

**Chapter Two**  
**From a Place to Farm to a Place to Live:**  
**The Transformation of Rural America in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century**  
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The Missouri Rural Church Study has been America's principal source of information about the Rural Church for 50 years, now. The study was originally funded in 1952 by the Rockefeller Foundation to look at religion in some of the most rural areas of Mid-America.. At that time 100 townships representing Missouri's economic, cultural and ecological diversity were selected and representatives of each church in these townships were interviewed. None of these townships contained a town or village with more than 2500 inhabitants. Subsequently, all churches in the same townships were studied in 1967, in 1982 and in 1998-99. The 1982 and 1998-99 studies were funded by the Eli Lilly endowment. The goal of each of these studies was to document the condition of rural churches and how changes in society at large had influenced religious life in Rural America.. Although each of these hundred townships has experienced substantial change over the past half century, their fundamental rural nature remains unchanged. In 1999 only two townships in the sample contained towns with more than 2500 inhabitants. Only two of the 100 do not have an active congregation within its bounds. (One has not had a congregation during the half century being studied. So, we often refer to 99 townships in the study. The second churchless township emerged only in the most recent replication of the study.)

To understand the changing life of the rural church, we must first understand the changes that have occurred in the rural communities where they are rooted. The Rockefeller Foundation financed the first Missouri rural church study because of a perceived need for information to help modernize and reform religious life in the countryside. In 1952, Rural America was undergoing dramatic changes. Farm numbers which had peaked in the 1930s were beginning to decline at a rapid rate and for the first time in our history, farmers were becoming a minority in Rural America.

In 1952 the institutions which served and depended upon farm populations were already in trouble, although few realized this to be the case. The one room schools, crossroad hamlets, and open country churches that served farm families were faced with a double challenge-- they were losing the people they served at a time when more was being expected from them. Rural schools lacked the resources needed to provide the comprehensive education required by an industrial age, hamlet businesses could not provide the breadth and quality of goods and services demanded and churches that could not afford full-time professional clergy had difficulty providing for the needs and wants of current and potential members. Rural leaders and reformers pointed out that institutions like the one room school and rural church were pre-modern and ill prepared to meet the needs of modern rural life. For these reformers, the future of rural religious life required a reorganization of rural churches. The first Missouri Rural Church study was designed to provide the information needed to carry out this reorganization.

**Changes in Rural America**

Rural America was optimistic in 1952. High commodity prices during World War II and the reconstruction of Europe which fueled expansion and improvements on the farms and in the towns. Tractors were replacing draft animals. Mechanical cotton pickers had been introduced. Electrification had come to the farms. Milking machines, heated brooder houses, and equipment to put grain and hay in storage became much more common. Homes were being modernized with

running water piped to kitchens and bathrooms, and central heating being added. Television sets were bringing entertainment and information into the parlors. Young families were being formed and settling on farmsteads. Farm to Market programs were improving roads. Most families could now afford an automobile and a truck. Stores at the crossroads and around the town square were well-stocked and were doing the best business in memory. Life was good and getting better, it seemed to many. A Missouri farmer was in the Whitehouse. A Kansas farm raised man was about to replace him. It seemed to be a Golden Age for rural America.

Actually, the seeds of destruction of the old rural paradigm were beginning to sprout. Modern markets, means of production, communication and transportation would make the little six mile square township worlds of the Jeffersonian or Agrarian vision obsolete. The old patterns of social dominance and economic dependence that welded town business and professional persons and farm dwellers together were cracking. Although farmers made up the majority of rural inhabitants and town and country were linked economically, the social worlds of town dwellers and farmers were much more distinct then, than they are today.

### Demographic Change.

Throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rural areas in New England, the South and the Midwest experienced population decline. Agricultural mechanization allowed more land to be farmed by a single family and stagnant or declining farm commodity prices required farmers to cultivate more land to maintain a decent standard of living. This resulted in a fluctuating, but overall steady, decline in the number of farms and in the number of businesses and institutions that catered to farm populations. This decline was largely the result of the out-migration of farm and town youth. Relatively few farms were forced into bankruptcy, but many farms were unable to generate enough income to support to families. As a result, farm children left the land and their parents worked the land until their retirement. At that time they usually rented most of the land to neighbors who were trying to expand in order to provide an opportunity for the next generation. Upon the death of the elders, farms were usually sold to neighbors. In many parts of the country, this pattern has repeated itself for more than a century.

Until the 1970s rural Americans declined in numbers. However that decade saw a rural population “turn-around”. Many rural counties experienced growth and together their populations grew more rapidly than urban ones. However, farming dependent areas continued to lose population.

New types of rural community were emerging at this time. Thanks in part to the interstate highway system and the availability of cheap rural land and labor, manufacturing plants began to leave the big cities and relocate to Rural America. Farm wives took a factory job to supplement family income. Most did not mind periodic lay offs from the plant. This allowed them to catch up with chores at home. In addition, rural communities with natural amenities such as lakes and forests also experienced growth. Increased national affluence led to rapid growth in the leisure and outdoor recreation industries. Recreation areas not only provided tourist related jobs, but many attracted a large contingent of retirees and urban refugees.

In the 1980s, the overall population of rural America stagnated, however. The percentage of persons living in rural areas declined again. Growth and decline was quite un-even. Communities dependent on agriculture lost population at a rapid rate. The farm credit crisis actually forced a large number of middle aged and young operators of farms to move on. Farm bankruptcies also had a devastating impact upon supply businesses that extended credit to farmers. Agriculture was not the only casualty in the 1980s. The financial crisis that affected

agriculture also affected manufacturing. Many of the manufacturing plants that came to rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s, in search of cheap land and labor relocated. Even cheaper land and labor existed in Asia and Latin America and improved information systems made it possible to ensure product quality over long distances. Shoe, apparel and textile manufacturing, once staples in small town economies, all but disappeared from the rural landscape.

Not all rural areas experienced stagnation and decline in the 1980s. Areas within commuting distances of suburbs or small cities continued to experience growth. In addition, communities with the natural amenities required for outdoor recreation continued to enjoy substantial growth.

In the 1990s America's rural population began to grow again—albeit not as rapidly as suburban areas. While most agriculturally dependent counties continued to lose citizens, some farm areas—those concentrations of industrialized hog and poultry operations—experienced growing populations. Much of this growth was due to a dramatic influx of immigrant workers—first from Southeast Asia and later from Mexico and Central America. Recreation based counties continued to grow with most of the new “ruralites” taking advantage of improvements in communication and transportation networks. These improvements in the flow of information and people, allowed some service oriented businesses to relocate to rural areas and other people to settle down in the countryside and to commute as much as 100 miles to small cities and suburbs to work. Rural population grew by about six million, or more than 10 % to 56 million. In Missouri one finds significant growth among rural, non-farm populations. What can this mean for rural and small town churches? (Studies of counties and townships in each of these categories of rural growth and decline can be found in chapters five through eight.)

### Economic and Occupational Change.

One of the most important results of the demographic changes we have noted, is the increased diversity of rural areas in America. Until the 1950s, the word “rural” was synonymous with agriculture in North America. For example in Missouri, 57% of rural residents lived on farms in 1950. Rural communities that were not based on agriculture normally had economies based on extractive industries such as mining, logging or fishing. These latter communities were a minority of rural places and were generally confined to isolated mountain and coastal regions of the country.

By 1990, agriculture was a significant activity in only 29% of rural U.S. counties but 49% of non-metropolitan counties had economies based on manufacturing or recreation. By 1990 only 6% of rural Americans and 10% of rural Missourians lived on operating farms. These changes were largely the result of technological changes. Agriculture had ceased to be the defining characteristic of Rural America. As a result of the above changes, the economic basis of rural life has diversified considerably. The most important consequence for us here is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about the “rural community” and the “rural church”. Many, perhaps most, rural areas are no longer dominated by the agricultural calendar and the swings of the agricultural economy. Without a common “rhythm of life,” programming for rural churches has become more difficult.

Dramatic as they may be, the changes in the farm population actually understate the shift away from agriculture in rural America. Not only did most rural Americans live on farms in 1950, but living on a farm had a different meaning in 1950 than it does today. In 1950 people who lived on farms, depended on their farm for all or most of their livelihoods. Today this is not the case. Now most farms families are heavily dependent upon off-farm employment. For example, in the

Missouri of 1950, 15% of farm operators had full time off-farm jobs and 14% of farm women had off-farm employment. By 1990, 42% of Missouri farm operators worked full time off farm and 53% of farm women had off-farm employment. Today fewer than 30% of American farm families receive a majority of their income from farming. (If one figures in the relatively higher average age of men and women on farms these numbers are even more arresting.)

Small town businesses and professional services have often declined in numbers more rapidly than rural populations. Improved transportation and communication systems have permitted rural residents to bypass small town businesses for regular purchases and go to the “Walmart towns” or nearby cities where consumers have more choices and often pay lower prices. Since a large portion of rural residents commute to a larger town or city, shopping in these towns is often as convenient as shopping locally. If a town does not have a Walmart, small town businesses are likely to suffer as harried farmers seek lower prices and rural residents shop near their workplace instead of near their home. The same infrastructure that allowed manufacturing plants to move to the country allowed rural people to travel to nearby cities to work and to shop.

### Community Life.

The nature of community life has dramatically changed in the past 50 years. In 1952, most people rural and urban alike, lived their lives in a single community or neighborhood. They lived, worked, learned, socialized, worshiped and died in a single place. In reality two types of rural communities existed at that time. One was the town communities which were dominated by the merchants, but depended upon the trade from others living in small towns and nearby farms.

However, community life for farmers revolved around neighborhoods and territories outside town limits. These neighborhoods were the source of socializing and social support contained the basic institutions needed by the farm populations—the one room school, the one room church, and often the crossroads general store. By 1952, these communities were under severe pressure. As farm populations declined, neighborhood schools, small businesses and some churches disappeared. Vestiges of these communities continue to exist, however, the surviving open country churches are the remnants of these old farm communities.

By the 1960s a new rural community began to emerge. This community was and continues to be centered around the consolidated school and the small town where the school was located. As farmers began attending high school with town residents the distinctions between the town and farm communities started to blur and disappear. Where agriculture remains the dominant industry, these “new” rural communities have continued to experience decline as farms have disappeared and local people travel to larger towns to shop and to obtain medical services.

Improvements in transportation have had profound impacts on rural towns. When the Midwest was settled, towns were located so they were accessible to the farm populations that they served. In an age of horses and dirt roads, this meant there were hamlets every 5-6 miles and larger towns every 15-30 miles. Often this was the county seat town with governmental offices and services. Today with cars and paved roads, people can travel further in an hour than they could in half a day in the 1940s. This phenomena has led to the relocation and concentration of businesses in a few larger towns and the obsolescence of most rural business districts. Rural areas may still be places to live, but many rural communities are no longer places to carry out business.

Community life today is remarkably different from the world of the 1950s where most people lived, earned a livelihood and shopped in their home communities. Today these activities are physically separated. Among the consequences of this separation is that time once devoted to

participating in community life is now spent on driving-- to work, to shop and to get medical care. Civic participation has declined in all parts of America, but its impact is probably greater in rural America where it is not possible to replace volunteers with professional staff.

### Family changes.

Family structure has changed considerably since 1952. Out-migration has meant that some rural areas have a large elderly population living far from their children. Although traditional two parent families are more common in rural areas than in urban suburban areas, divorce and single parenthood has become increasingly common in rural areas as well. More importantly, women have ceased to be homemakers and have increasingly found employment from the home. In fact rural women in Missouri are more likely to work outside the home than suburban or urban women. Women have less time to contribute to their churches and daycare is now a serious issue for those with young children. These changes have contributed to the increased heterogeneity and complexity of rural life. What we have said about rural life in Missouri is applicable across North America.

### **From Homogeneity to Diversity: Types of Rural Communities**

The largest consequence of the changes outlined above has been a trend toward increased diversity in rural America at a time when mass media and consumer values seem to be homogenizing our cities and suburbs. In 1951 it was easy to talk about the “rural life” and the “rural church” as generic categories, because agriculture was the dominant occupation throughout rural America and open country churches made up nearly two thirds of rural congregations. Ethnic and historical differences distinguished one community from another, but orientation and rhythm of life of rural residents was remarkably similar.

Today more people are living in rural areas than in 1951, but rural communities are increasingly diverse. Today, the only characteristic shared by most rural communities is a small population base. Rural America is extremely diverse--so diverse that it is difficult to summarize the differences. To illustrate some of this diversity, we will describe five types of rural areas found in Missouri and throughout the U.S. Three types will be from communities that are experiencing significant population growth and two types of communities which have experienced stable or declining populations. The rural areas that we are talking about here represent the very smallest rural communities--those with towns of less than 2500.

### Types of Growing Rural Communities

Nearly half of the townships in our study experienced net population growth since 1950, with many of them fluctuating across time. Growing communities are those who have made the transition from a farming community to one based on other economic activities. These communities are a diverse lot, but I will discuss three types of these communities based upon the sources of their population growth--immigrant communities, commuter or rural lifestyle communities and recreation/retirement communities.

#### *Immigrant*

Some rural communities owe most of their population growth to a large influx of foreign, predominantly Hispanic, workers who are employed in the expanding food processing industry.

Since the late 1970s, the meat industry has undergone rapid change. Increased demand for white meat has led to an expansion of turkey and broiler production. Innovations in pork production and beef packing led to the movement of hog and beef production to new communities as well. Processing facilities needed more workers to meet the expanded demand and there was not sufficient local labor available. The packing industry has historically relied on immigrant labor. In order to expand production in the 1990s, industry turned to foreign workers again.

The small communities of Noel and Milan, Missouri are two examples of the many rural communities that are experiencing changing ethnic content. In 1990 Milan Missouri had 1769 people and Noel had 1169. At that time, the two communities had very different economies and cultures. Milan was a Northern Missouri agricultural community that had been adversely affected by the farm crisis of the 1980s. Its largest employer was a frozen foods plant. Noel was in many ways a typical Ozark community. Agriculture had not been an important industry for decades. The local population worked in nearby poultry processing plants and light industry. In the 1980s Hudson foods opened up a new poultry plant nearby and Tyson foods expanded its production facilities. In the 1990s Premium Standard Farms opened a hog slaughter plant in Milan. By 2000 Milan had 1958 persons and Noel 1480. More importantly was the change in ethnic composition. The two communities had 24 Hispanic residents in 1990 and 968 in 2000. Anglo populations in the two communities actually declined significantly!!

#### *Recreation and Retirement*

Other small communities have grown because of outdoor recreation opportunities. Missouri has scenic hills and numerous lakes and reservoirs. These reservoirs are sources of weekend recreation and are favorite places for second home construction. Recreation and construction create new employment opportunities. Second homes frequently become retirement homes and this in turn creates new demands for health services and other amenities. Recreation communities often have growing service and retail establishments. Prosperous in-migrants bring capital, expertise and connections with them. Warsaw, Missouri or Eldon, Missouri are two communities which fit this profile. These areas have experienced steady growth over the past three decades. Conflicts between locals and newcomers do occur, but on the balance the newcomers can bring energy to their communities—if they choose to become involved. Recreation based industries are not high paying ones, and housing for local populations is often an issue and new residents pay premium prices for real estate.

#### *Lifestyle*

The third type of community is what I call the lifestyle community. Visually, these communities sometimes resemble areas surrounding recreation communities. In both you will see new houses springing up on large lots in fields and pastures, but there are some important differences between recreation and lifestyle areas. The growing population of lifestyle communities is comprised of commuters. They have chosen to live far from where they work because of affordable housing, safety, pace of life, and/or country living. New residents in these communities are moving away from the negatives of urban life. Life style communities may not have tremendous recreation or employment opportunities. They have rural tranquillity and picturesque rural vistas. In these areas, population grows much more rapidly than employment. While small towns in recreation communities see growth in retail and service employment, this is often not the case in lifestyle communities. Many of the small towns in these areas seem unaffected by the growing populations. Commuters rarely pass through the small towns in their area and often shop near where they work. Businesses and churches do not thrive unless they

move to the small towns along the roads that people use to travel to work.

Commuters are a very diverse group of people. Some are there to enjoy the splendid isolation of rural living and want little to do with their neighbors. Others want to be actively involved in community life, but their long rides to work give them less time and energy to devote to civic affairs than people who live and work in a community. The commuter's quality of life is not tied to the economic well-being of the communities in which they live—this is something that can separate them from old time residents whose livelihoods are connected to the community economy. Examples of these communities would be found in rural Callaway and Gasconade counties in Central Missouri where large numbers of people commute from their rural acreages to small cities within an hours drive of their homes.

### Types of Declining and Stable Rural Communities.

#### *Farm Service*

The stereotypical declining community is probably still the agricultural community. The Midwestern town surrounded by small farms and dedicated to providing services to farm populations is still the most common image of rural America. Farm numbers have now declined in the U.S. steadily for more than 50 years. There are fewer farmers to serve than in the past and improved transportation has made it possible for farmers and rural residents to travel farther to shop—leaving little business for the small town shop keepers who lack the volume of business to compete. These small towns are characterized by deteriorating buildings, empty store fronts and an aging population. These towns are often described as “dying towns”—each year they have fewer and fewer businesses and their population declines as buildings become uninhabitable. The towns of Northern Missouri which typify this—towns like Keytesville, Gentry and Mound City. These are communities that have had a prosperous agrarian past, but whose future looks dim. They typically lack the amenities to be a recreation destination and are located too far away from employment sites to attract commuters. Local populations have a large number of elderly residents and many businesses and services are in crisis because of a declining client base. This type of community may represent less than a sixth of rural communities today. *In our set of 99 rural townships in 1952 14%, are still rural in 2005.*

#### *Persistent Poverty*

The second type of declining community is often found in what the USDA has classified as persistent poverty counties. These are counties that have very different economic bases, but they are characterized by large numbers of poor people who are not farm operators. None of these areas have ever been prosperous family farming communities. In Missouri these counties are found in the Ozarks, the Mississippi Delta and some marginal farming counties of Northern Missouri. Most were formerly subsistence farming areas or share-cropping areas. Tax bases and educational achievement levels have been traditionally low. People have stayed in these areas because of attachment to land and family and because they often lacked the education and skills to prosper in the outside world. Nonetheless, these areas have experienced steady population decline as slowly and surely, the best educated and most ambitious youth have migrated to urban centers. These areas typically lack natural amenities to base a recreational industry upon. Poverty and the low tax base that accompanies poverty, make it difficult for local governments to finance the infrastructure and schools needed to attract new industries or commuters.

### **Implications of Diversity for the Faith Community**

The increased diversity of rural communities provides us with both hope for the future and challenges for the present. The specter of the declining rural community no longer is the image that dominates rural America. Most rural communities have stable or growing populations. The largest challenge for most rural communities today is more often rapid change than demographic decline. Hope is more common than despair in rural churches today, according to those who were interviewed in our study.

At the same time, the challenge of increased diversity is a large one. Many rural congregations continue to be led by persons who have their roots and their identities tied to the agrarian communities that existed when these churches were founded. These wonderful communities of faith, tradition and commitment to place are not places where most newcomers, or the person who does not have that connection, can feel attracted, welcome and comfortable. It is not easy for a congregation to serve a diverse population or membership. In addition, the increased diversity of rural areas makes it more difficult for seminaries and denominations to provide the training needed by rural clergy and lay leaders. When rural life was synonymous with farming, it was far easier to develop educational programs than it is today.

Our study found that while the population of rural Missouri and of the 99 township from which we gathered information has grown, the numbers of persons involved in the life of the churches has declined. Later in this study we will consider causes and responses. Here, I only want to note that the churches have opportunities.

## **Conclusions**

The rural community of 1952 is much different than the rural community of 2005. It is different in terms of socioeconomic activities and support. It is different in its diversity. It is different in its rhythms of life. It is different in its relationship to the larger world. Its institutions are also different.

Among the persons we found in a rural community was a “30 something” lawyer who serves also as the pastor of a Primitive Baptist church. He speaks eloquently of the need to return to the “old paths”, or the old ways. Apparently, he is an exception. And the personal, family, church and community life of 1952, or 1852 for that matter, does not seem to be an option. Somehow we must learn to live in our present context with an eye toward the future.

The “old paths” of our lawyer/pastor were once the “new way” that his spiritual ancestors believed the truths of the Holy Scripture were to be applied to the context in which they found themselves back in the mid Eighteenth Century when the Baptist movement expanded in America. And, on closer examination of his “old paths,” one finds that they accepted human slavery and found justification for this practice in an appeal to the Scriptures. So, the “old paths” are not only not eternal but also subject to error. This is to say that the old was once new and that being old does not mean better or perfect. What is really needed is to find ways of responding to the current context in rural America that applies biblical revelation and principles appropriately. This must be one element in the task of Rechurching Rural America.

## **Suggested Further Reading**

Rex Campbell, *Revolution in the Heartland*.

A rural sociologist Rex Campbell has published a book about change in rural America during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He grew up in the Missouri Ozarks. The book is an interesting

mix of personal reflection and academic insight. It is an electronic book which can be accessed by typing his title into your search engine.

Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets*.

Doubleday, 2001.

A wonderful account by the current professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School concerning his experiences in the 1970s as a city raised minister in his first parish, a rural Missouri Synod Lutheran one. It was across the Mississippi River in rural Illinois.