

# The Rechurching of Rural America

## Chapter 1, Introduction

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As Sunday morning's dawn spreads across rural North America, millions of people awake, arise, and prepare to make their way to worship in one of the more than 200,000 churches that dot the country-side and cluster in the hamlets and the towns of this land. For the most part, these are small congregations with fewer than 100 persons in attendance. Most have existed for a century or more. Typically, the churches have been bonded by ties of kinship and place, a history of shared experiences, pleasant memories, deep commitments to the continued viability of the church and a vibrant faith.

Some of these rural churches serve as the anchor or the center of a small community. Other rural congregations seem to be a community within themselves. They are *in* a place, but not really *of* it. Still others are part of a set of congregations that serve an area, cooperating, competing, creating and continuing a sense of community among the residents of the place.

Sunday in most of these 200,000 places of worship is a wonderful, warm experience. Accounts of the events in the life of each person, since they last met, are shared. Any absences are noted and explained. Intercessory prayers are offered. Words of encouragement, praise and consolation are exchanged. Feelings of love and mutual support pervade the place. Hope is restored. Self-esteem is enhanced. The presence of God is experienced in deep and powerful ways, personally and collectively. God is worshiped in a variety of ways—ritual, music, and sermon—depending on the heritage of the congregation.

Certainly, there are the “down” times as well in each of these congregations. Sickness and accidents strike loved ones. How is this to be understood? Death too comes, seldom when and how one might select. Families have troubles. Relational problems may disrupt the harmony of the congregation. Most often, however, peace will be restored and equilibrium re-established.

Many of the rural congregations are smaller and the membership older than they were in the remembered past. Questions about the future of the church sometime rise to the surface. Some ponder. Some pray. Some act. Some muddle through. Some find new health and vitality. Some die. Some vow to be a “faithful remnant”.

Generally, however, the people in these churches seem to see the hand of God working in the life of the congregation. They hold a deep faith that God will bring victory. It may not be a return to joys of the “golden” past, but it will be an appropriate victory for this time and this place. God will accomplish His purposes in and through the life of this church. As the six remaining active senior women members in one of the churches visited as a part of the current study declared, “We are still paying the bills, supporting missions, and providing help for the less fortunate. This being the case, we do not believe that God is through with our church yet.”

It is this kind of spirit that the researchers from the rural sociology department of the University of Missouri found again and again as they have studied the life of about 500 congregations in 99 select Missouri township, repeatedly, since 1952. This is a unique study in North America because it alone has longitudinal data from a set of rural churches extending for almost a half century. It offers the possibility of understanding how churches at the grass roots have responded to the waves of change that have come sweeping across our heartland. (The 1982 data was reported in the book, *The Rural Church* written by Edward Hassenger, John Holick and Kenneth Benson.)

Here in this report we will integrate the township level data of the University of Missouri researchers with the county level data gathered by the Religious Congregations and Membership Study (RCMS), since 1950, across Missouri. We believe that the result will be an accurate picture of what the current state of rural church life in America is.

The research reported here was funded by the Eli Lilly Endowment. The central purpose of the research has been to ascertain principles that have contributed to the sustainability of rural churches across the past half century. As the book unfolds, we will address this concern again and again. And in the final chapters we will share our conclusions about what factors have contributed to sustainability of rural churches, both collectively and individually. We hope that those who have the responsibility of caring for the viability of these churches will consider our findings and act upon them.

This report from the heartland is directed to pastors, lay leaders, students preparing for ministry, denominational leaders, and all those persons who care about the life of common people in very ordinary places. It will reveal what is happening in many, many tiny places among persons of faith. We want to provide an authentic look inside the churches of the countryside. We also want to present the larger picture of what has happened to the Christian faith in rural America over the past 50 years, or so.

While the primary data is from but one state, Missouri, we believe that it has much broader application. Persons from all across the continent, from many faith families, and from varied experiences in rural ministry have reviewed the manuscript and offered helpful insights, raised questions, and been of great assistance to us.

Missouri, the word, brings to mind several images—mules, the “Show-Me” State, Branson and country music, the Gateway to the West arch, Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, President Harry S. Truman—to list some of the most common ones. Our book draws upon these images. For example, we have described it as a “mule” book. As you probably know the mule is a hybrid creature. Its father is a jack ass and its mother a horse mare. The mule tends to exhibit some of the better qualities of both creatures. In this book we draw upon the data and the insights of sociological research and interpret the data from the perspective of theology. Hopefully, we capture and display the strengths of both disciplines. What we have to say about the rural church is based on scientific research, not theorizing. But we do not limit ourselves to describing rural churches, we are passionate about them being healthy, whole, and biblical. Further, we believe that a church has a spiritual, or divine, dimension that cannot be captured by social analysis.

It is fortunate for several reasons that Missouri is the location where this data has been collected over the past half century. Demographically, it contains the center point of the population of our nation. In the 1990 and 2000 Federal censuses a point in the southeastern part of the state was determined to be the spot where half of the people lived to the east and west and to the north and the south. Denominationally, there is a rich and diverse mix. At least nine significant religious bodies have their national/international headquarters in Missouri. Historically, it was a border state, north and south, and the gateway for the settlement of the west. St. Louis is the last eastern city and Kansas City is the first western one. The patterns of settlement in the rural areas have resulted in ethnic and racial diversity, as well.

We have selected as our title for this report **The Rechurcing of Rural America**. This title is indicative of and a response to four important facts the study reveals. One, rural and small town America is much changed since 1950. Second, the number of churches in the 99 townships

which have been the focus of the study has dropped from 505 in 1952 to 428 in 1999. Third, and most alarming, we found that the percent of the persons living in these townships who are church members may have dropped from just under 50% to just more than 36% over the past 50 years or so. The sociological data calls for a theological response and activity. Fourth, while the Baptist movement has become dominant in much of rural America, some of our data suggests that its influence and effectiveness is on the wane.

Many of the bonds that held the congregations of 1952 together, when the initial data was gathered, are diminished in their power. We will attribute much of this to changes in the economy and in community life in rural America. *Consolidation* is the term often used to describe the changes. Further, the mix of churches has changed. There are fewer “mainline” congregations and more sectarian and independent congregations. There are fewer open country and more town churches. We have found the churches in this sample much changed, operationally, since 1952. This is true of their facilities, their schedules, their activities, and the work life of their members. We have tried to determine what, if any, commonalities there are among the congregations that have prospered since 1952 and those who have closed. We will share what may be some clues for the future. We believe that a primary focus must be on forging new bonds, and/or strengthening the old ones.

And we believe that current and coming changes will call for still more “rechurcing” in rural America. We hope that our findings will contribute to this being done with vision and intentionality. Some rural areas are attracting new comers from the cities. Others are being resettled by new ethnic workers. Some are still declining in terms of population. These changes will call for new staffing patterns, new congregations, and the refocusing of old ones. Some churches, those in depopulating places and those that will not or cannot change, will die.

What we mean by the unfamiliar term, “rechurcing” is that rural places have indeed changed over the past half century; that, some will need to make changes soon if they are to continue; that, many new churches have been born during this half century; that, more new churches will need to be planted in the decades to come; and that denominational leaders need to be very intentional about strategizing for the church life of rural America.

We believe that the message of our book is a valid and important one for most of the 200,000 congregations in rural North American and for the many millions of persons who belong to and care about them. For this reason we have chosen to write a brief, concise, and readable book. We want it to be available and helpful. In addition, we want to augment the book with a web-page which will provide additional information, resources and stories about the victories of rural churches, ours and yours. We will place on the web-page several background papers that were written to set the boundaries for the project. A special feature will be an electronic library where rural church leaders will be encouraged to submit accounts of what has proved effective in their congregation and community. A living bibliography of books and other materials related to rural church life will be maintained on this web-site as well. This web-page will be managed by the Missouri School of Religion. For nearly a century it has worked ecumenically to train leaders for rural church work. It will be a good steward for this task.

Unlike pre-information age books that told a “frozen in time” story and soon became obsolete, we see this book as an introduction to a living, lively, on going conversation among rural people about how they are re-churcing the countryside. In addition to the web-page there will also be a second book, one that looks in depth at six of the townships, the ones that were studied in greater detail. It will provide a kind of ecology of ecclesiastical life. It will

demonstrate how the churches in a given area evolve to address the various interest groups and populations in a place.

### *Historical Background*

Now, to set the stage for this, let's consider how all those thousands of rural churches came to be out here in rural America. While each congregation has its own unique story, it is also the product of larger historical forces. To understand their stories one must attend to the larger one. The story features the Christian believer, the local church, the church universal, the community and the nation. A central issue is how they relate to one another. Here we will focus on church and community relationships.

In the early centuries of the Christian movement, individuals and families were converted from Judaism or from pagan religions and became members of congregations of fellow believers. Often these congregations were persecuted by the authorities and ostracized by the community. So, it was a conscious and often courageous act to convert to the Christian faith. Because of this the members of the congregation were very close to one another and felt a deep connectedness, at least this was the expectation of the apostles Paul, Peter and John as evidenced by the writings which they left and we accept as holy scripture. The believers experienced "community" within the church.

By the early 4<sup>th</sup> century Christianity had grown to the extent that it was adopted and established as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Soon, being a church member did not call for a brave commitment. It came with citizenship. Thus, community membership and church membership became coextensive. Because the Emperor Constantine initiated this change in the nature of the church, and its relationship to the community and the nation, this period that extended on to the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond was called the Constantinian era.

In that era the local church served a specific community, or parish, and almost everyone belonged to the church. One might say that the church was the spiritual arm, or department, of the community. The focus of church life shifted from witnessing to pagan and non-believers to the administration of sacraments, proclamation of the word, and pastoral care. Subtly, the nature of the church was modified from being essentially a community within itself that witnessed to the world, to being an integral part of the larger community. Salvation was found in the church and was mediated to individuals by the church.

When the Reformers broke with the Roman Catholic Church, most of them continued with the existing pattern of church and community relationship. A very few, often labeled Anabaptists, called for the restoration of the ecclesiology (church order and practice) that characterized the church in its beginnings. They wanted the church to accept as members only those who had had a transformational experience of grace and had, as adults, made a commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over their lives. They wanted to form local churches with members gathered from the larger community, instead of ones which were essentially coterminous with their geographical communities.

When the North American Continent was settled during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of the colonists came with the old, parish model understanding of the life of a church. Many of the colonies, which were to become states, established a particular denomination—Congregationalist or Anglican—as the official church and provided it with funds and other benefits. But there were other denominations present in the colonies—Presbyterian, Lutheran, German Reformed, and Roman Catholic which, although not established here, were

part of national churches back in Europe. Still others, Quakers, Baptists, and German pietistic sects championed freedom of conscience. Thus, they were opposed to the establishment of a particular Christian denomination by the political authorities.

Changing the social paradigm to allow for religious freedom and pluralism did not come easily. After 1688 with the ascension of William and Mary to the throne of England, dissenters were tolerated, but the social theory that called for the establishment of a particular faith as an integral part of community and national life continued to be normative.

The First and Second Great Awakenings, at the mid 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, brought the explosion of denominations that called for freedom of conscience and the restoration of New Testament ecclesiology. They gathered new congregations within existing communities, often in competition with a congregation which held to the parish model ecclesiology. In New England it was New Light Baptists breaking with the Congregationalists. In the Middle and Southern Colonies it was Methodists breaking with the Episcopalians. Most of these new congregations sought to create a “community of faith” within the larger community.

The Baptists adopted an organizing document called a “church covenant” which asked members to pledge to live lives of personal holiness, physical and spiritual care for one another, and mutual accountability in the form of the disciplining of members who violated the covenant in the hope of restoring them to a pious and holy lifestyle. The Methodists formed “class meetings” which served a similar function of encouraging personal morality and the forming of spiritual communities. Most towns, villages, and even hamlets came to have multiple congregations within them. This often resulted in fierce competition and some doctrinal conflict.

Lyle Schaller has recently termed as the “Made in America” denominations these emerging faith families and contrasts them with the “Western European Heritage”, or establishment, denominations. Methodism, as a reform movement within Anglicanism carried strains of both ecclesiologies. It spread quickly on the expanding Western frontier as the continent was settled in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It became the most common expression of church life in rural America across the nation in that century.

A more evangelistic wing of Presbyterianism, arose on the frontier and gathered congregations of new converts with significant success. It took the name Cumberland Presbyterians. Rural Missouri was one of its strong-holds. Rev. Finis Ewing, one of the founding ministers of this movement moved to Missouri in the 1820s and founded a school for ministers there.

In the wake of the Second Great Awakening, Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone made common cause for the restoration of the New Testament type of church and formed the Disciples of Christ/Christian Church . This movement also carried a strong commitment to ecumenism as the dual name suggests.

It was these Frontier Four denominations—Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and Disciples of Christ/Christian--that were destined to play primary roles in the settlement of the Midwest and the West during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As one seeks to understand local church life in rural America, it is crucial to keep in mind that both of these paradigms, or models of what a church is, and how it relates to the place where it is, are present in the context, and often even within a given congregation.

Prior to the purchase of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 during the administration of Thomas Jefferson, those who settled in the region that was to become Missouri were Roman Catholics, mostly from France. They established towns and planted churches along the

Mississippi River and inland in the Lead Belt, a mining area, south and southwest of the modern city of Saint Louis. With the change in ownership of the territory, many Protestant settlers came from Kentucky which was in the throes of a great revival of religion called the Second Great Awakening.

*(You will want to find a map of Missouri to refer to. Note that various chapters will refer to natural areas within the state such as the Ozarks and the Bootheel. If you will google these sections you will find statistically data and maps.)*

In the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Baptists, Cumberland Presbyterians, and Methodists established congregations, particularly along the northern side of the Missouri River. Many slaves were settled on farms in this region which came to be known as “Little Dixie”. The 1830s saw a great surge by the Disciples of Christ movement, some of it coming out of the infant Baptist churches in the region.

Then in the 1850s Germanic Lutherans, Catholics and Calvinists settled in the area along and south of the Missouri River from Saint Louis to Boonville and beyond. Much of this area came to be called the “German Ozarks”. Following the Civil War, Union veterans streamed into the Ozarks to homestead and form new communities. And the building of railroad lines throughout the state brought Irish workers, some of whom settled in the new towns along the rail lines. The railroads also encouraged various European ethnic groups to come to Missouri, buy land from the railroad company, and establish a town which would be much like the one from which they had immigrated. Of course, included would be the church of the colony. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the state has been settled up and churches established along with many small communities.

The 1900 U. S. Census of population counted 3,106,665 residents in the Show-Me state. The 1906 Federal Census of religion reported that 1,199,239 of these persons were affiliated with churches whose denomination had cooperated in the collection of this data. The Roman Catholic church counted 382,642 of these persons as members in 457 parishes. More than half of the Roman Catholics resided in St. Louis City. The various Methodist denominations counted 214,004 members in 2,533 congregations. About 200,000 of these members were in the denominations which have since merged to form the United Methodist Church. The Baptist churches affiliated with the Missouri and Southern Conventions numbered 176,208 members in 1,894 local churches. The various other Baptist groups, mostly African American, swelled this figure by about 22,000, or to just less than 200,000. The Christian/Disciples churches reported 159,050 members in 1,545 congregations. The Lutheran churches which are now known as Missouri Synod Lutheran Church reported 41,185 members in 175 congregations. The various Presbyterian bodies reported 71,500 members in 788 local churches. The largest number of these members and churches were affiliated with the Cumberland Presbyterians. The various Mennonite denominations counted only 1,032 members in 17 congregations. The denominations which became the United Church of Christ reported 43,702 in 238 congregations.

Before, I continue the story, let's pause for a moment and look at the comparable statistics for 2000. The population of Missouri nearly doubled during the century to just less than six million. Since the reporting denominations are now very different, the total membership figures may not tell an accurate story, but in 2000 the participating denominations counted 1,465,017 full members. The number 2,893,159, which includes adherents as well as members, may provide a better picture. The Roman Catholic church had grown to 856,964 in 537 parishes. United Methodists counted 226,478 adherents in 933 local congregations. The churches affiliated

with the Missouri Baptist Convention numbered 1,824 congregations and 797,752 adherents. The whole of the Baptist family swells this total to more than one million. The Disciples of Christ and Independent Christian churches totaled 651 congregations with 183,818 adherents. The Missouri Synod Lutherans reported 140,315 adherents in 311 congregations. The Presbyterian denominations reported 352 congregations with 32,693 adherents. You will note that some denominations lost adherent totals while the population doubled. Some gained adherents but not as rapidly as the population grew. Others grew more than the population rate of growth and thus gained “market share”. What questions does this raise in your mind?

The Roman Catholics, the Southern Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, and the various Mennonite bodies have grown faster than the population. The Mainline Protestant denominations have not done so. The 2000 Religious Congregations and Membership Study reports that more than 51 percent of the Missourians are claimed by churches participating in the study as adherents. And while the 2000 study counted more denominations by far than the 1906 census, the number of congregations in the state is down from about 9,000 to about 7,000, as reported. The lack of participation by African American and Independent congregations may be a major cause of this decrease.

One must be careful not to draw absolute conclusions because of the differences in the data sets, but it would appear that many small rural churches have closed in the past century. So while there are more denominations at work, and more people related to the existing churches, they are gathered in larger congregations. As we will see in the next chapter, changes in where people live, work and congregate have driven this.

Now back to our story, when one traveled across rural Missouri in 1900, one would find areas where there were ethnic colonies with a single church for the whole of the community—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, German Reformed, or Mennonite. Much more common, however, would be a community with two to four of the Frontier Four denominations represented by congregations. Interesting patterns of cooperation and competition, even conflict developed among these congregations. For example, in many communities a building would be erected to house a school. A union, or non-denominational, Sunday School would be formed and would meet in this community school building. Three or four different denominations would take turns providing for a worship hour after the Sunday Schools classes were conducted. Perhaps the Baptists on the first Sunday, then the Methodists, the Disciples and the Cumberland Presbyterians on the fourth Sunday provided a preacher who led in worship. On the other hand, these same denominations might engage in fierce debate concerning which one was really most like the churches of the New Testament because the “restorationist” theme had strong public support in rural areas.

Students of rural community life have found the ethnic colonies to be strong multibonded communities. Novelist Wallace Stegner would have called them communities of “nesters” by which he meant places where the settlers were committed to creating a true commonwealth in the full sense of the word. Stegner contrasted this with the new settlements led by “boomers”; this is, folks looking to make a big profit and move on.

My sense is that the emerging communities where the Made in America denominations formed congregations were usually a mix of nesters and boomers. One of the challenges of the churches in these communities was to tame them, and to replace the boomer mentality with a nester mentality. The story of their effectiveness in this effort is mixed.

Many others of the local churches one finds today in rural America trace their

denominational history to a time of great religious ferment near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and on into the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the nation industrialized, moved to a market economy and accepted the world view of modernity, many rural people reacted against these changes. Often they saw their national denomination as compromising the historic faith by embracing these trends. And some accused the national church of moving toward the Western European Heritage ecclesiology, abandoning the effort to restore the New Testament patterns. Consequently, several new denominational groups hived off of the Methodists–Nazarene, Pentecostal, Assembly of God, and other Holiness groups. The Disciples lost many of their rural and poor congregations to the non-instrumental Churches of Christ. The Baptists lost many congregations to an independency movement, to the American Baptist Association, and significant numbers of members and pastors to the Church of God, Cleveland, movement. Interestingly, the Cumberlands and the larger Presbyterian body reunited early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Episcopalians and Congregationalists simply lost many members to atheism, agnosticism, or to the more evangelical denominations. Often they were the business and professional persons in small towns. Their children, went off to college and then settled in the large cities of America. By the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the period covered by this study, their presence in rural America was greatly diminished.

But to continue the story, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the spread of the anti-modernist, often rural, sects across the nation. And in the last third of the century they were joined by large numbers of the New Charismatics who rejected denominationalism and wanted exciting, spirit-filled worship experiences. It was triggered by a rekindling of “speaking in tongues”, signs and miracles. So, today some small town communities that had the four basic Protestant congregations at the beginning of the century, came to have 10 or so congregations, and then have experienced a gradual decline in the number of congregations serving it. I say serve, but often these sectarian groups, although in a community, did not have much of a community function. For them, the community that they served was the gathered church itself. Most of the community needs were served by persons from the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Disciples churches.

How then did all of those thousands of open county, village, and small town churches come into existence? Some came with a colony of persons from Europe and sought to replicate village life here in North America. Many more were established as a missional response to the settlement of the frontier. Among these some were planted by missionaries supported by mission boards “back East”. Some resulted from the establishment of a non-denominational Sunday School, often with support from the American Sunday School Union, which as the community grew hived off two, three or four congregations with denominational connections. Some were the work of local lay persons and itinerating preachers who saw a need for a church of their denominational connection in a developing settlement and took steps—revival, summer-time Bible school, or camp meeting, to generate an interest in having one. Some were the result of conflicts within local congregations. The African American congregations arose after Emancipation as an expression of freedom and as a setting for persons called to ministry to exercise their spiritual gifts. Some were the result of the formation of new denominations or movements as a consequence of unhappiness with the existing ones. The successful groups have expanded into existing and forming communities. And some independent congregations are the product of charismatic leaders who felt called of God to form a congregation but who lacked the credentials or the will to connect it to an existing denominational family.

Sill another type, one not mentioned to this point, is the federated, or non-denominational church which resulted as the consequence of the shirking population in an old rural community. In some instances this was the reversal of the process that caused the non-denominational Sunday School to divide into congregations of differing denominations as the community developed. Most of these were formed during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1952 when this study was first conducted, the stock of churches in rural America could not only be catalogued in terms of denominational affiliation, but also in terms of being a town church or a country church. Generally, the country churches were populated by farmers and their families, were conservative theological, had poor facilities, and worshiped only once or twice a month. The town churches tended to draw from business and professional people, have good facilities, more activities, and worship every Sunday. Within many denominations there was a kind of social class tension between the country and the town congregations. We will see that this has changed.

Please, reflect upon the history of the community where you live and its churches. How does this story fit it and its congregations? Keep asking this question as you read on through this book.

### *The Plan for the Book*

The next two chapters will summarize the changes that have occurred in rural and small town life since 1952 in North America, economically, socially, and religiously. Note will be made of how the changes have “moved the cheese” of those who work in and for rural churches. The lead writer for these chapters is Jere Gillis. He heads the rural sociology department at the University of Missouri.

Chapter four summarizes the data that was gathered in the most recent study of the rural churches in 99 Missouri townships and compares it with the findings from the three previous studies. This is useful data. It contains some important insights about local churches, pastors, and denominations.

I was the principal writer, but drew upon the resources of others. My background includes 19 years teaching sociology on the college level, 13 years leading the rural church program for the Southern Baptist Convention, and since 1998 I have headed a rural Baptist judicatory in Alabama. I am ordained as a Baptist minister and have served rural and small town churches along the way since 1957.

Chapters five through eight look at the data more intensely by integrating it with the RCMS material and looking at various types of economic and demographic characteristics in selected counties across the state. I was the primary author of these chapters.

Chapter nine was written by Arnold Parks, a CME minister and social scientist who is on the faculty of Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Park did field work with three predominantly African American congregations. His chapter provides insight into a set of rural churches which is generally not available.

Chapter ten looks at the growing Hispanic population in rural areas. It reports on several creative ministries. John Bennett, who serves as the president of the Missouri School of Religion, was the primary author. Bennett is an ordained minister in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ connection.

Chapter eleven has as its focus ecclesiology. I describe the church as having both divine and a human side. I look at the missiological considerations of an effort to rechurch rural

America.

Chapter twelve is directed to the judicatory persons who are concerned about religious life in rural America. Here we will address the issue of sustainability and will seek to draw together our thoughts and insights concerning rural church work at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *Our Purpose*

We love life in rural churches and communities. We want them to be healthy, lively and sustainable. We will share what we have found through our surveys, observations and analysis. We hope and pray that what we share will prove to be helpful to the rural churches and communities in their quest to be healthy, sustainable and effective.

Again, we hope that this book will, through the related website, take on a life of its own. We recognize that few denominations are now addressing the needs of small and rural churches. If these congregations are to be helped, much of the help will need to come from efforts to network among themselves.

Further, we recognized there is significant diversity among the churches presently serving rural America. Help for the churches with a colony or Western European Heritage background may not fit the needs of a Made in America, or conquest, church. We cannot offer a program or a solution that will fit them all. But we hope that we can stimulate understanding, reflection and conversations that will result in solutions.

Finally, we hope that our research will encourage the churches and their judicatories to take a fresh look at their mission in the emerging and changing rural setting. We believe that there is a crying need to develop policies and procedures by and for denominational officers to rebuild rural communities and to rechurch them.