. The fire goes out. The poor are left behind. Baptist folk continue to remind us not to forget our roots, to not neglect the poor, but to remember the words of James--the essence of true religion is ministry with the widows and the orphans. (James 1:27) Let's address ourselves to the mass of folk one sees down at the Wal-Marts. (What follows is a set of notes from several recent publications about the kinds of folk Baptists must continue to reach.)

Baptist historian, Wayne Flynt has provided us with an exceptional look at the life of poor White folk in Alabama--many of whom are our fellow Southern Baptists. His study focused on the hill country and on the Wiregrass. Many came to Alabama early in the 19th Century for cheap land. They lived as yeoman farmers. A few prospered. But, many more sunk deep into poverty, becoming first tenant farmers and later, factory hands in the mills or miners in coal fields.

Certainly, no one life style came to characterize all of the poor in Alabama. Many were very traditional Christians in their values and in their behavior. Others lived lives characterized by vices, violence and infidelity. Many more either fell between the extremes or moved from one extreme to the other, with some alternating; that is, in polite Baptist language, backsliding.

The lives of the poor were complicated by national and international forces beyond their control. Included were--the Civil War, the end of slavery, the growth of farm tenancy, the industrialization of agriculture, the development of the steel industry in Birmingham, the movement of cotton mills into the towns and small cities, and the instability attendant with a single crop agriculture and with emerging capitalism. This is to say that they furnished a mobile labor force that could be drawn upon as needed by economic forces.

It seems as though these were people who had bought into the vision of Jefferson and Jackson of a nation of yeoman farmers, village craftsmen and shopkeepers being steamrolled by the changes attendant to industrialization and urbanization. They lived lives that did not equip them for the demands of the modern world. For example, education was not widely prized nor easily obtained.

Flynt pictures the mill owner-entrepreneurs as often being paternalistic Christians. While the mill village often offered improved living conditions and a stable wage, the work was long and difficult. Driven by competition and greed, perhaps, the management of the mills typically exploited the work force including mere children. Mill hands were at the bottom of the social class level for Whites. Often they were the subject of prejudice on the part of the business and professional persons in the town, against which the mill village set.

Similar, but different, the mining towns were also company towns. Typically they were more violent and less stable. Most miners suffered accidents. Often they were thrown out on the scrap heap of humanity. Their families suffered. For many millers and miners the unions became their champions in a struggle for justice. Where reason failed confrontation in the forms of strikes and lockouts became common.

Sawmilling and steel mills were the other alternatives for employment for the "poor but proud" of Alabama. Birmingham became a confederation of steel mill villages. Tree cutters and subsistence farmers in the hills remained the most independent persons in the region.

The picture that emerges is one of persons with poor diet, health, housing and with great stress. Marginal. Living on the edge. Often a sharp line was drawn between the godly and the ungodly. The churches were hard on vices, violence and infidelity. Some even were critical of economic injustice. Music was found on both sides of the line. Gospel hymns focused on justice in the world to come. Country music lamented infidelity and the like, but also praised it. Emotional outlets seemed to be needed for persons trapped in lives of drudgery.

Early in this century social workers, church related and secular, worked among the youth and families in all of the vocational groups of the poor in Alabama. In most instances, they experienced limited success, both with persons and with systems. Yet, both personal and social problems continue to the present. To say this is not to suggest that poverty and personal and family dysfunction are necessarily the same. Many poor folk, according to Flynt, maintained traditional values of family, love of children, pride in work and in ability to cope with adversity.

Flynt notes these components of poor folk culture: strong nuclear family, feelings of powerlessness, racial segregation, and a rhythm of life dominated first by the cropping seasons and later by the production schedule of mine and mill. Fundamental religion impacted the lives of all the poor, directly and indirectly. Basic was the attribution of the happenings of their lives to the inscrutable will of God. Missionary Baptists were often the town churches in the hills. Hollow and ridge folk seemed drawn to the

emotionalism of the independents and the pentecostals. Particularly effective among the poorest was the Church of God, Cleveland. (Consider the connection between country music and NASCAR racing on the one hand and rural white poverty on the other.)

In concluding *Poor But Proud*, Flynt declares that the poor folk who made the shift from tenancy agriculture to mills and mines and from the crossroads and hamlets to the towns and cities are now faced with another set of crises. The "de-industrialization" of America is the term often used. Those who were not successful in upward mobility earlier and some who were, are now faced with serious problems. His conclusions are summarized on page 362:

Most great historical sagas are filled with irony. The poor white experience in Alabama is no exception. The American Dream of landownership often ended in failure and deprivation. Forced into industrial jobs they did not seek, poor whites frequently found a better life. Then, just as these occupations allowed them access to the middle class, America's manufacturing sector entered the postindustrial age of declining markets, increased foreign competition, layoffs, and unemployment. government programs designed by well-meaning bureaucrats to help the poor actually displaced them from the land and drove them into distant cities away from the nourishment of the soil. Desperately needing help, they often rejected it because it offended their sense of pride or ridiculed their culture. when reformers tried to force conformity to mainstream educational values, the poor rejected them as meddling do-gooders. So individualistic by nature that they resisted organization, they made difficult two recourses that could have made their lives better, unionism and political activism. Locked into a common struggle for survival with poor blacks, they frequently rejected biracial activity and scorned Negroes. Crippled by negative stereotypes of their culture, they watched in wonder as their betters harnessed their violence into sports, their fundamentalist, pentecostal, or charismatic religion into mainstream denominations, and their soulful poetry into country music. Despite all the stress and irony, they generally retained their folkways, social order, and cultural richness.

Among contemporary theologians Tex Samples is uncommon in his concern for understanding how to minister to and evangelize the poor. His book, *Blue-collar Ministry*, is a must for those wishing to work among the poor. For one thing he notes the diversity among those who might be labeled as poor. One is the "Blue-Collar Winners." These are, typically, the older auto workers and crafts persons, the persons who prospered and tasted the American Dream through hard work. Often, unionized workers or entrepreneurs have prospered. Often the wife is active in church. The husband comes only to the big events. While not financially poor, they are driven by their poverty-ridden past. (These are the folk who flock to the Grand Ole Opry and Bransons.)

Second, is the "Blue-Collar Respectables." These are the Winners less successful peers. They tend to live in older, quiet neighborhood, take excessive care of their lawn and property and have kids that have moved into the White Collar professions. Often they are the pillars in the working class churches. The older ones are very conservative, remembering the struggles of the Great Depression. They are very much concerned to maintain the appearance of respectability and have little patience with those who violate traditional values. Family is important of course. So is conventional morality. They pay their bills. They steward their resources. They give a day's work for a day's pay. They continue to exercise deferred gratification. Disciplined. Responsible. Trustworthy. (These are the people in many if not most Southern Baptist Churches.) Some are resentful, others angry, about those who do not play by

their rules, yet prosper. Welfare recipients are often condemned for a similar reason. They believe that "what goes around comes around," so unearned benefits or success attack their basic world view. This position has been much under attack in recent years by those who seek self-fulfilment, asking, "What is in it for me?"

Samples' third group is the "Blue-Collar Survivors." These folk typically live on the edge. The job is a means to an end, not an end in itself. It provides the money needed for necessities, and a little fun. Their sense of self is derived primarily from leisure and/or avocational activities. For some this is the church. For others, it is the bowling league, coaching softball, or building model railroads. Work comes and goes. Sometimes things are very hard. Either they hang on, or they move to one of the other BC lifestyle groups.

The fourth grouping is called "Blue-Collar Hard Living." These folk often drop off the edge. Addictions are common. The family is instable. Toughness often related to a weak self or gender image is typical. Politically alienated. Rootless, perhaps. Strongly individualistic. Oriented toward the present time. These seven characteristics, Samples suggests, are common among the Hard Livers. These folk are not often found in traditional churches. Most of the persons we normally consider as poor are found in this group, although they are present in the Strugglers and the Respectables as well.

On inspecting the religious activity of Blue-Collar folk, Sample finds that they want to believe and feel their faith. And they usually belong to a church that serves their neighborhood. (Not so much in the regional church. But, I suspect that at least some of the Winners find some vicarious success as members of the mega churches.) Samples continues that churches that reach the BC folk need to be demonstrative in worship and biblically oriented. They often like to do things manually, more than talk speculatively. The church needs to be like family, it needs to focus more on fellowship and love than on goals, crusades and mission, and it should do its work more with events than with programs. (I am not sure that this is true for the older Respectables. Note the success of the Four Star SBC program church with these folk.)

For Sample, the model of the effective pastor for Blue-Collar folk is that of the "ward healer" for a political machine. He is from the community. He is street smart. He can access needed resources. He can fix things. It is relational, building on the principle of reciprocity. Integrity and love are the key virtues. The BC pastor needs to know the culture, the community, the way things get done here, and he needs to love the family, all of it. He calls for the pastor to be involved in development of the community.

Very recently Sample has returned to this subject and written *Hard Livers*. This book draws on many interviews with Hard Living folk and those who pastor them. Common among the respondents who were Hard Livers were growing up and living in abusive families and relationships. Most were also abusers of drugs. Typically these folk see the churches as being comprised of hypocrites. Usually these contend that they do not have clothes to wear to church. And they tell stories of the failings and greed of preachers. Many have had experiences with rejection by churches when they were in need.

Conversely the Hard Livers commonly believe in God. They believe that God is actively involved in everyday life. Perhaps they lapse into magic, but there is a point of contact here. Hard Livers have not so much rejected God as they have rejected the church of the Respectables.

Hard Livers have experienced injustice. They have been subject to control. They resist this. They seek to maintain some sense of self and ego worth in a society where they lack the marks of success. Sample here accepts conning by Hard Livers. This is the way they survive in this world.

Those who have engaged in ministry with Hard Livers have noted that Love is foundational. Relations, not gimmicks, are important. There is a place for confrontation, the telling of truth in love. The Hard Livers need oral worship, fervent prayer, common musical idiom, and anointed preaching. Religious education programs must be careful not to rely on students being literate. They are looking at the church to meet needs, advocate the concerns of common folk and call for and work for justice.

In *Like a Family*, Jacquelyn D. Hall, et al. have taken a historical look at life in Southern Mill towns. This is one of several recent books dealing with this life. Another is by M. Smith, *Behind the Glitter* which looks at the life of those who do the blue-collar and pink-collar work around the tourist industry in Gatlinburg, TN. Many of these are single-parent women struggling at jobs that both pay minimum wage and are seasonal. Here I want to direct our attention to the story, told by Hall, of the ministry of George Washington Swinney, pastor of the Glen Hope Baptist Church in Burlington, NC. His life may well typify and illustrate the points drawn from Samples above. This was his only church. He was a layman who had been called to preach, became a part of a little group who were meeting for Bible Study, and was called by them to be their first pastor. He was a farm raised mill worker like the persons who comprised his flock. At first he was bivocational. His wife and ally in building a blue-collar working class church was also from the farm and the mill. A common heritage, life experience, and struggle bonded the people. Swinney seems to have compensated for his lack of formal training with his ability to relate to the flock which he served. He was a friend and companion of the men in the village. He had skills in the manly recreations of baseball, fishing and hunting which they pursued. He also knew their temptations and sins first hand. He gave no quarter to sin; but, he loved sinners with a transparent passion. Like so many of the preachers of his generation, he was a terrific story teller. He confronted troublemakers. He intervened when needed. He made his village, Piedmont Heights, one of the most peaceful mill villages around. Mill owner Spencer Love was supportive of Swinney's ministry and church, but never demanding. They held common values that complemented one another. It was not a manipulative relationship, according to Hall. Swinney was socially and theologically conservative, but was not a pawn of Mill Owner Love. When he dealt with Love it was a confrontation of principle, not of person. Interestingly, both union and nonunion folk found support in the doctrine preached by Swinney. Community responsibility and individualism. Likewise he seems to bridge the order and stability of a mainline type church with the passion and excitement of a sect.

David Harvey, in *Potter Addition*, addresses the everyday life and values of poor people on the metropolitan fringe. I resonated with this study because it put me in mind of Military Heights in the Raytown area of Kansas City back in the 1940s and 1950s. These people from the Ozarks had bought small acreages and put up gerry rigged housing. Some even lived in old bus bodies in the late 1940's; the children from this community attended school with those from mine. Our church, a new mission, worked hard to reach them with limited success. I recall an outdoor revival we held one spring in the Heights community on the property of the founding family, the one at that time whose outdoor spigot provided city water for many of the families. More recently I visited in a similar place east of Albuquerque.

Writing from a Marxist perspective, Harvey contends that a poverty class is a necessity for capitalism. While this is probably true, it does not mean that Communism should be embraced. Rather, for the Christian minister it would seem to support the observation of Jesus that there will always be poor people. And, while embracing Christianity has been the way out for many, those who are concerned with the formation of poor people congregations will never complete their work. Some will make it out. But others will take their place.

The People of Potter Addition in the 1960s when Harvey first came to know them were mostly what Samples termed Survivors. (I suspect that there were also some Winners who remained in the Addition, perhaps to be the "big ducks in this little pond". And some Hard Livers were to be found there as well.) Harvey affirms the concept of Oscar Lewis, that among these Survivors and Hard Livers a world view and a culture develops that allows them to cope, howeverbeit in a nontraditional form (see *La Vida*). Certainly, it is important that those who minister to poor people understand this culture. It is also important to relate it to Christian values. In my mind it is easy to see when elements of it deviate from our faith, but closer inspection will find that others are closer to the radical teachings of Jesus than are the folkways of even the Respectables. In looking at the culture of poverty one must note three aspects: material condition, coping through being present-day oriented, and values such as resignation, fatalism, low personal aspiration, weak ego structure and low level of class consciousness. Again these are characteristic of only some poor folk.

Potter Addition includes 80 acres of land. It contains nearly 100 dwellings and several business enterprises such as a convenience store, junkyards, and some trades shop, electric and plumbing. Cheap housing, a little track of land for gardening and to keep livestock, and no zoning against marginal enterprises are among the attractions. The community institutions included a community and a fire hall. No schools. No church.

Many of the men were "jacks of all trades." Work was exchanged. Physical work was more valued than mental. Most wanted to own their own business. They shared a fascination with the auto (Car Cult). Status was achieved by being a good mechanic. Also status was available to those who produced things from the land. (Harvey notes that the general rules of trading cars and horses are about the same.) He also notes that they are future oriented, but they can't really count on it. Their economic life is more cyclical, it would seem, than progressive. If you spend now, you can enjoy. If you save, it is there for someone else to exploit. They even felt that the junk yards kept the middle class away and kept their taxes down.

Three types of families were found in Potter. Male dominated. Female dominated. Sibling-based. Many families there are dysfunctional. Husbands are in and out, take off, or wives return to parents after suffering violence. Harvey notes how mothers and daughters often team up against the poor-providing husband.

Harvey speaks of the compression of generations. By this he is noting that often the grandmother is more the mother to a grandchild than is its natural mother. This time she has the time and resources to enjoy the child. She could not do so when she had her own. He also notes that often the women in reacting to the failure of the father, so stress his inadequacies to their sons that it becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that he will fail, too. A similar process seems to occur with the raising of daughters which often results in repeating the mistakes of the mother and becoming pregnant before marriage. Heredity is usually blamed for the family in

raising failures by the neighbors. Potter people know both the standard values as taught by the schools and the alternate ones that operate in the community.

They are caught. They cannot attain the standard in their context. They cannot legitimate the culture of poverty alternative. Note is taken of how the young couples often venture out on their own. Fail to make it financially. Come back to parents. Pressure and criticism follows. After a few times through the cycle the marriage is broken.

Kinship is both traditional and fictive. It is a complex web. Some is alternately affirmed and broken. The norm of kinship amity is very strong.

Perhaps it reflects Harvey's own position, but very little is said about the church in the lives of the people. One reference notes the paternalistic nature of assistance offered to a very poor family.

Today the older, more exotic homes have been replaced by modular and mobile homes. The junkyards have been cleaned up. Some have prospered and moved away. Others have taken their place. Many who have moved return to visit old friends. Entrepreneurialism among the males is still very strong.

Again, how does one proceed in doing ministry, evangelizing and congregationalizing in the hundreds of Potter Additions across the nation? What are the points of contact, the needs, the methods of reaching the communities comprised largely of Survivors? Can a mission be started in these places, a goodwill center, a Bible study, a bus from an existing congregation? How?

Anthropologist, Janet Fitchen has been looking at rural poverty for two score or more years. The setting of her research is rural New York state. She has recently published *Endangered Spaces, Enduring Places*. She begins her book by discussing how the Family Farm Crisis of the past decade has created a new poor in rural farm dependent area. This is to say that many families that were doing well in the 1970s fell into poverty in the 1980s as commodity prices dipped and land values dropped. Now many are working multiple jobs to keep the farm. They have little time for social activities. Many have dropped out of church because of time, embarrassment and even anger with God. One point she makes needs to be noted by rural pastors--other voluntary organizations are surviving by shifting their focus from farm to rural concerns and by changing their calendar and format of meetings. They are focusing on current felt needs and meeting at times convenient to those they are wanting to reach.

Fitchen goes on to note other issues. One is that consumer and service institutions are being consolidated in a few regional towns with a resultant drying up of many villages and hamlets. Many rural manufacturing plants have closed to move "offshore." And some portions of New York state are being impacted by recreation, second home and retirement development. This often brings demands for more services and higher property taxes. Some rural poor seem destined to be forced off land that has been theirs for generations. Often good jobs are being replaced by part-time jobs with few benefits. Again, it appears that some how were Winner and the Respectable are being pushed down into the life of Survivors and/or Hard Livers. In addition Fitchen notes that significant numbers of those who had migrated to the cities or to other parts of the nation are returning to her area, poor, broken, unhappy--impacting the social services resources. Yet another telling criticism, one I have heard from pastors as well is that the "week-

enders" come as consumers with economic advantage over the locals and paternalistic attitudes, not as full participants in the life of the community and its institutions. (Ron Powers, *Far from Home*, has reported a similar observation in his comparative study of Cario, Illinois and a Connecticut village.)

Fitchen declares that rural poverty is different and often less visible than urban poverty. Often when county statistics are aggregated one gets the impression that things are fine. But if one looks at smaller districts one may note that some portions of that county are in difficult straits. Particularly in hilly area with poor soil one finds multi-generational poverty which takes on elements of the "cultural of poverty" discussed by Harvey. (Fitchen does not like this term, holding a higher view of the life of poor people than it suggests.) She contends that rural people really want to work, but the opportunity structures are not in place. They do not want to live in the cities. So they continue a hardscrabble existence in a rural community where they have a support system of kin in place and where they can pursue some of the activities they find enjoyment and fulfillment in such as car repairs and deer hunting. She notes the growth of homelessness, family dysfunction and the influx of the exurban poor into rural area.

"Rationality" in the funding of social services and governmental services--spend the money where the people are and efficiency of scale can be achieved--has hurt the rural poor. The availability of health care, adequate housing, and quality educational programs are but three examples. Fitchen praises the churches and other voluntary organization for their commitment to strengthening the life of their community.

Rural areas are being increasingly impacted by environmental issues. Ground water pollution is serious. Toxic waste from urban based industries being dumped improperly in rural areas is another. And prisons are another rural growth industry which can be seen as another example of the impact of urban imperialism--dumping the refuse from the city on the country.

Change has made even the definition of rural difficult. Is it only the residual of urban? Certainly, country isn't what country use to be. Television and Wal-Marts have changed all of that. Fitchen finds community at the base of rural. For her it contains five elements--small and friendly, egalitarian, family based, chosen and secure. Change is impacting all five of these as has been noted above. The "locked" door at home and even at the church symbolizes this change. (Those of us whose roots are in the west may be less sanguine or nostalgic about the pastoral peace of rural communities.)

She acknowledges that consolidation is taking place and as this occurs, care must be taken to form new community identity. Illustrative is the naming of a new consolidated school. Hyphenate it. Name it by the compass. How can a new larger community be formed? She concludes with a plea for a federal policy that included attention to the value of rural, small community life.

Finally, let us focus on ministry with the poor in rural settings. Two of my favorite books on this come out of Chicago. Strange. No. Ray Bakke and Carl Dudley have taken the rural pastor model and transferred it to the city. When I first read *The Urban Christian* by Bakke, I thought he is describing what one does as a small town pastor, only setting it in "an urban village". I think that Dudley has done much the same in *Basic Steps Toward Community Ministry*. He looks at three foundational topics--context, congregational identify (including, I think, an awareness of what God wants from this congregation), and organizational structure.

(Note: D.G. McCoury and I have done much the same in *We're Family* which addresses the very small church.) Certainly, it is important to do all three of these things. A ministry must address real and felt needs among the people you are to reach. It must be rooted in the self-image of the church and their understanding of the will of God for them. And it must be planned and implemented so that it will be effective. Both Bakke and Dudley are careful to minister with and through people rather than to people. The temptation of going on a ego trip by pauperizing folk is a besetting one. So the goal must ever be to empower the poor to do ministry, not to make them recipients of ministry alone.

I know that you would agree that the only way to do this really is through Bible study. The Bible provides authority, the power and the motivation for ministry. Among the sources I might refer you to is one by Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News*. The subtitle is "Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes." This is what most rural poor need to do. This book contains 10 Bible studies. The texts are Luke 24:13-35; Exodus 1:8-14; 2:23-25 and 3:7-10; 2 Samuel 11:2-17, 26-27; 12:1-7; Jeremiah 22:13-17; Luke 1:46-55; Luke 4:16-30; Luke 10:25-37; Luke 9:28-43; Matthew 25:31-46; Daniel 3:1-18.

Returning to my opening statement, let me stress that as you are on mission among the rural poor be missional. Your task is not to pull around yourself a little band of folk who become dependent upon you. Rather, you must seek to discover and train the person(s) God will raise up among these "people of the earth" to lead and nurture them. Mission/indigenation. Hand in hand.

I truly believe that the future belongs to the ministering congregation, howbeit even very small ones. Prior to World War I it was the age of the parish or the territorial church. During most of the rest of the Twentieth Century it was the age of the Program Church. Now the age of the ministry based church is dawning. Networking around needs and skills (gifts) will become more important than place or program for gathering a church. As this occurs the church will become local again with cooperation being missional more than mandated and bivocationalism will be reinvented as congregations raise up their own ministers and old strategies and methods will be supplemented with new ones. It is truly an exciting time. (See Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church* and R. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership*)

One projection of the future in America is the growth in number of the poor. This will certainly include growth in two or three of the categories identified by Samples. We pretty well know how to do church with the Respectables. We need to learn more about how to do church with the Survivors and the Hard Livers. (For many of us a part of our agenda has been to move Survivors and Hard Livers to Respectables and Winners. Certainly, we will also examine this presupposition.) At this point, I am thinking that churches for the Survivor/Hard Liver folk will need to include the following elements:

1. Loving acceptance of sinners (bad folk)
2. The sharing of good counsel from the Bible
3. Healing for physical, psychic, and spiritual maladies
4. Active intercessory prayer for the needs of participants and their kin and friends
5. Deep faith that trusting Jesus makes a difference now and hereafter
6. Blessings that come without merit or manipulation of God
7. Expressive worship
8. Networks of caring

9. Creative involvement in the life and ministry of the congregation by discovering, training and expressing ones giftedness
10. Growth of the body both by inclusion and by extension
11. Personal spiritual development

This paper is an honest and open presentation of my thinking on the subject of evangelizing the rural poor. I have attempted to look at history, contemporary sociology, theology and Scripture. While I am committed to this task and see it as coming under the assignment of the Town and Country program of the SBC, I recognize my limitations. I am not poor. I was not raised poor or rural, really. My thinking needs to be challenged and rounded out by those who have experienced poverty, rurality, and ministered among the poor more, and more effectively than I. I look forward to a dialogue around this subject and the development of plans, processes and actions which address this subject according to what God wills for it. In responding be candid, critical, loving, forgiving. Together let us seek the mind of God.