

FILE 2016

**CELEBRATING THE JUBILEE YEAR OF
THE RURAL CHURCH PROGRAM**

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The Baptist movement is the dominant expression of Christianity in more than one-third of the counties in US America. Most of these 1,322 counties are found in the states of the old Confederacy and in those that border those eleven states.¹ Most of these counties are rural/nonmetropolitan in character. In 1994, open country, village, and small town (places of less than 2,500) congregations affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) totaled 20,867. Their total membership numbered 4,674,489. Their income totaled \$1.5 billion.²

When sorting Southern Baptist churches into the two sets--those in metropolitan and those in nonmetropolitan counties--the numbers come out very similar: 20,500 congregations with nearly 5 million members--to those of their self reporting. This sort includes many churches in communities with more than 2,500, but less than 50,000 persons. However, it misses many churches in counties labeled metropolitan but seen by their communities as rural.

Since "rural" can refer to a cultural orientation as well as to a place, putting a number on rural SBC churches is even more complicated. To wit: there are many rural-culture Southern Baptist churches inside the perimeter highway around Atlanta and other cities.³ In summary, then, about half of SBC congregations, one-third of SBC members, and one-fifth of the income of Southern Baptists are definitely rural. Yet, ruralness is embraced by a much larger number.

Southern Baptists have more congregations and more members in rural areas than any other Christian denomination in the nation. In fact, only three denominations have more members totally than does the rural portion of Southern Baptist life.

During the 1980s, Southern Baptists gained "market share" in rural areas all across the nation. Apparently, this trend is continuing in the 1990s. This is to say that not only did we grow in the rural areas, we grew more rapidly than did the population. This was true both in the old and the new Convention states, as well as all kinds of rural areas. The greatest percentage gains in membership were made in the most rural new Convention counties. The greatest gain in real numbers were in the urbanizing counties adjacent to metro counties. Southern Baptists gained 95 new churches in America's most rural counties from 1980 to 1993. Also, Southern Baptist resident membership grew more rapidly than did the

population in the most rural counties. In sum, rural church work among Southern Baptists, when taken as a whole, is alive and well, thank you.⁴

This "ruralness" of Southern Baptists is appropriate for several reasons. First, the country is where the Baptist movement took root in America. With the westward settlement of the nation in the nineteenth century, Baptists organized churches in the rural communities. Towns were for Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and many Methodists. They relied on an educated, fully supported ministry. Those ministers intended to settle in towns where the money and the "high culture" were. By way of example, consider the oldest town in East Tennessee, Jonesborough. It was nearly 60 years after its founding before the first Baptist congregation was constituted in the town. Meanwhile, some of the oldest Baptist churches in Tennessee grew in nearby rural communities pastored by bivocational, farmer-preachers and led by committed laypersons. East Tennessee became a Baptist stronghold by the end of the century.⁵ Long after great Baptist churches were planted in the towns and cities, the real base of the movement remained in the countryside. Second, the Old South contains 42 percent of the rural population of the nation, about 24 million. In many rural counties, almost all of the people are affiliated with the Baptist denominations. Across the rural South, somewhere between one-third and one-half of the population is affiliated in some way with the Baptist movement. Third, one might argue that in his divine economy, God was creating a mighty force for the evangelizing of the nation—particularly of the cities, now at the dawning of the twenty-first century—by blessing the growth of the Baptist movement in the rural South.

When controls on immigration were tightened in the 1920s, American industry looked toward the farms for new workers. During the industrial expansion brought on by World War II, the stream of Baptists moving from the farm to cities swelled to a tide. Today the Baptist movement is well-positioned in every state and in every city. This was made possible by the migration of Baptist young adults from the Baptist Zion of the Old South. Satan is well aware of this. The Baptist movement must surely frighten him. He has worked in many ways to blunt and sidetrack this work of God. But it continues.

When one reads the New Testament through the eyes of a rural missiologist, one finds interesting parallels. Jesus focused His ministry in the rural territory of Galilee. Capernaum was a small town of only about 1,500 persons.⁶ There the gospel story was planted among a people who could guard it and be true to it generation after generation. It was in a rural place, a stable place, a safe place, a fertile place that the rootstock was planted. It was there that the light was kindled (see Matthew 4:13-16). God knew that Jerusalem would soon be destroyed. He knew the church would be scattered. He knew that cities were hotbeds of conflicting ideas. He knew that the diversity of a congregation drawn together from many cultures would be dangerous for the purity of the gospel in its infancy. Consider the destination of the epistles of Paul and the seven letters of The Revelation, city churches, troubled churches, for the most part. Consider how the

newly called Paul went off to a rural place to work through the implication of his call prior to becoming the great urban missionary. No, Jesus did not rush to plant the gospel in the population center of His nation; and neither did Paul. An important element of any strategy of world evangelism must be the rural part. It has a unique role to play. Likewise, when God desired to plant the gospel in the New World He employed a similar strategy. Place the story in the secure, rural place where it could be told and retold and retold. Then in the fullness of time the story could be carried from the rural to the urban for a time of great harvest. Baptists, black, white, and ethnics are playing important roles in this enterprise. Yet, even in this time of expansion, it is important that care be exercised to protect the rootstock of the Baptist movement. In our rush to save the cities, we must not neglect the care of our country congregations.

In the remainder of this essay, I will sketch the story of how Baptists planted the gospel story across the rural South. Then I will tell the story of how rural Baptists responded to the age of industrialization. And finally, I will seek to identify the emerging challenges and opportunities that the future holds for our rural churches. I will use the typology of Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, to organize this presentation.⁷

CHURCH PLANTING ON THE WESTERN FRONTIER

It is a matter of conventional knowledge that the nation was more urban than rural for the first time in 1920. But recall the first paragraphs of this essay and note that urban means places of 2,500 or more. (In 1920 it was 1,000 or more.) Therefore, it was not until the era of World War II that the nation became more metropolitan, or city dwelling, than rural. By 1920, Southern Baptists had pretty well churched the rural South. In the 17 states affiliated with the SBC of that day, 22,043 congregations served the rural communities. Their combined membership totaled about 2.5 million members. The income of the whole denomination, however, was less than \$30 million. Most of those congregations were small, poor, and not well housed. (At that time fewer than 4,000 Southern Baptist churches served urban communities.)

TABLE 1	
THE STATE OF THE RURAL BAPTIST CHURCH IN THE SOUTH—1922	
	(22,000 congregations in the open country, villages, and towns to 1,000. Membership was at 2.5 million.)
	2/3 in one-room building
	1/4 with fewer than 50 members
	most did not have weekly worship
	1/3 reported no baptisms the previous year
	1/4 were in decline of membership
	1/5 had no Sunday School
	1/4 had no building of their own
	1/2 of the pastors had no college or seminary training
	2/3 of the pastors were not resident on the field
Sources: 1923 SBC Handbook E. P. Alldredge	

Even today, most of the old Convention states continue to be primarily rural/nonmetropolitan, both demographically and culturally.

Baptist history needs to be viewed from the perspective furnished by *social movement theory*. This theory identified a set of steps through which a successful movement passes. First, a movement arises out of a deep sense of dissatisfaction with existing conditions. Often a leader emerges who articulates this concern and proposes a means of addressing it in simple, focused language. Second, the movement gathers a core following. The English Baptist movement arose out of a dissatisfaction with the unregenerated nature of the Church of England. The *true* church was formed of persons who had experienced the new birth by trusting in the work of God's son, Jesus, in the eyes of the Baptists. Locally, these regenerated persons would gather together for worship, witness, and spiritual growth. They bound themselves to one another, freely, by means of a covenant to which each was asked to subscribe. The Baptist movement, however, had no Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley, or Alexander Campbell. Rather, the Baptists found a plurality of regional leaders who, while holding some common beliefs, often had different foci. One might argue that the Baptist movement was actually a confederacy of movements, or as James Sullivan has aptly called it, a rope of sand.⁸ There is an advantage to this kind of movement. With no central teacher who can be elevated to a place of authority next to Christ, Himself, the movement may be more open to modification as the context changes. This seems to have been the Baptist experience.

Third, a successful movement catches popular attention. Some persons are attracted to it, others are repulsed. Often the movement is seen by the power structure of a community or nation as a threat. Efforts are made to suppress, and/or to co-opt the movement. The early struggle by Baptists for religious freedom is an example of the results of the former. The support of many yeoman Baptist farmers for the cause of the Confederacy may be illustrative of the latter.

Finally, the successful movement may replace the previous establishment and become the dominant group. Next, it may even become a suppressor of subsequent movements that threaten its hegemony. Or after a period of coaptation, it may experience a period of renewal and revival, or it might find another cause to champion. Examples of all three of these results can be found as the story of the Baptist movement in rural America unfolds.⁹

The completion of the American Revolution opened up vast territories in the West for settlement. Across the coastal plains of the South, the Plantation system was extended. There, wealthy planters bought up large tracts of land on which cotton, rice, and indigo were planted, usually by African slaves. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, additional lands suited to large scale agriculture were opened up in the valley of the Mississippi and its tributaries. Inland, yeoman farmers settled on the less productive land of the hilly piedmont. And on into the Appalachian Mountains pushed those whose lifestyle focused more on hunting and gathering than on tilling the soil. It was among the piedmont farmers and the

mountain hunters that the Baptist movement gained its greatest early following. North of the Ohio River, the settlers relied on the New England pattern of townships and villages. West of the Mississippi River, this was institutionalized by the practice of granting land in 160 acre square tracts and the platting of a farm service center village about every six miles.

As a people's movement with no universally revered central leader, Baptists had little formal organization beyond the area association of churches well into the nineteenth century. This allowed for considerable coalescing and splintering off within the movement. A fruit of the western revivals of the early 1800s was both surging growth and the union in area associations of many of the Regular and the Separate Baptists congregations as the United Baptists. But in the next two decades this union was splintered by the anti-missions controversy. Whole associations rejected both revivalism and mission societies. This became the Primitive, high Calvinist wing of the movement. Then in the 1830s, Alexander Campbell and his followers split many congregations and led hundreds of others away from the Baptist movement and into the Disciples of Christ/Churches of Christ/Independent Christian movement. Issues included the concept of baptismal regeneration and the place of "means" not mentioned in Scripture in the work of the church. In the 1840s, the Baptist movement, nationally, split over the issue of slavery into a Northern and a Southern Convention. In the 1850s, J.R. Graves began the "Landmark" movement among Baptists. He argued that only the Baptists were the true church, and only they were locally organized. Hundreds of congregations were lost to this movement by the 1920s.

Tennessee Baptist history provides a microcosm of the impact of these splinter movements. East Tennessee was rocked by the Primitive movement and by the slavery issue. The mountain associations had their own regional convention until 1874. Most East Tennessee Baptists supported the Federal government during the Civil War while most of the churches of Middle and West Tennessee supported the Confederacy. In Middle Tennessee, many, if not most, of the rural Baptist churches become Disciples of Christ churches during the Campbellite controversy. And churches, mostly rural, in West Tennessee and in a band across Arkansas and into Texas, departed with the formation by the Landmarks of their own denomination about the turn of the century.¹⁰ As a consequence, one focus of the Southern Baptist home missions work has been to go back into the areas of major defections in order to rebuild the movement.

Fisher Humphreys identifies as the unique core beliefs of the Baptist movement the following: only believers are to be baptized; baptism is by immersion only (as a symbol, not a means of salvation); churches consist of believers only; each congregation is self-governing; all members share in decision making; congregations should cooperate with each other; church and state should be separate; and Baptists have no creed but the Bible.¹¹ Most of these beliefs fit under the theological subcategory of ecclesiology. Other core beliefs, although not unique to Baptists which did energize the movement during the wave of agrarian

settlement of the West, would certainly include the following: God is free to work in His own unique ways; the local church is a covenanted body; grace must be experienced personally; persons can be secure in their knowledge of their salvation; persons must witness their faith and support missions; believers should live pious and holy lives; God is great and good and moving history toward His appointed ends; and, each believer is a priest of God.¹² Particularly in the mountains and the piedmont, the thrust of the evangelistic message was: God is a very real reality on all aspects of life and should be relied upon and consulted. God, not luck, or chance, or evil spirits, is the prime cause of life's events. However, this high Calvinist view of the sovereignty of God was modified by the Baptist evangelists with a strong emphasis on personal responsibility for one's actions, good or evil. Being a people's movement, the Baptists were not particularly troubled by the fact that these positions seem to pose a logical contradiction for some. No, these beliefs are biblically based and reflect the everyday experience of people.

The practices of those nineteenth century rural Baptist churches reveal how this set of beliefs was lived out. Most had worshiped only one Sunday per month. On Saturday afternoon, the congregation would meet for business. Any moral, theological, or relationship problem within the fellowship could be addressed. This might include lying, stealing, adultery, heresy, fighting, drunkenness, and the like. Normally, the pattern set forth in Matthew 18:15-18 was followed. At its best, the goal was restoration of the person and of the fellowship. And certainly one finds the Epistle to the Ephesians, with its emphasis on the local church being characterized by unity, personal purity, mutual submission, and missional activity, providing a backdrop. Ideally, a wonderful balance of personal freedom and of corporate responsibility was struck.¹³ After the business was handled, the church clerk would write in the minutes something like this: "The church was found to be in union. So, worship services can be held tomorrow."

Many of the congregations included within their membership several licensed and one or more ordained ministers. Popular preachers often served a different congregation each Sunday of the month. Others would preach for only one congregation. Many did not have a congregation at all, but worked locally. Most churches issued a call to a preacher annually. Not a few were recalled again and again for 40 or more years. It is my sense that most often these rural preachers saw themselves more as evangelists than as pastors. They preached the word, but the pastoral care of the congregation was most often provided by the lay leaders, including licensed ministers within the congregation.¹⁴

The minutes of the annual associational meetings from this period reveal much about the church extension activities of the Baptist movement westward. Often someone would stand to express a concern for a community that was "destitute of a gospel witness." The association would respond by appointing one of its ministers to go to the community, hold a revival and seek to form a congregation. Often, the following year the resultant new congregation would present itself for

membership in the association. It was after this manner that Baptist churches sprang up in almost every community across the South. As the movement grew more successful within the bounds of an association, it was common for the association to divide, often using county lines as boundaries. (Many of the early associations were named for a river, reflecting the role of a river as an avenue of transportation, commerce, and communication.) This change in organization size and bounds seems to reflect a strong desire for fellowship and cooperation among the churches. (Today the typical association in the rural South is comprised of 35 congregations located in one or two counties.)¹⁵

How this set of Baptist beliefs informed much of the work of the movement during this era can be summarized thus. First, it encouraged Baptists to select lay and pastoral leaders who had been gifted of God, regardless of their educational achievements. Everywhere, it was a people's movement giving leadership to the natural, indigenous leaders. Baptists did not have to wait for a missionary to be sent to them from national headquarters before gathering a congregation. They just did it. Second, as a gathered church it called for high levels of commitment, both to the gospel of salvation and to the local congregation. Third, as a covenanted fellowship it provided a mechanism of accountability and mentoring which encouraged personal spiritual growth.

These same core beliefs motivated white Baptists to seek to evangelize and congregationalize the African slaves. In many instances, the local Baptist church had more slave than free members. The indigenation principle also allowed for God to call the natural leaders from among the Africans to pastoral roles. With freedom, the African-American congregation became the primary social institution in the emerging communities. The covenanted fellowship provided the best means available to these communities for social control. The Baptist movement found a real home and met a real need in the African-American community.¹⁶

The Civil War devastated many of the rural congregations. Hundreds of church names do not appear on the list of congregations when the associations resumed meeting after the war. Many core families moved further west to take up new land and begin life anew. Particularly in the border states, some congregations were so divided as a result of the war, that families could no longer worship together. Ironically, but in the providence of God, the horror of war gave renewed impetus to the planting of new congregations and the evangelizing of the unsaved. The loss of the war seems to have caused many Southerners to turn to God. Some historians would add, that with the failure of the political cause, many turned to the mission of the church as an alternate cause to champion.¹⁷

Given the repeated splintering of the Baptist movement during the century, it is probably no surprise that Methodism was the largest denominational expression of Christianity before 1850. But by 1890, Baptists had passed them. The Disciples of Christ, the Presbyterians, and to a lesser extent, the Episcopalians were other actors in the evangelization and church planting of the rural South. West of the

Mississippi River, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and Congregationalists were part of the rural ecclesiastic scene.

This age of expansion resulted in some very interesting patterns of competition and cooperation among the denominations on the frontier. Often, there were great debates focused on which denomination was "truest" to the teachings of the New Testament in its beliefs and practices. Each group found biblical texts and logic that proved their own superiority. Positively, each group seemed to take seriously what it believed. Negatively, many persons claimed that they were driven away from a church by the debates, not drawn toward it. On the other hand, in many rural communities several denominational groups would share a common building. For example, the Baptist might have worship there on the first weekend, the Methodists the second, the Disciples the third, and the Presbyterians on the fourth. When the Sunday School movement gained popularity, a union Sunday School might be held each Sunday with the rotation of denominations worship continuing. Within the present century, many of these congregations finally became Baptists. Primary among several reasons for this is the fact that because of the practice of indigenation and bivocationalism a Baptist pastor was more often available to the congregation.

So, by the end of the nineteenth century, one might travel across rural America as far west as Ft. Worth and find a crossroads community, village, or small town about every six miles. And particularly, in the South it was very likely that it would include a Baptist church.¹⁸ The movement had survived internal conflict and the loss of a war. It had gained numbers. Yet detractors might note that while the Baptists were many, they were not yet much.¹⁹

CHURCH DEVELOPMENT AND EXPANSION IN THE INDUSTRIAL AGE

No date for the coming of the Industrial Age is widely agreed upon. Certainly one result of the Civil War was the dominance of public policy by the industrial, urbanizing North. Toffler finds the "hinge time" when the Industrial Age replaces the Agricultural Age coming about the end of the century. It is no coincidence that this was also a time of great unrest within the older Christian denominations and the emergence of some new denominations. The national churches were becoming more urban in thought and focus. They were responding to the impact of Darwinism, socialism, and modernism. The great influx of Roman Catholic and Jewish immigrants to work in the cities had cost the mainline Protestants their domination there. Rural church leaders often felt neglected, if not betrayed. Methodism suffered the multiple splintering off of the Nazarene, Holiness, and Pentecostal groups. The Disciples lost many of their rural churches to the Churches of Christ movement. And the Baptists found many of their poor, rural members defecting to the Churches of God, Churches of Christ, and the Assemblies of God, as well as to the Independent Baptists.

Within mainline Protestantism, the response was to launch The Rural Church

Movement (RCM). It grew out of the Rural Life Conference called by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908. It proved to be a rural version of the Social Gospel Movement that focused on the problems of the cities. Socially, the RCM addressed the issues of poor roads, inadequate schools, distance to health care, tenant farming, and low income. Spiritually, it seemed to the national leaders of the rural church network that many rural areas were over churching. They set a goal reducing the number of churches to a 1-to- 1000 residents ratio. This was to be achieved by the consolidation of churches and the assignment of particular territories to particular denominations.²⁰

While Southern Baptists often agreed with the social concerns of the RCM, they did not accept the idea of church consolidation. This reflects a very real difference in ecclesiology between the mainline and the evangelical denominations. The former focuses on providing pastoral care for their folks. Evangelism is secondary. It seems that this is a carry over from the days of state supported denominations and fixed parish boundaries. Baptists saw the focus of church as being missional and evangelistic. For them, while pastoral care was certainly important, it must not become the main thing. Again, as a movement, rather than an established church, this seems natural. A movement is focused on a victorious crusade. Suggestions to cut back or shut down do not set well.

The Baptist response focused on strengthening the rural church. In 1917, Victor I. Masters, superintendent for publicity for the Home Mission Board, published *Country Church in the South*. Masters called for the churches to become better organized, secure a resident pastor, be more concerned about ministry in their communities, hold revivals annually, and make improvements to their facilities. In 1922, a major survey of the rural SBC churches was conducted. Highlights of it were noted in Table 1. The picture is one of poor churches, in one room buildings, lead by absentee pastors who were not well trained. Drawing on this survey Dr. I.J. Van Ness, president of the Sunday School Board, wrote a book highlighting the work of 100 successful rural churches.²¹ The following year Dr. Jeff Ray, who taught homiletics and rural sociology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, published a book on how to be an effective rural pastor. He stressed being theologically conservative, involved in community life, and diligent in building up the church. Ray presented a program for education of rural pastors in the social sciences which was to be launched that year by Texas Agricultural & Mechanical University as a summer institute. At Oklahoma Baptist University, Dr. John W. Jent, also a rural sociologist by training, published a book that detailed a plan for a rural church to improve its role in ministry to its community. Jent went on to be president of Southwest Baptist College, Bolivar, MO., during the 1930s. One of his colleagues there, Courts Redford, did a major survey in 1937 of rural Baptist churches in Missouri and incorporated many of Jent's ideas in his suggestions for the churches. Meanwhile, the great Sunday School organizer, Arthur Flake, penned a manual for use in rural Sunday Schools. Had the rural depression of the 1920s not cut the income of the denomination and had

the Great Depression not followed, then a massive program of rural church development would have been launched by Southern Baptists, I have no doubt.²²

The common theme of these writers seems to have been that the rural churches had plateaued because the movement's dynamic had cooled. They understood intuitively that movements seldom last more than two generations, and the post Civil War surge of the Baptist movement was then in its third generation. They realized that the churches were in a rut. The emphasis on discipling one another had been abused and its practice had declined. There were few rural places still needing a new congregation. Many persons were still unchurched, however. What to do? What the leaders decided to do was to lead the rural churches to find a new vision, become involved in a new, challenging movement. They focused on the concept of enabling the churches to move into the Industrial Age. Soon the language of the factory or mill was being transferred to the churches. Church program leaders were called "superintendents." Workers were "trained." Organizations were given "Standards of Excellence" to guide their performances. The meetinghouse was called the church "plant." The new goal was to enlist persons into the life of the church, then evangelize them and finally to disciple them—through church organizational programs. Note how steps one and two were reversed in this new ecclesiology. In the earlier movement a person was first evangelized and then brought into the church for growth and for service.

Even though the total income of Southern Baptist churches was only \$52 million in 1943, Redford was brought to the Home Mission Board as associate to the executive secretary-treasurer at the end of the year to launch the effort to renew the rural churches. The initial report of the program is found in the 1945 SBC Annual.²³

PROPOSED PROGRAM FOR COUNTRY CHURCHES
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A careful reading of the eight points in the box to the right reveals a very significant shift in Baptist understanding of the church. First, the pastor assumes more of a leadership role. Second, he is to be pastor, not preacher or evangelist, only. Third, the congregation is asked to take a more active role in doing the work of the denomination. Fourth, the image of a covenanted body seems to have been pushed to the background. Fifth, the community, or parish, understanding of the church has been adopted from the mainline denominations. Sixth, by implication, the church is being organized along the lines of the structures of industrial organizations. Implicit in this was: there is "one best way" to do things; we have found out what it is; we will tell you how to do it.

This shift was not without its critics. They were stirred up by Bob Jones, John R. Rice, J. Frank Norris, and others. Not a

few rural churches have subsequently withdrawn from the denomination and became independent, sighting the increased control of the denomination as their reason. Ironically, in most instances, this was not accompanied by an effort to continue or to regain a sense of being a covenanted body. Rather the church was led out by a pastor who wanted to dictate to the congregation.

A veteran rural missionary, John Freeman, had been placed in charge of the effort. In 1945, he reported that already 53 rural missionaries were at work, mostly in the Old Convention area. The movement to revitalize the rural churches achieved amazing results.²⁴

- The following minimum goals were suggested as a working program for the country church:
1. A pastor living on or near enough to the field to render pastoral service.
 2. A perennial Sunday School under church control.
 3. At least one revival meeting or special evangelistic effort during the year.
 4. The best possible use of church property, with proper care of house and grounds.
 5. A practical plan of church finance which includes the Cooperative Program.
 6. A regular weekly prayer service at a time and place most suitable.
 7. Cooperation in denominational activities, including personal representation at the meeting of the district Association with a report from the church.
 8. Enlistment of as many members as possible in service, evangelistic, and missionary activities.

It is thoroughly understood that these minimum goals do not include all of the activities and services that many of these rural churches need. They constitute the first step, and an enlarged program can be undertaken as leadership is developed and a sympathetic appreciation of an enlarged program is secured.

SBC Annual, 1945

TABLE 2

SBC CHURCHES: 1948-1991

	1948	1965	1991
Total Rural Congregations	21,515	23,074	22,166
Quarter Time	4,874	548	NA
Half Time	8,685	3,229	NA
One Room Buildings	7,843	NA	NA

Even in 1948, there were still nearly two-thirds of the rural congregations that did not worship weekly. By 1959, this dropped to only one in six. Today, few rural Baptist churches do not worship each Sunday.²⁵

In 1954 and 1955, major conferences were held dealing with the rural church and a new program was launched. It was named the Long-Range Rural Church Program. It was also called the *Four Star Church Program*. The stars represented the basic programs of a Baptist church — Sunday School, Baptist Training Union, Woman's Missionary Union, and the Brotherhood. Additional steps were taken to tie those churches more closely to the denomination by encouraging them to put the state convention newspaper in the budget, use Sunday School Board curriculum materials exclusively, and give a percentage of income to the Cooperative Program. A continuing concern was to have the pastor living in the community served by the church. Unanticipated consequences of these efforts was to damage the self-esteem of some smaller, poorer churches and to alienate some bivocational pastors who felt threatened by this emphasis.²⁶

The program encouraged the congregations to identify projects that they might perform to "Build a Better Church, Community, and World." To make this happen, area associations were encouraged to hire an associational missionary who knew how to carry out the SBC programs. His task was to train the lay workers and indigenous pastors. The seminaries with major rural responsibilities hired staff to better train ministers for rural fields: Garland Hendricks at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Willis Bennett at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Carl Clark at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The Seminary Extension program was enlarged to provide more training for pastors who could not attend a seminary. Nationally, the Four Star Program was led by Wilson Brumley at the Home Mission Board. Most older state conventions added a staff person to promote the Rural Church Program among its affiliated churches. They worked closely with the associational missionaries, many of whom had their salaries subsidized by the state convention.

The physical and numerical evidence suggests that this effort worked well. All

across the countryside, beautiful and functional new buildings were erected. Membership grew. Good things happened. Much of this was made possible by changes in the rural economy. Many farm operations grew larger and more commercial in orientation. The rural South industrialized, so while the numbers of farmers dropped the number of rural non-farm dwellers was growing. The "baby boom" children were growing up, attending church, and being baptized. People were grateful to God for carrying them through the depression and the war.

Other social trends were appearing that would significantly change rural America and its churches. Improved roads made it possible for farmers to shop more often in places beyond their little six mile local village. Schools could consolidate in the county-seat town. Country doctors died off or moved their practice to the office complex next to the county hospital. Village schools and stores closed. Increasingly, rural families sought off-farm income. Like their siblings who did not return to the farm after World War II, they became commuters.

The shift from "general" agriculture to "commercial" agriculture introduced the concept of "comparative advantage." Areas that could not grow certain row crops as efficiently as others, planted timber or turned the fields to pastures. Agriculturally dependent areas began to experience significant loss of population as machinery replaced field hands. The old system of tenancy faded. Some churches grew smaller. Some were closed by their denomination. Others just died.²⁷

In the Southern Baptist Zion, new charismatic and nondenominational congregations sprang up. Many rural counties have more congregations today than ever before, even where the population has declined. Southern Baptists were also moving into new territory. The industrialization that accompanied World War II drew Baptist young people to the northern and western towns and cities. Some were lost to the movement, but others became the founding families of new Southern Baptist congregations. In these New Work states, particularly those of the Southwest and the Rocky Mountain regions, the Baptist movement has prospered. In most areas, we have moved past the Mainline Protestants and have become the second or third largest Christian body. A major component of this growth since 1960 has been the deployment of associational missionaries. Here they have been given a territory, much like an area sales person, in which they are charged to generate new Southern Baptist congregations. This seems to have saved us from blindly accepting the conventional wisdom and focused on the cities. These missionaries have been close enough to see "where the action is" and respond accordingly. Evidence of this is the statistic that since 1971 more than half of the successful new church plants by Southern Baptists have been in rural or town communities.²⁸

In reflecting on the life of churches of the Baptist movement in the rural South during this century, it appears that it was a wise thing for most of them to accept the Industrial Age paradigm. The parallels between the life of the church and the

workplace were useful. But for many who did not accept the Industrial Age, that was probably wise also. Often they were still serving a different (pre-modern) clientele, one that while accepting the material things that the Industrial Age provided, has not accepted much of the modernist world view that accompanies them. For example, in the Appalachian Mountains there are portions of communities whose understanding of the world is little changed since last century.²⁹

One possible criticism, however, of this shift in ecclesiology is that the ideal model in the mind of those who developed the Long-Range Rural Church Program was that of a congregation that served about 125 to 150 worshipers every Sunday. A church would need to be that size to have the resources required to do the things suggested by the program. On the one hand, this can make some churches feel bad about themselves because they cannot come up to this level—the field is too difficult, the population so low, the resources so limited, or "the family" for which this church serves as a chapel is just not that large. On the other hand, some rural churches may have an open door to be much more than a good church, running 150 in worship. Certainly, standardization can be helpful, but it runs the danger of deflecting a movement from being all that it might be. Southern Baptists were perilously close to ceasing to be a movement and become a church of churches.

Further, it has been good that Southern Baptists extended beyond their old boundaries during this wave of American history. It would have been so easy for Baptists to be a rest in their Zion, lapse into the role of establishment, and stop being a missional movement. The challenge of new conquest has, for the most part, kept us from this. The continued growth, numerically and geographically, of the movement seems to have brought us to the attention of the larger American public as never before. However, with this comes the possibility of the establishments in other sectors of the society co-opting our movement as a means of achieving their own goals. If Southern Baptists avoid being seduced into sin by their new power position, then some wonderful challenges that can renew the movement awaits in the coming of the Third Wave, the Information Age.

PREPARING THE BAPTIST MOVEMENT FOR THE INFORMATION AGE

Rural Baptists were at the center of Baptist work in the First Wave. For the second, rural Baptists provided much of the person power. God had planted good rural churches during the Agricultural Age which trained a cadre of persons who would populate the new urban Baptist churches in the Industrial Age. (This is the great unexpected consequence of the Rural Church Program. While its aim was to build good, solid, programmatic, standardized rural churches, its equally great contribution has been to provide good lay leaders for the city churches.)

Preparation is being made by Baptists for the response to the challenges of the Information Age. A key change was reflected in the publication of a small Book, *We're Family: Helps for the Smaller-Membership Church*, in 1991.³⁰ The concept of "one best way" was rejected. *We're Family* declares that each church should put together a set of programs, events, and projects that will enable it to do the work God has given it to do in its setting. Taking note of the fact that each church has basic functions to perform—worship, nurture, ministry/mission, evangelism, and fellowship—how it goes about these is up to itself. Information Age people will want choices, diversity, quality, and involvement. This approach will foster this. Quickly the Sunday School Board picked up on the concept that function is central, and form should follow it. The is the message of the mission statement set forth by Gene Mims in *Principles of Kingdom Growth*.³¹ The movement from one paradigm to another is a difficult, painful and ongoing process, but the Sunday School Board has redirected itself toward doing this. The great success of its publication, *Experiencing God*,³² seems to be pointing the way. This is a piece that can be used by a church in a variety of time formats and settings. Several addition, undated, resources have followed.

This change means that a church which elects to be in tune with the Information Age will no longer docilely take the standard offering of curriculum material from the Sunday School Board. Rather, it will determine the needs and interests of its congregation and of the people group it is trying to reach. Then, it will select for the whole array of resources those which best serve the needs and interests it has identified. This approach will again empower the local congregation to be "on mission" in its setting. For the small rural church, this shift will be difficult, but it has the potential of revitalizing its ministry. The difficulty will center on the fact that the leadership may not really know much about the curricular material available to them. Making choices may be frightening. It is for this reason that many of us think that the role of the associational missionary will become more and more focused on consulting with the churches in helping them custom make their set of programs, events, and projects as is suggested in *We're Family*.

When one looks at rural America today, one finds it to be very different than it was in the 1950s when the Rural Church Program was launched. First, as a result of urban sprawl, many hundreds of churches which were rural then are now suburban, and even metropolitan. For example, First Baptist Church of Sandy Springs, GA., was recognized as the rural church of the year in 1954. Today, the suburbanization of Atlanta has already passed it by, and it is in the midst of an emerging "edge city" forming around the Perimeter Mall. For many of these churches the results have been mixed. Some have changed from Agricultural Age to Industrial Age churches and grown large. Other have elected to continue to be what they have always been. And others have changed half-heartedly and floundered.³³

Second, particularly in the rural South, the retail side of the economy has been

Wal-Martized. About every 30 miles, from Myrtle Beach, S.C. to Weatherford, TX., one finds a Wal-Mart and/or a K-Mart. The towns in which they have settled, normally ones with more than 2,500 in population, have grown and prospered, often at the expense of the smaller farm service towns, at six mile intervals between it and the next Wal-Mart town. Increasingly, a Baptist church in, or near, these towns is becoming an ecclesiastical equivalent of the Wal-Mart. That is, it offers a full-service line of programs and events. And they have grown, sometimes at the expense of the rural and small town churches near by. In 1990, more than 70 Southern Baptist churches, which ran more than 650 in average Sunday School attendance, were identified in the nonmetropolitan, Wal-Mart towns. Their numbers will undoubtedly continue to increase. Like the Wal-Mart they draw persons from a radius of 15 to 20 miles in each direction. Back when Baptists were "churching" rural America, congregations sprang up about every six miles, or, no more than a one hour walk from anyone's home. The Wal-Mart churches will be no more than a 30 minute drive from home for most persons in the rural South.

Some rural, village, and small town churches within the service area of these churches express concern for their very future. No longer can they rely on persons attending their churches simply because they are the closest to them. It is probable that the community that the church traditionally served is much less important to its residents today than it was back in the Agricultural Age when it was formed. Typically, the children of that community are transported to the Wal-Mart town for education. The same town where families shop, "doctor" and "recreate." One or both parents hold jobs that take them out of the rural community daily. The rural and village churches cannot compete in terms of quality programs with the big full-service Wal-Mart town church. So, unless the rural church has become the "family" chapel for a large and growing family, its survival may be in question, indeed.

A strategy that appears to be gaining acceptance suggests that the rural and small town churches shift their focus from being the "parish" church for their little place (one that is often losing population) to being a church with a "signature" ministry, reaching out for members and prospects, like the Wal-Mart churches, 15 miles/30 minutes in each direction. Some focus on Southern gospel music, including a band. Some develop ministries for senior adults, intercessory prayer, pageants, campgrounds, literacy, social services, and home maintenance. These are just a few of the ministries reported. As the denomination emphasizes the concept of *Start Something New* from 1996 through 1998, many rural churches may find their "signature" ministry, the one God has uniquely gifted them for, and get it launched.

A very real possibility, particularly for the Baptist movement in the rural South early in the twenty-first century, is the development of associations where a large, full-service church is found in the Wal-Mart town; around it in the more rural areas will be 8 to 10 congregations doing their "signature" ministries, 10 or 12 that

serve as "family" chapels, and another 8 to 10 that are still trying to by the "parish" church for their village or small town. As a result, three or four churches will be trying to evangelize and reach every lost person within the bounds of the association. Cooperation among the churches will grow as they find that they are really not in competition with each other. Each is different. Each has a set of persons that it can aggressively target. The spirit of "kingdom" growth will pervade its life.

Beyond this, some of the churches are now clustering to offer a ministry. For example, three small, rural churches near Florence, S.C., are cooperating around a ministry for senior adults. Together they can have a program and events that are high quality. This approach to doing the work of the church draws both persons who need the ministry and persons who feel called of God to provide that ministry.

The approach being described here in many ways recaptures elements of the early Baptist movement in the South. The Wal-Mart and the "signature" ministry churches will be "gathered," not "parish" churches. They will be formulating for themselves, under God, a sense of their unique role and mission. They will sense that they are an integral part of the great movement of God in expanding and extending His kingdom. There will be a new openness to experimentation and creativity in doing ministry. This should engender a new vitality. Strategy will be "locally" developed and owned.

One other type of rural place needs to be identified. This is the recreation/retirement community. One finds them along the ocean beaches, around the lakes, and in the mountains. Many of the churches in these places have had to learn how to act like an accordion. They expand during the recreation seasons and contract during the slow time. The churches in the retirement communities will also need to accommodate to the life rhythms and the expectations of the newcomers, many whose church life has been in city congregation. Just as the great challenge for the Baptist movement in the Industrial Age was to plant country churches in the expanding metropolitan place, a great challenge of the Information Age will be to plant city churches in the country settings. Some of these churches will need to be targeted to young families who have opted to live in the country and commute to work, mostly via computers. In few instances will they be attracted to a traditional rural church. The world views are too different. How the gospel is applied to their lives will not be much like the way it is applied to the traditional residents of many rural communities. Hopefully, the Baptist movement is now large enough, wise enough, and diverse enough to creatively attract these new-to-ruralites, often by creating new congregations.

As rural America continues to change, the stock of rural Baptist churches will also continue to change. Some will complete the ministry God set for them and elect to close it out. They must be supported in doing so with dignity. Each one of them has had victories that should be celebrated. Each has contributed to the movement and the kingdom in significant ways. Others can be helped in looking

at an array of options and refocusing their ministry to a different "people group," or to an expanded area.³⁴ This included identifying a "signature" ministry. Some will need to grow and become large, full-service, churches. They must be encouraged to do so, because this appears to be a developing trend. All of them need to be affirmed. They must also be challenged to not let the old paradigms make them blind and deaf to what God wants of them for this new era. Many new churches will continue to need to be formed. Among them will be congregations targeted to the service workers in rural America, folks whose rhythm of life, or schedule does not allow them to participate fully in the life of our current congregations.

We will need to continue to support the renewed interest in and appreciation of bivocational ministers. Many rural places will continue to not have the resources to support, or the need for a full-time, fully-supported minister. And in the new Convention areas, there are hundreds of small communities where the mainlines have closed a church, where a pastor who does not need to be fully supported by his congregation can plant and build a good ministry. Coupled with this will be an increased need to enlist and equip retirees for volunteer ministries. As the tide of retirees moving to rural places swells, retirees coming with knowledge, skill, and resources that can be used by the movement, the opportunity to help these folk find places of ministry will expand.

Of course, as we get deeper and deeper into the Information Age challenges and opportunities that one cannot yet see will emerge. From my perspective "the best is yet to be" for the Baptist movement. Certainly this is true in rural America.

CONCLUSION

The Baptist movement was planted and flourished in rural America in the Agricultural Age. This was a time where America was rural. During the Industrial Age, the rural components of the movement furnished many of its young people, and some of its congregations, to build the movement in the cities. And the denomination worked to enrich the life and work of these churches. During the Information Age, the Baptist movement became the largest in rural America, dominating church life in the area where it was first planted and moving ahead of most Protestant groups in the western areas that were entered after World War II. Much of the continued Baptist movement growth must be seen as the result of the success of the movement in rural America. And now at a "hinge-time" in American and world history, new challenges and opportunities await in rural ministry. This is an occasion for the revitalization of the movement. But it is a dangerous time. Satan surely sees the threat Baptists pose for him. This can be the best time ever for the Baptist movement. Pray that not only this is what God wills, but that we will listen to Him and do as He commands.

ENDNOTES

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