

IDENTIFYING YOUR PLACE IN RURAL AMERICA

The Baptist Program

by Gary Farley

Rural America has changed significantly in the past 30 years. Anyone who has been involved in the life of rural and small town communities is very much aware of this change. Certainly in any gathering of pastors of rural churches one hears long refrains about change. Some places are growing, many are declining--all are changing. The Church is being affected. How does one make sense of all of this?

Recently, R. Alex Sim, one of America's most respected sociologists, devised a four-fold typology of rural community life which captures the essence of what this change has brought to rural America. In Land and Community, Sim declares that four basic types of communities can be found in rural places--Agraville, Mighthavebeenville, Ribbonville and Fairview. This model has proven useful to me in understanding what is happening in rural America.

In this article, I will help you locate your rural community within this typology, consider how this is impacting your church and offer suggestions for local church, associational and denominational strategy in each of these settings.

When rural America was settled in the 19th century, the land was surveyed out in townships of six-by-six or 36 square miles, and several thousand rural communities were planted across the continent, about every six miles. The plan was that each would provide basic services to the farm families that lived up to three miles from the village. Each little village would have craftspersons, professionals, and shopkeepers. As a general rule people born before 1920 in rural America grew up in six-mile places. Most of their physical, educational and spiritual needs were met within this little world. For example, a typical Midwest county would be 30 miles square and have as many as 24 rural six-mile communities and a county seat town, somewhat larger, within its bounds.

A variety of changes in technology--automobiles, paved roads, telephones, tractors, mechanical harvesters, industrialization, urban sprawl, and petro-chemical agriculture, to name a few--have made the old six-mile communities obsolete. As a consequence, the sameness of old rural villages as described by Sinclair Lewis in Mainstreet have been replaced by the diversity captured in Sim's typology.

The first type he calls Agraville. This is a free standing, relatively economically secure trade center for a surrounding area whose economy is largely based on some extractive industries, primarily agriculture, but it can also be oil production, timbering, coal mining or fisheries. Oftentimes it has a trade area of 15 to 30 miles in each direction. Many have other diverse factories such as governmental institutions, factories and tourism. These are what some other rural sociologists have come to call the Wal-Mart towns. In a sense, they are the rural equivalent of a city, and they have congregating in them, not only Wal-Marts or K-Marts but chain drug stores, chain and franchise fast food restaurants, health services, government services, branch banking, and the like. In part, this is the result of governmental policy which, in a sense, has operated with the idea that you can no longer have all the goods and services present and available in all the little old township towns because many of them no longer have a population base in their hinterland to financially support modern services and retail trade. Therefore, these activities are being re-clustered in the 30-mile Agraville towns. Consequently the many six-mile towns surrounding it are becoming, in essence, neighborhoods within a larger 30-mile "Agraville." This is easy for a rural sociologist or agricultural economist to say. It is difficult, far more so, to live in a Purdy, Pierce City, or Fristadt, Missouri and see it slowly dry up as Monett grows. Not in this case, but often the Agraville is a

county seat town that expands. Many such Agraville places are growing, exciting, happy places to be. Many hundred such places can be found all across the United States.

What about the churches of Agraville? First of all, in many of the towns where Southern Baptist is the dominant denomination, often the First Church is becoming a kind of rural reflection of the urban mega church, a mini-mega church if you please. It has multiple-staff; it has a full range of ministries and programs, and it draws members and participants from a 15- to 30-mile radius. There are a couple of other types of churches present in Agravilles. One is a denominational church, that is the corral that rounds up the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, or Roman Catholics, those other worshipping communities that are not dominant in that area but have a presence. The third type is the distinctive church. This is the church that sees itself also as having a 30-mile trade area like the dominant mega church may see itself having. It is frequently a metal building on the edge of town with a dove on the side, indicating that it is a charismatic congregation. This may be its primary distinction. Added to this in towns of more than 2,000 is the "second" church of the dominant denomination, as a fourth type. Frequently it serves a poor neighborhood.

Both in the case of this emerging mini-mega church of the dominant denomination and the distinctive church which may also in some instance have grown to be a kind of rural reflection of the mega church, they find themselves drawing participants not from the old six-mile community, but from the larger 30-mile trade area of the Agraville. I see this as reflective of an emerging consciousness. The old six-mile community consciousness is now 30-miles for many rural people. Consider what the implications of this change is for programming, for relationships, for the role of the denominational agencies. Some important dynamics are created as these churches move aggressively into turf identified traditionally as that of other places and congregations.

The second type of rural community identified by Sim is the "Mighthavebeenville." These are the places most hurt by the growth of Agravilles. These are those towns which may have started 100 years ago with a great dream of becoming the second Chicago, but they missed it. On it is simply a rural crossroads village that just happened, a hamlet. Most six-mile towns or villages never became anything more. Today many of them are losing their distinctive role because, with the consolidation of services and trade and schools to the 30-mile Agraville, they have lost their traditional function. Many of the former six-mile communities now are little more than "neighborhoods" within the bounds of the 30-mile "Agraville." Stores are boarded up. Schools closed. Populations are shrinking and aging. Most rural "open county" churches can be viewed as the last survivor of a Mighthavebeenville. The village is dead. It's church lives on. Many Mighthavebeenvilles, however, still contain up to 1000 persons. These may still have a dominant church, denominational churches and in some instances, as the location of one of the distinctive churches¹. Undoubtedly a great many of the plateaued churches of Southern Baptist life and also a great many of the churches that don't baptize anybody in a given year are the churches in the "Mighthavebeenvilles."

Like it or not, many of these are becoming "neighborhood" churches in the 30-mile Agraville. This is a significant change of role and must be given attention. My thinking is that we need to encourage some of these churches to consider becoming a 30-mile distinctive or "special purpose" church. This is particularly appropriate in those Mighthavebeenvilles which are losing population. That is, that they define some ministry or set of ministries that they are gifted at doing and that they use their gifts and graces to specialize in these ministries and become known within their 30-mile community as the church that has

Dudley, Carl and Douglas Walrath. Developing Your Small Church's Potential. Valley Forge, PA 1988.

done a good job with ministry to senior citizens, or to young people, or to Hispanics, or to the mentally retarded, or to children, or to some other special group. Their pull would be from across the 30-mile area for people who have either needed a particular ministry or wanted to be involved in providing that particular ministry. I don't see much positive happening in the life of most of our "Mighthavebeenville" churches if they continue to try to be a "full-service" six-mile church. They can't compete effectively with the 30-mile mini-mega church in Agraville. Frustration and decline is likely. Several associational directors of missions, among them Marlon Brown in Sedalia, Missouri, is encouraging Mighthavebeenville churches to adopt a ministry that serves and draws from across Pettis County.

The third type of rural community identified by Sim is called "Ribbonville." These are the rural communities on the metropolitan fringe. Many are former six-mile communities, but as the city expands they are being gobbled up and becoming a part of the city. I live in such a place, Conyers, Georgia, 25 miles east of downtown Atlanta. This kind of urban expansionism has been occurring throughout most of this century. So we have a track record, and I think we can say that there are basically four things that can happen to the old churches in Ribbonvilles. Some will opt to become or will continue to be family chapels--that is, basically relating to an extended family or families--small, isolated from their community, and often impenetrable by the new people moving into their territory, remnants of our first wave of church planting back in the 19th century. A second possibility is to expand the family circle and allow other folks like themselves to come in. This sometimes occurs in a village church that may be open enough to allow Southern Baptists, either from other rural areas moving to the city or those who have moved to the city and are now moving to the suburbs, to become part of the group. Typically, this sort becomes a mid-sized program church. A third possibility is to focus on becoming a "church mother"--that is, being a church that realizes it has a mission opportunity to reach the new people but isn't going to be able to reach all of them, so it actively becomes involved in planting new churches for new people. And the fourth possibility, least common to date, is where a church will change over radically, say from being a family chapel or a village church, and become a kind of mega church, be very evangelistic and reach and grow well beyond what it used to be. There are several examples of this around Atlanta like Hebron, Woodstock, New Hope and a few others. As the Ribbonvilles become urbanized and blend into the city, they will find that these four types of churches are joined by two other types--churches that started as satellites by urban churches and also by churches that decide to relocate from the city. Again, looking at Conyers, all six types are present among Southern Baptists in this Ribbonville. (For an enlarged discussion of Ribbonville churches see "Oops! 10,000 Metro Churches Overlooked," [The Baptist Program](#), March 1992, 5-7.)

This brings us to Sim's fourth type of contemporary rural community, the "Fairviews," by which he means those communities that are being developed for recreation and retirement. I would add to this category those that serve institutions, such as colleges, military bases and prisons. Oftentimes "Fairview" is a place that has a very urban mindset even though it is small and in a rural setting. Some examples might be Bagnal Dam at the Lake of the Ozarks; Branson, Missouri; Georgetown, South Carolina; Telluride, Colorado; Bella Vista, Arkansas; Murphy, North Carolina; and Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

As our population ages and our cities are insecure, it is forecast that more and more rural towns will become Fairviews. Agravilles and Mighthavebeenvilles in the mountains, along the seacoasts and near large lakes will prosper from retirement and recreational usages. Again, strategies involve either helping some of the existing rural and small town churches in Fairviews to change their orientation to reach the new ruralites or the planting of new churches for the new people. Not long ago I visited our work around Bagnal Dam and found that both of these strategies were being used by Missouri Baptists in that area as DOAM, John Farris, led out. A brand new church has been planted at Horseshoe Bend. Nearby Riverview Baptist Church, an old church, was being transformed into a church that is open to the new people coming into the area.

By using Sim's typology, missions strategists can get ahold of what is happening in rural America. I see a re-clustering of people. Many thousands of "Mighthavebeenvilles" are dying. But some will refocus from independent six-mile places and become neighborhoods of 30-mile places. Some will carry the church with them. Elsewhere people are relocating in Agravilles and Fairviews, a "new ruralite." And in Ribbonvilles, old rural places are being transformed into urban places.

In reflecting upon this typology I want to offer 13 strategic insights as related to our rural church world. Let me preface my remarks by saying that I think most town and country associations will find that within their territory two or more of the four types of communities that I have just identified and consequently the association will have to have several different types of churches that must learn to live in harmony. (Also I want to add a word of caution to the effect that identifying trends does not necessarily mean that we need to accept them lock, stock, and barrel, and go with them. There are some trends that are contrary to basic Christian principles and we might find ourselves needing to be in conflict with them.)

1. Encourage the development of more 30-mile, full-service churches which have some of the characteristics of urban mega churches in the strong Agravilles of America. Particularly in those areas of the Old South where Southern Baptist are dominant, this might be called a Wal-Mart strategy. Frequently, this will be the old First Baptist Church. Often it will mean moving from a walk-to-church location just off the square to a 10-plus acre campus out on the by-pass next to Wal-Mart.
2. Many Mighthavebeenville churches will need to consider what I suggested earlier, becoming 30-mile distinctive church within a greater Agraville. As the mini-megas develop, there will be niches, people groups, ministries that can be better done by a small church.
3. Many rural association will need to consider encouraging the formation of an urban-type church in a Fairview community. Arkansas Baptists have done this effectively in some intentional retirement communities such as Bella Vista and Hot Springs Village. I also see a great need for "lake-people" churches. These congregations will have as their core new ruralite retirees who live around the hundreds of Corps of Engineers and TVA lakes across America.
4. Other rural associations will need to consider encouraging either the formation of African-American congregations or becoming more actively involved with existing National Baptist congregations. I say this because in much of the rural South, the basic primary church growth opportunity is with African-Americans more so than with Anglo-Americans. This is certainly true both in Agraville and Mighthavebeenville. In the Mississippi River Valley this need is being addressed by a mission effort of a consortium of seven state conventions. To learn more about this, ask your Director of Associational Missions (DOAM) to loan you the special MissionsUSA Video Magazine (Volume 9, Number 2B - August, 1992) entitled "The Challenge of the Blues."
5. In much of rural America, there is a declining population which no longer can support even 30-mile communities with churches there. So we are going to have to come up with alternate models for churching much of the

western United States and sparsely scattered people that live there. A special conference, "Churching the Heartland," is scheduled November 5-7, 1993 in Kansas City to address this need. For more information contact Gary Farley at Home Mission Board, SBC.

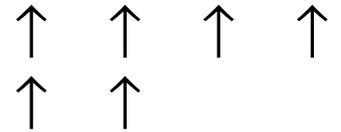
6. We may want to consider Human Capital Development ministries such as literacy education and helping people improve their self-image and job preparation. At least one rural association in Alabama and another in Indiana have begun work in this area. This will also be a part of the Mississippi River Ministry projects.
7. Others may wish to consider direct economic and community development in the areas of improved housing, creation of jobs, and formation of industrial and service activities.
8. Associations will need to promote the health of most small membership churches in Mighthavebeenvilles. Many DOAMs have been trained to lead their churches through a study of We're Family, Convention Press, \$5.95. Many will be able to discover a ministry that will enable them to be effective.
9. Some Agravilles will need a second church, one targeted either for blue- or pink-collar workers or for highly educated professional people of the community. A related learning gained in new convention areas is farmers are more likely to attend a new church on the outskirts of an Agraville than Old First down on Church Street, just off of the courthouse square.
10. Most Ribbonvilles will experience pressure to change the focus of existing congregations and add additional ones. Not only is this true within denominations, but it is true across denominational lines also. Southern Baptists are not the only people involved in church extension and one of the things that I have noticed during my eight year tenure at the Home Mission Board is that a whole lot of "new outlets" of different denominations are being opened up in the Ribbonvilles, even in the old solid Baptist South. Point: If we fail to respond creatively and dynamically, someone else will.
11. In all four of the types of rural communities, the age of a common rhythm of community life has mostly passed. This can be seen in programs such as missions education. It is hard to find a time when everybody is free and available for a program.
 - a. In Ribbonville, Wednesday evening as a family night event is becoming increasingly popular as a time to do missions education. In fact this has commonly replaced Sunday night as the "second service" of Ribbonville churches.
 - b. In Fairview, missions education can be done around annual events in the community, often as the local

coordinator of the mission action teams. For example, consider the work of John Farris as a director of missions around the Lake of the Ozarks who coordinates mission teams doing clowning and other resort ministries. Often the new ruralites of Fairviews have great skills and experience that can be utilized in such mission action projects.

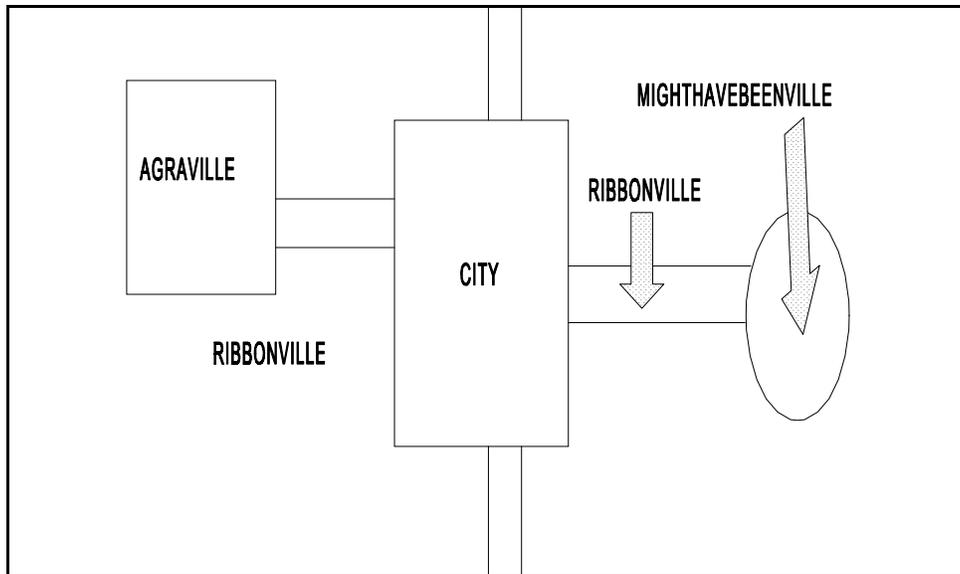
- c. Associational-based programs for missions education in the Agraville after school program for the children of both Agraville churches and the Mighthavebeenville churches, six and twelve miles out.
 - d. In some Mighthavebeenvilles, missions education may be the only show in town but others may be so weak that they cooperate with Agraville and others may do events or be the host of projects.
12. Presently the urban dominates the rural. Sim calls this "urban imperialism." Changes typically are initiated in the city and trickle down to the country. Consequently one element of a town and country strategy must be the adoption of urban church models and trends in some town and country settings, particularly the Fairviews, the Ribbonvilles, and the Agravilles. Southern Baptists did this with Four-Star program churches in the 1950s. Change and diversity of communities and churches make this needed once more.
13. What we have often labelled urban is really the elements of production in an industrial society. And what we have called rural is really the organization of economic activity in a folk society. While urban churches have tended to adopt an industrialized model of mass production and task-oriented life, many rural churches retain the relational, craftspersons style. However, we may be at a moment of another major paradigm shift, the Information Age, when one of three things may happen: (1) the old folk society model may reappear in a community freed from some of the drudgery of work; (2) the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" may expand with a kind of neo-feudalism and bifurcated society; or (3) some new order different from the folk or the feudal or the industrial may emerge, perhaps even a real democracy. I don't think anyone knows, at least here on earth, but we need to remain aware of these possibilities.

Perhaps the rural reality captured by Sim's typology will be short lived. Perhaps the coming of the Information Age will result in a resettling of rural America much as Alvin Toffler and John Naisbett have forecast. I certainly hope so. But for now we will need to do church in the places Sim has described. It must be different from what we did 30 years ago. If we do respond effectively today, then we will be positioned to respond to yet a different configuration of rural communities and people for 20 or 30 years hence.

AGRAVILLE



MIGHTHAVEBEENVILLE



AGRAVILLE

MIGHTHAVEBEENVILLE

