

The Walmarting of the Rural South  
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Few of us in the rural South live more than 30 minutes by car from a Walmart discount center or superstore. Here we find a greater variety of consumer goods for less cost than most rural mainstreets ever offered. Items that once required a long trip to a city or a long wait for the mailman to deliver a catalogue order from Sears or Wards are readily available to us. Most counties from Virginia's tidewater to deep in the Heart of Texas have been selected as a site for one of these stores. And when Walmart comes, other national chains and franchises are not far behind.

The hundreds of towns in the rural South which have been selected for a Walmart store have usually grown and prospered. While some of the old mainstreet stores were unable to compete and have closed, an expanded trade area has brought greater diversity and prosperity to the town's economic life. In addition education, healthcare services, and recreational activities have tended to be consolidated in the Walmart towns. The big losers in the Walmarting process has been the thousands of villages and small towns lying in the hinterland between the Walmart towns. Many have lost retail businesses, schools, and other services.

As a sociologist I see this process as being the result of very significant changes in the rural economy, as well as, changes in transportation and communication. Let me explain. When the nation was settled the driving paradigm was the Jeffersonian Dream. It called for a nation of yeoman farmers who were served by business and professional people living in villages. The model called for a village to be situated about every six miles. This would mean that most people would be no more than an hour's walk from a trade and service center. Most of those who grew up in rural America prior to World War II lived in just such a six-mile world. There they worshipped, were educated, labored, married, parented and died. Some never even ventured beyond the county of their birth. For many, if not most, there was a deep commitment to place. The changes have brought most rural people into a 30 or 60 mile world centered in the Walmart town. Consequently, the villages that served the six mile world have lost their primary functions and have become obsolete.

Baptists churched the rural South in terms of the old six-mile paradigm. Virtually every village, every community, had a Baptist church, and often others. But as the old place has lost its function and its power, and in many cases its people, many of these churches have struggled. Some have become essentially "family chapels" for folks connected to the dominate family or families of the old community. Some have successfully identified a "signature" ministry and reach folk up to 30 minutes away from the meeting place who need or desire to provide that ministry. Some are slowly dying. Others have closed. Which ever course these churches find themselves on, comes with a large set of ethical issues. Boundaries. Inclusion. Exclusion. Resources. Discernment of the unique will of God for the body.

In more than 100 of the Walmart towns of the rural South an interesting transformation of Baptist church life is occurring. In many instances old First Church is growing into the ecclesiastical equivalent of a Walmart—large, multifaceted, many programs and projects, and drawing participation from a broad area. It has relocated out on the new highway near the Walmart. It has built a modern facility with acres of parking. It is a seven day a week church. It is well staffed. With this change comes another set of ethical problems. The people left behind. Impact on the villages churches that cannot offer as high quality of programs and projects. Relationship to the association. Moral leadership for the whole area, often the county.

Overarching the ethical issues for the churches, are those related to community formation. It seems that as the six-mile communities have become obsolete, many of us have either ignored the loss or have attempted to recapture the old, usually with little success. It seems to me that for much of the rural South the future calls for the creation of new bonds of community which will typically embrace the whole county, or the whole trade area served by the Walmart and related stores and agencies centered in the Walmart town. Often this will mean that towns and communities that once were at war economically, and one Friday night each fall on the gridiron, will need to come to see that their future must be based on cooperation. Because the Gospel is concerned about people living in good community, an important role of pastors in the rural South will be declare this truth. It has been my observation that there are many people across the region who are aware that new bonds of community need to be formed. I believe that ethically sensitive Baptist ministers are situated in a position to initiate the process.

For a fuller treatment of this theme consult Shannon Jung et. al., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come*. Abingdon Press, 1997. Also available from the Rural Sociology Department of Texas A&M University is a resource for small group learning, Gary Farley, ed., *Discovering the Uniqueness of Rural Communities*.