

**THE RURAL CHURCH IN THE SOUTH**

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**INTRODUCTION**

I have identified three purposes for this presentation:

- (1) To share some information which has been gathered related to the rural churches of the Old South
- (2) To identify some data banks or resources you and/or your students might access easily--I am talking big numbers collected across several decades--for analysis
- (3) To encourage the formation of a section at these meetings in subsequent years to share continued research on the rural churches of the South.

Certainly, churches are far and away the most frequently seen social institutions in the region. By all accounts, they play a significant role in the regional subculture. If one considers the crucial social issues and movements of the region--slavery, civil rights, fundamentalism, or labor issues--some attention must be given to the churches. In short, if one's intention is to understand life in the rural South, one must attend to the reality of the rural church.

The present paper, which presents quantitative data in broad strokes, can only be a kind of backdrop for such studies. I will focus only on the more macro concerns of numbers of congregations, numbers of adherents, and the apparent growth or decline of the Christian movement during the 1980s.

**THE STOCK OF CHURCHES IN NON-METRO USAMERICA**

The initial step in the process is for us to have a clear understanding of the "stock" of rural churches currently present in non-metropolitan America. As many as 200,000 congregations serve rural USAmerica. These vary in size from less than 10 to several thousand members or participants. In 1990, the Church Membership Survey (CMS) researchers identified 116,872 congregations in the non-metropolitan counties. This report, published as *CHURCHES AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES, 1990*, presents data collected from most of the church bodies in the nation. While the primary format is to present county, state, regional and national data on number of churches and of adherents, one table contrasts metro and non-metro county data in percentages. This table follows the designations of the US Census Bureau which categorizes counties in terms of them containing a city with 50,000, or more, and the neighboring counties that are closely tied to the central city county as being metropolitan. For example, Atlanta is in Fulton County, Georgia. Its metropolitan region extends, according to the Census Bureau, to an additional 15 counties that surround it. Therefore, all of the congregations, and their members, in these 16 counties are counted as metropolitan, not as rural, in the CMS report. The residue are the non-metropolitan, or rural, by this approach.

We believe that the total number of "rural" churches, however, is closer to 200,000 than to the 116,872 reported for at least three reasons. One, several denominations with significant rural memberships did not participate actively in the study. Most apparent is the absence of most African-American congregations from the count. While ways were designed to get reasonable estimates of Black Baptist church membership, a count for congregations was not attempted. Further, the AME, CME, and COGIC congregations are not included. Missing also are the Bible Baptists, American Baptist Association, and the General Association of Regular Baptists. And as anyone who travels rural America, taking note of the labels on churches, realizes there are many non-denominations, community and new charismatic congregations there which also escape the methodological net of the CMS study. Second, by using county-based data, it would seem that thousands of congregations were swept up in the metro church count which by culture, and/or by location, actually continue to be rural churches although they are located within a county designated as metropolitan. To illustrate, my denomination (SBC) counts about 11,000 congregations in metro counties who report themselves to the denomination as being in places of less than 50,000, or by this set of categories, non-metro. On the other side of the coin, nearly 200 counties are listed as non-metropolitan, but have small cities of 20,000 to 50,000 located within them. Certainly, many of the churches in these small cities are more similar to the metropolitan congregations of their denomination than they are to the open country and village congregations, generally. The third concern has already been suggested but must be stated clearly. "Rural" refers both to place and to culture. Often they overlap, but not always. So, to identify churches as metro, or as non-metro, here only notes location. It may miss the actual culture and self-identity of the church.

**Table 1 compares the CMS numbers for 1980 and 1990 Churches and adherents for denominations with over 100,000 adherents in 1990.**

These are the non-metropolitan county figures:

Denomination name	Congregations		Adherents	
	1980	1990	1980	1990
American Baptists/USA		2,123		740,461
AME Zion		910		322,044
Assemblies of God	4,180	4,873	472,693	583,745
Baptist General Conference		250		35,800
Baptist Missionary Association		937		171,711
C & M Alliance		529		65,721
Christian Church/Church of Christ		2,746		509,450
Christian Reformed		227		61,721
Church of God--Anderson		1,016		80,118
Church of God--Cleveland		2,373		261,320
Church of the Brethren		576		82,104

Church of the Nazarene	2,070	2,373	286,339	308,136
Churches of Christ		7,087		635,418
Disciples of Christ		2,073		410,010
Episcopal Church		2,507		396,090
Evangelical Free		398		45,425
Evangelical Lutheran		4,629		1,698,775
Free Will Baptist		1,397		159,624
Friends		510		36,343
Foursquare Gospel		437		45,153
Latter Day Saints		3,131		1,026,890
Lutheran--Missouri Synod		2,600		835,884
Lutheran--Wisconsin Synod		575		184,756
Mennonite Church		525		57,866
Old Order Amish		576		84,095
Pentecostal Holiness		825		75,208
Presbyterian Church in America		360		39,188
Presbyterian/USA		4,765		856,223
Reformed Church in America		258		96,169
Roman Catholic		8,662		6,780,500
Salvation Army		379		32,283
Seventh Day Adventist		1,709		178,794
Southern Baptist	19,453	21,414	6,397,621	7,651,760
Unitarian-Universalist		224		18,240
United Church of Christ		2,310		498,500
United Methodist		20,795		4,132,800
Wesleyan Church		794		103,880

Table 1

Please do not see these comments as disparaging of the CMS report. It is a massive undertaking. Much progress has been made since the first CMS report in 1972. It provides the best insight we have concerning distribution and membership of rural congregations. It provides a platform from which one gets a fuller view, howbeit, not a complete one.

Nearly, three-fourths of the counties of USAmerica are non-metro. About one person in five dwells in these counties, or in 1990 almost 51 million. This was a gain of about 1.3 million in the decade of the 1980s. It is estimated that the non-metro population grew another 1.3 million in the first three years of the 1990s. (Ironically, much of this growth is in the collar counties next to the metros. So, with the next census many of these counties along with their people and churches will be moved to the metro column.)

[See Map 1 \(Non-Metro Counties, 1983\)](#)

The 116,872 congregations identified by the CMS researchers count 31.5 million members/adherents, or about 60 percent of the non-metro county population. Given the point made earlier that thousands of rural congregations are not captured in the CMS report, the numbers of "adherents" may pass the 40 million mark and the percentage rise up to 80 percent or even more. Conversely, membership data is not uniform and often subject to unintentional inflation. Specifically, the membership counts of the nations two largest denominational bodies, Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists, are much higher than that of active participation in congregational life. So, while the numbers are high, one must not be lulled into thinking that the evangelism and outreach work of the churches in rural America is virtually complete. Not so. Likewise, although the ratio of churches to population runs 1:450 using the CMS data, and is probably more like 1:350, this does not mean, necessarily, that there are no more churches needed in non-metro places. Really, one can only conclude that the rural churches have been effective in gaining adherents by whatever means their tradition affirms, and that while some rural areas may be "over"-churched, this does not allow for the conclusion that rural USAmerica, as such, is over-churched. As will be discussed in a later section of this chapter, change in population characteristics and distribution demand that the number and mix of churches in an area will probably need to change also across time.

Roman Catholics comprise the only major USAmerica Christian ecclesiastical body which is more metropolitan in membership composition than is the nation. Yet, while only 12.8 percent of its adherents are non-metro, because of its huge total size, it ranks second behind Southern Baptists in the actual number of rural adherents. It seems that because Roman Catholics are such a visible force in metropolitan America, many of us lose sight of the fact that they are an important player in the rural areas as well. The 6.7 million adherents of the Roman church in non-metropolitan America is only about one million less than that of the Southern Baptists. (If all of the rural African-American, smaller Baptist bodies and Independent Baptist congregations were treated as a whole the number of rural Baptists would easily exceed the 10 million mark, however.) The third largest presence in rural USAmerica is that of the United Methodists with 4 million. Like the Southern Baptists, they have about 20,000 congregations in these counties. Like the Roman Catholics, the Methodists are found in about 90 percent of the counties of USAmerica. Assemblies of God and Southern Baptists are in more than 80 percent of the counties and will be at the 90% mark at the end of the century.

Of the denominations with more than one million adherents, only AME Zion continues to be more rural than urban in the location of its membership. However, many of the smaller, regional denominations continue to be based, primarily, in non-metro counties.

[See Map 2 \(Major Denominational Families\)](#)

Among the many valuable insights to be drawn from the CMS materials is that in spite of our belief that this is a pluralistic nation, the fact is that in most counties, one denomination has emerged as the dominant one. Settlement patterns by race and ethnicity as well as the charisma of certain persons in the era of rapid rural church planting (essentially the 19<sup>th</sup> century) explain much of this. Note the Roman Catholic dominance around the coastal edges of the nation. Note the Lutheran dominance in many corn and wheat region counties. Note the United Methodists, mixed with some Disciples presence, across the midlands. See how the Mormons continue to dominate their traditional Inland Empire. And note the heavy concentration of Baptists across the South and Southwest stretching up into Missouri and Southern Illinois in the Midwest.

The 1980s were difficult for much of non-metro USAmerica. Many farm families lost the base of their livelihood. Energy development cut back. Small factories shut down and the work was moved "off shore." If one compares the 1980 and the 1990 reports, as relates to growth or decline, several observations present themselves. The mainline protestants continued to decline in much of non-metro USAmerica, Roman Catholic gains and losses typically paralleled population growth and/or decline. The losses sustained by the mainliners and the Roman Catholics can be partially related to the significant numbers of rural churches that experienced closure during the decade. Southern Baptists grew in all regions regardless of loss or of growth by the population of the region. They gained about 800 congregations and one-quarter million members, net, during the decade. In fact, Southern Baptists actually grew more rapidly than did the non-metropolitan population and consequently gained "market" share. Many Pentecostal groups also grew significantly during that decade. Particularly noteworthy was the growth of the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ. With revived growth in many more non-metro counties continuing in the 1990s, it seems very likely that many other denominations could observe significant numbers of their congregations growing. We believe that the swelling tide of urban to rural migration, the coming of the Information Age, and the revitalizing of rural communities and churches offer a promising future for rural missions and church work.

## **THE STOCK OF CHURCHES IN THE NON-METRO SOUTH**

See *Map 3 (U S Census Regions)*

The CMS report found 56,126 congregations in the non-metro counties of the three Southern census regions. However, most of the African-American congregations of the South are not reported in this figure, nor are many independent and fundamentalist congregations. Working with the figures found in *The Yearbook of Churches in the US and Canada, 1994*, I imagine that the actual total is about 85,000 congregations. The CMS study found 14,185,000 adherents in the South. While this does include an estimate of the rural African-American Baptists, the adherency of all the rural churches in the South probably exceeds 15 million. The non-metro population of the region was a little over 22 million in 1990. So, about two-thirds of the rural residents would seem to be church related persons. (A word of caution needs to be sounded. Often adherence figures do not reflect participation. To wit: more than 35 counties in the South reported more adherents than residents.)

[See TABLE 2, Selected Denominational Totals](#)

Only in the West North Central region of the census is the adherence rate higher according to the CMS report. However the primary denominations in that region count as adherents baptized infants rather than conversionist as is the case in the South. Further, the estimates offered here suggest that there is about one

congregation to every 400 persons in the non-metro counties of the region.

In about all of the rural South the Southern Baptist Convention related churches are dominant. In the three census regions, Southern Baptists report 16,996 non-metro congregations in 1990 with 6,218,242 adherents. This is nearly a one in four ratio. And since most rural Southern Baptists are caucasian, among whites the ratio is probably in excess of one in three. Further, during the 1980's adherents in SBC churches grew more rapidly than did the non-metro population in the three southern census regions.

[See TABLE 3, \*Southern Baptist Churchs and Adherence in the Rural South\*](#)

[See TABLE 4, \*General Population Growth in the Three Regions of the Old South\*](#)

I consider this to be very significant because it would seem likely with as high a ratio of adherence in a population as the Southern Baptists enjoy in the rural South that a voluntary movement like this should have saturated, plateaued, and not experienced continued improvement of "market share." To my mind, this is but one of many possible research topics that surface from these data. (In the metro counties of the South, the Southern Baptists also gained "market share" in the East and West South Central, but lost it in the South Atlantic region. Further, this was during a period when, nationally, the denomination was in great turmoil.)

Look again at Map 2, Major Denominational Families. This map, which was prepared by the CMS researchers for the 1994 edition of *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*, notes not only the dominance of the Baptist movement in the Old South and Missouri, but also illustrates the fact that most counties are part of larger concentrations of dominance by a given denomination. Very few counties are truly pluralistic.

Personally, I ran a check on the CMS findings by using the reports from the SBC churches (Uniform Church Letters) to the denomination during the 1980's and found confirmation not only of growth but of growth that surpassed population growth across the non-metro South. My focus was on resident membership--a more restrictive definition of relationship to a congregation, and a more honest figure, I believe. (You can find annual reports of this data in *The Southern Baptist Handbook*, edited by Linda Barr, published by Convention Press through 1993.)

[See TABLES 5 and 6](#)

In each of the three regions collectively, and in almost all of the Southern States, these data also indicate that the Southern Baptists grew faster than the population in the 1980s.

## RESOURCES

In the course of this paper I have mentioned some resources that rural sociologists and their students might draw upon in doing quantitative studies of churches in the non-metro South. The Church Membership Survey has been compiled in relationship to the 1970, 1980 and 1990 censuses. It is available both in book and on computer tapes. It is organized by denominations, by counties, and by states. It attempts to paint a big and broad picture of church life. I noted its primary weaknesses earlier.

Quantitative research on the rural church in the South benefits from the fact that Southern Baptists have

been gathering extensive data from their churches, annually, especially since the 1950s. The instrument contains about 150 items. Churches report their location by size of the community and by county. This would allow a researcher to look, for example, at all "village churches" over a 40 year period. In turn, these could be broken out as being in metro or non-metro counties, by region of the nation, by age, by size of congregation, by level of contributions, and even by growth and decline. The Research Department at the Home Mission Board has these data for several years on computer. It is also building county data sets which will include the CMS data, census data, and the market service data. Generally, there is an openness to work with researchers on topics of mutual interest.

Coming from the CMS findings is a useful set of maps showing the pattern of membership concentration and reporting the growth or decline of a denomination in a given county by decades. (See Halverson and Newman, *Atlas of Religious Change in America*). This publication in itself offers some tantalizing ideas for further research as the maps I will now share with you will suggest.

There are several older surveys and reports of the churches in the South which I listed in the bibliography. The most recent major study with which I am acquainted is one by Lincoln and Mamiya on the African-American churches, *The Black Church in African-American Experience*. And the Council on Religion in Appalachia (CORA) has recently published an update of its *Appalachian Atlas*. It reports the work of Clifford Grammich and is based on the CMS reports.

For the more qualitatively or micro-oriented persons, there is a growing set of resources to guide studies of individual congregations. Some of these are listed in the bibliography. One fruitful place to look for material is the report of dissertation abstracts. In the past decade, hundreds of projects dealing with local church studies have been conducted by Doctor of Ministry students. While their quality is varied, some good clues and data for further research are present there. Further, several recent studies of denominations in the South, particularly the SBC, are also available. See the bibliography for some citations.

### **A PLEA FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

In beginning, and repeated throughout this presentation, I have attempted to encourage teachers and students of rural sociology to take seriously the opportunity to study the churches of the South. I have demonstrated that there is, already in place, some data bases that quantitatively-oriented persons can draw upon. And there are other resources available. It is my hope that a section on the rural church of the South might become a regular feature of these meetings. I will certainly do what I can to support such an endeavor.

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TABLE 2, SELECTED DENOMINATIONAL TOTALS

DENOMINATION	1980 Churches	1980 Adherents	1990 Churches	1990 Adherents	Churches Gain	Adherents Gain
<b>NAZARENE</b>	4,892	885,749	5,167	888,123	5.6%	0.3%
Metro	2,822	599,410	3,066	608,073	8.6%	1.4%
Non-Metro	2,070	286,339	2,101	280,050	1.5%	-2.2%
<b>ASSEMBLIES OF GOD</b>	9,447	1,612,655	11,149	2,161,610	18.0%	34.0%
<b>Metro</b>	5,267	1,139,962	6,566	1,620,976	24.7%	42.2%
Non-Metro	4,180	472,693	4,583	540,634	9.6%	14.4%
<b>SOUTHERN BAPTIST</b>	35,552	16,281,692	37,922	18,940,682	6.7%	16.3%
Metro	16,099	9,884,071	17,685	11,786,745	9.9%	19.2%
Non-Metro	19,453	6,397,621	20,237	7,153,937	4.0%	11.8%

	1980 POPULATION	1990 POPULATION	GAIN
TOTAL	226,542,203	248,709,873	9.8%
Metro	176,967,118	197,811,971	11.8%
Non-Metro	49,575,085	50,897,902	2.7%

TABLE 3, SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCHES AND ADHERENCE IN THE RURAL SOUTH

<b>DENOMINATION</b>	1980 Churches	1980 Adherents	1990 Churches	1990 Adherents	Churches Gain	Adherents Gain
<b>EAST SOUTH CENTRAL</b>	9,868	4,034,138	10,109	4,490,106	2.4%	0.4%
Metro	3,316	1,979,184	3,432	2,230,438	3.5%	12.7%
Non-Metro	6,552	2,054,954	6,677	2,259,668	1.9%	10.0%
<b>WEST SOUTH CENTRAL</b>	7,876	4,634,482	8,414	5,599,173	6.8%	20.8%
<b>Metro</b>	3,451	2,926,287	3,864	3,650,048	12.0%	24.7%
Non-Metro	4,425	1,708,195	4,550	1,949,125	2.8%	14.1%
<b>SOUTH ATLANTIC</b>	11,447	5,326,963	12,087	6,032,005	5.6%	13.2%
Metro	5,862	3,488,827	6,318	4,022,556	7.8%	15.3%
Non-Metro	5,585	1,838,136	5,769	2,009,449	3.3%	9.3%
<b>TOTALS</b>	29,191	13,995,583	30,610	16,121,284	4.9%	15.2%
Metro	12,629	8,394,298	13,614	9,903,042	7.8%	17.9%
Non-Metro	16,562	5,601,285	16,996	6,218,242	2.6%	11.0%

TABLE 4, GENERAL POPULATION GROWTH IN THE THREE REGIONS OF THE SOUTH

	1980 POPULATION	1990 POPULATION	GAIN
SOUTH ATLANTIC	36,959,123	43,566,853	17.9%
Metro	28,225,331	34,293,545	21.5%
Non-Metro	8,733,792	9,273,308	6.2%
WEST SOUTH CENTRAL	23,746,816	26,702,793	12.4%
Metro	17,353,930	20,235,041	16.6%
Non-Metro	6,392,886	6,467,752	1.2%
EAST SOUTH CENTRAL	14,666,423	15,176,284	3.5%
Metro	8,057,588	8,563,014	6.3%
Non-Metro	6,608,835	6,613,270	0.07%
TOTAL	75,372,362	85,445,930	13.4%
Metro	53,636,849	63,091,600	17.6%
Non-Metro	21,735,513	22,354,330	2.85%



<u>WEST SOUTH CENTRAL</u>									
Arkansas	2,858	2,889	2,947	1,454	1,409	1,425	1,839	1,822	1,855
Oklahoma	3,857	3,962	4,082	1,324	1,250	1,269	2,116	2,107	2,170
Louisiana	5,917	5,745	5,844	1,366	1,324	1,324	3,186	3,124	3,163
<u>SOUTHERN STATES TOTALS</u>									
Missouri	5,366	5,467	5,567	1,322	1,329	1,357	2,701	2,764	2,825



WEST SOUTH CENTRAL									
Arkansas	172,621	179,606	182,566	300,535	328,057	334,904	57.4%	54.7%	54.5%
Oklahoma	214,438	222,068	223,954	430,982	464,141	473,226	49.8%	47.8%	47.3%
Louisiana	147,005	152,306	151,332	375,038	395,332	401,204	39.2%	38.5%	37.7%
Texas	381,359	393,792	397,788	1,452,306	1,605,783	1,672,622	26.3%	24.5%	23.8%
SOUTHERN STATES TOTALS									
Missouri	194,089	193,684	194,159	411,083	417,813	421,735	47.2%	46.4%	46.0%





WEST SOUTH CENTRAL									
Arkansas	7.5	7.0	7.1	7.7	7.3	7.3	7.6	7.2	7.2
Oklahoma	8.0	7.7	7.8	6.1	5.7	5.7	7.0	6.8	6.8
Louisiana	13.7	13.0	12.9	7.4	7.0	7.1	11.2	10.7	10.7
Texas	10.8	11.7	11.8	7.0	7.2	7.2	9.8	10.6	10.7
SOUTHERN STATES TOTALS									
Missouri	15.4	15.7	15.8	8.2	8.3	8.4	12.0	12.2	12.4

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