

Rural Sociology and  
Rural Southern Illinois  
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## Introduction.

Let me make some statements about Illinois based on my understanding of national trends and the history of the Baptist movement. Then, you can destroy, correct, refine, and/or affirm these statements, and we can move toward a better understanding of the context and the way you are involved in ministry.

## The Nineteenth Century

Illinois was settled first in the south by yeoman farmers, and hunters. Many came from the Middle colonies, others from Kentucky. It became a free state, so slave holders moved on to Missouri. Religiously, this was an age of often fierce competition for converts among the Methodists, Baptists and Disciples of Christ. Methodists gained the majority for two primary sociological reasons greater strength among those coming to the state, and the Disciples won away many Baptists. (Note: Peter Cartwright and John Mason Peck)

To the north, where the land is prairie, settlement was delayed until mid-century and the development of steel plows capable of breaking the sod. Consequently, much of this land was settled by Germans Roman Catholic, and Lutheran, other Continental, and Irish emigrants. (Driven by the potatoe famine and the rise of communism in Germany.)

Communities developed according to the Jeffersonian model. The state was platted off in townships usually about six miles square. Often a village or small town would grow up near the center of the township. It would provide services and goods for the nearly 150 farm families living within its bounds. The coming of the railroads in the latter part of the century caused some modification of this pattern as some towns relocated to the tracks. And some towns, usually at the places where rail lines crossed, grew to become small cities.

Later, the coal deposits of southern Illinois was found and exploited. And still later the petroleum was exploited. This development attracted still more emigrants. And any number of towns and villages grew up around the mines and the petroleum fields.

The Baptist movement prospered during the 19th century and the Agrarian Age in the region. Many rural communities supported a Baptist congregation. As across the South, Baptists were country people and were late in moving to the towns and planting churches there. Their pastors were typically called from the harvest and did not seek formal education for the ministry. Consequently, the churches tended to be very traditional, strict, conservative. Many were

influenced by the Landmark movement among Baptists. Many rejected the inroads of modernity and modernism which were impacting religious life by the end of the century.

## The Twentieth Century

Many of the churches and associations in southern Illinois withdrew from the Northern Convention and became a part of the Southern Convention prior to World War I. Being in reaction to the Modernism they saw in Chicago University, they tended to be ultra conservative and continued the practices, language, and belief system of 19th Century rural Baptists. For some this translated into a defensive, anti-modern stance.

With an economy based on natural resources and their extraction, the region became vulnerable to depletion of resources, loss of comparative advantage in national and international markets, and changes in the tastes and mechanism of the larger economy. Mechanization in the mines, the development of rich deposits, and the shift to gasoline powered traction for the farms all hurt the economy and caused migration from southern Illinois. Many of the communities have lost population decade after decade. This took a toll on the churches both in resources and in membership. And because of their earlier stands, change in the way churches reached out and sought to evangelize was not an option.

As in other rural regions, leaders have sought to replace farm and mine jobs with factory jobs. They moved from the Agrarian Age to the Industrial Age a kind of rural, weak Chicago shadow. Some towns like, this one, prospered from this change. And so did others like Carbondale who were hitched to the engine of institutional services. But many of the rural communities where the strength of the Baptists lay continued to decline. And often where the community did not lose population in numbers the church did, in part because it insisted on continuing to be an Agrarian Age church and did not attract Industrial Age persons. Some of the differences such as organizational patterns might have been negotiable. Others, in the moral realm, many not have been. But the end result was that many rural Baptist churches of the region went into decline. Some died. Many became so small that they lacked the "critical mass" to grow, and are waiting to die, I am told. And while our loss has not been as deep as that of the Methodists and Disciples, it is serious.

Another factor that has impacted life here has been the decline of the railroads and the development of an interstate highway system. The towns along the interstates have prospered and many of the others have gone into serious decline. Effingham, Mt. Vernon and in a sense Marion are examples of this significant fact. Moving stuff quickly is an important value of this century. Still another factor is the distance to major airline service from the southern Illinois area.

In terms of retail trade, work, schooling and other services, southern Illinois has been Walmartized. By that I mean that the towns which were selected for a Walmart have prospered, but with a flat population, they have sucked the very life out of other communities across the region. This is true in many other places as well. Consequently, many of the small communities

where rural Baptist churches stand, are also weak and growing weaker. Something needs to be done. There is nothing sadder to me than the death of a church. And while my rational side recognizes that this will happen, my emotional and spiritual sides decry it.

### The Turn of the Millennium

Alvin Toffler first announced the coming of a third age or wave, The Information Age, about 25 years ago. It followed the Agrarian Age and the Industrial Age which I have discussed to this point. Much of what he said has come true, and more of it day by day, it seems. The assignment to speak on this subject came to me by e-mail to the little west Alabama town where I live. I wrote these words on a computer and sent them to Springfield for criticism and got them back in a few days by the same way. And the materials I will share in the next session were transferred to Springfield for duplication. My point, one made by Toffler, is that the Information Age decouples work from natural resources. I can write, and in a few years speak to conferences, from most any location. I can do this as well in Carrollton as I could have in Atlanta. Actually, the advantage for what I do falls to Carrollton, because there I am living what I am talking about. The point I am making just now is the primary one that I want to make in this session whereas the changes that came in the Industrial Age and in the Agrarian Age, because of their being tied to place and natural resources put southern Illinois at a disadvantage this is no longer the case for rural places. Many, many jobs that once required a person to live in a Chicago or Atlanta no longer do so.

It follows that some people may decide to live in southern Illinois in a rural community or in a small town and still be active in the work of the Information Age. The quality of schools might not even be a major deterrent, given access to the internet. With a service provider one can learn, buy, share, send, sell, find out about many things that formerly required a trip to a city.

You may need to discount some of what I say because of my biases, but I want to contend that a day of bright possibilities lie before rural churches. It may call for some adjustment. Many of these people will be bright, thoughtful, independent people. They will not be Baptist bred and raised, for the most part. Some may even be agnostic and hostile to begin with. You will need to make them welcome, minister to them, build relations, encourage others to come. You will be wise to let them help you in areas and on topics about which they can be your instructor. Then, they, because of the "principle of reciprocity," they will be bound to listen to you. We will address that in my second session. But the future is freighted with hope.

I have been talking about this hope in terms of the rechurching of rural America. This will mean the starting of new Information Age churches in places where Agrarian and/or Industrial Age churches exist and are not adapting. This will mean that some churches will need to be helped to become different and attractive to Information Age people.

Conclusion

Often we want to try to recapture the good from an earlier age. Many want to re-establish the small rural communities of a former age. I am suggesting that we must go forward to create new communities. And these will need new, different, or changed churches, although there will be some churches that will serve the Kingdom with very little, or not real change..