

THE STOCK OF RURAL USAMERICA CHURCHESGary Farley

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.¹ 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.² 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 mostly in Fulton County, Georgia. Its metropolitan region extends, according to the Census Bureau, to an additional 19 counties that surround it. Therefore, all of the congregations, and their members, in these 20 counties are counted as metropolitan, not as rural, in the CMS report. (The appendix attached to this paper reports the numbers of churches outside of the metro counties using the 1994 listing of metro counties.)

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. Very 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 church signage realizes there are many non-denominational, community and new charismatic congregations there which also escape the methodological net of the CMS study.³ 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. Also by the schemes employed in this accounting, they are identified as non-metro or rural. 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. Even with these reservations, the CMS data provides us with the only quantitative picture of the rural church in USAmerica available to us. So we will use it while keeping these three qualities in mind.

TABLE 1

The CMS totals for 1980 and 1994 by Churches and adherents for most of the denominations with over 100,000 adherents in 1994 (using the 1994 non-metro counties as a constant).

These are the non-metropolitan county figures:

Denomination name	Congregation		Adherents	
	1980	1994	1980	1994
American Baptists/USA	2,178	2,022	487,004	451,784
AME Zion	770	850	277,451	301,456
Assemblies of God	4,180	4,583	472,693	540,634
Baptist General Conference		250		35,800
Baptist Missionary Association		937		171,711
C & M Alliance		529		65,721
Christian Church/Church of Christ	2,796	2,577	485,904	475,225
Christian Reformed		227		61,721
Church of God--Anderson		1,016		80,118
Church of God--Cleveland	2,272	2,230	181,138	244,369
Church of the Brethren		576		82,104
Church of the Nazarene	2,070	2,101	286,339	280,050
Churches of Christ	6,830	6,790	627,938	601,580
Disciples of Christ	2,099	1,904	449,990	376,387
Episcopal Church	2,269	2,324	401,494	347,896
Evangelical Free		398		45,425
Evangelical Lutheran	4,500	4,434	1,691,038	1,629,505
Free Will Baptist		1,397		159,624
Friends		510		36,343
Foursquare Gospel		437		45,153
Latter Day Saints	2,523	2,986	794,753	924,438
Lutheran--Missouri Synod	2,404	2,512	804,750	807,773

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	5,091	4,424	896,142	775,768
Reformed Church in America		258		96,169
Roman Catholic	8,154	8,181	5,985,243	6,141,767
Salvation Army		379		32,283
Seventh Day Adventist		1,709		178,794
Southern Baptist	19,453	20,227	6,397,621	7,153,937
Unitarian-Universalist		224		18,240
United Church of Christ	2,287	2,198	486,880	466,915
United Methodist	20,816	19,783	4,162,340	3,813,797
Wesleyan Church		794		103,880

Table 1 lists all USAmerican bodies with 100,000 or more adherents in 1994. And for those with 500,000 or more, a comparison of 1980 and 1994 totals are offered. Only those counties considered non-metro in 1994 are included in this comparison. It should be noted that the movement of counties from non-metro to metro designation pulled about 6,000 congregations and over one million members from the non-metro to the metro column. This suggests one must be careful in dealing with statistics about church growth and decline to make sure that one is working from a common base.

(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.)⁴

[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 among the denominations and often subject to unintentional inflation. Specifically, the membership counts of the nation's 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. 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 12.7 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 such an important player in the rural areas as well. The 6.1 million adherents of the Roman church in non-metropolitan (1994 county count) 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 non-metro Baptists would easily exceed the 10 million mark, however.) The third largest presence in rural USAmerica is that of the United Methodists with just less than 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.

[See Map 2, Major Denominational Families by Counties of the United States, 1990](#)

Of the denominations with more than one million adherents reporting for the CMS study, 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.

Among the many valuable insights to be drawn from the CMS maps 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 19th century) explain much of this. Note the Roman Catholic dominance around the coastal edges of the nation and in a strip up the eastern bank of the Rockies. 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.⁵

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.⁶ With revived population 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 in many regions of the nation.

NOTES

1. After the 1990 census was processed, several counties were moved from non-metro to metro status. With this, about 6,000 congregations and 2 million adherents were redefined as metro.

2. Bradley, Green, Jones, Lynn, and McNeil, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States, 1990* (Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center, 1992).

This is the third in a series of publications, 1972, 1980, and 1990, in which many of the denominations reported church membership by counties across the nation. Because the Glenmary Order of Roman Catholics have played the key role in this effort, it is popularly known as the Glenmary report. Currently it is housed in the International Office of the Church of the Nazarene and directed by Rich Houseal. He has been very helpful in providing the statistical information found in this section. He has also furnished tables on the larger U.S. denominations which appear in the appendix. The totals here reflect the 1980 definition of metro counties. No 1994 rural counties were shifted from non-metro to metro designations. This reduced the total. Non-metro congregations to 10,375 with a membership of 29,197 are reported by denominations participating in the Glenmary

count.

3. Bradley, op.cit.

The eight denominations mentioned above count about 75,000 congregations. This would probably add 50,000 to 60,000 congregations to the CMS rural totals. They would also add 5 to 6 million adherents to the CMS count. Source: *The Yearbook of U.S. and Canadian Churches, 1993*, edited by Ken Bedell, Nashville: Abingdon Press.

4. As a result of the revision of counties from non-metro to metro since the 1990 census was processed, the Southern Baptists had a net of 1,200 churches and one-half a million members shifted from the non-metro to the metro column based on CMS adjustments. (Care should be exercised to note the difference between real church growth and "bookkeeping" growth in the metro area.) These figures are found or are derived from data reported in the CMS report cited earlier.

5. For documentation of these assertions, review the appendices at the end of this book. See S.S. Dupree and H.C. DuPree, "The Explosive Growth of the African-American Pentecostal Church," *Yearbook of U.S. and Canadian Churches, 1993*, edited by Ken Bedell. Also see M. Paloma.

6. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*. NY: Bantam Press, 1980. See also his *Future Shock* and *Power Shifts*.