

## Chapter Six Religion in the Ozarks

The Ozarks is the name of a hilly area which encompasses most of Missouri south of the Missouri River. It spills over into Arkansas and Oklahoma. For the most part it is an ancient plateau which has been eroded away across the ages. It is rich in minerals and timber. But the land beyond the river valleys usually is thin and poor in fertility. In this chapter I will present data from four distinct areas of the Ozarks. The first will report on two counties with a history of “kitchen-garden” agriculture and timber industry, much like that of Appalachia. The second will be a report on three counties in the mineral belt where mining has driven the economy in the past, but are increasingly being driven by commuters to the Saint Louis area. The third will be a report on two counties that were settled by Germans about 150 years ago seeking to duplicate the life they had experienced in Europe. And the fourth will be a set of seven counties which formerly were very similar to the first set, but in the past half century have been significantly impacted by recreational and retirement development and usage. Ex-urbanites are swelling their population.

Again I will draw upon the data from our study and from the RCMS study. We will be able to note changes over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And we will note the differences among these four subsections of the Ozarks.

### The Rural Ozarks

In this section we will look at the development of religious life in two Ozark counties. One is Iron. As its name suggests it is also a part of an area known as the Mineral District. Its population is about the same now as it was in 1950 when it was 9,458 residents. Today it counts 10,697. It is an odd shaped county with two arms or panhandles. It looks much like and upside down “L”. The MRCS researchers of 1999 selected it as one of 6 counties in which they intensively studied one township. They found the county seat of Ironton to be depressed. They also found a number of independent congregations that would not be identified and counted by the RCMS methodology.

The second county is Shannon. Its total population is about the same in 2000, 8,324, as it was in 1950, 8,377. I was first introduced to this county in 1986 by Dr. Robert Flanders, then Director of the Ozark Studies Center at Southwest Missouri State University. Dr. Flanders had just completed two films on the county, *My Shannon County Home*, and *The Hearts of the Children*. They are both still available from the Center, now on video tape. Timber and hosting recreation are the primary economic engines in Shannon.

### Christian Denominations in Iron County

Denominations	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 And/Att
Assembly	5	206	6	329/241
Catholic	1	475	2	368
Episcopal	1	92	1	35/22
Lutheran	2	157	2	139

Presby	2	93	1	73
S. Baptist	11	1,522	11	2,665/582
U. Methodist	8	564	3	499/289

The first fact that I find here is that the Assembly of God and the Southern Baptists are the two denominations that have grown over the past 50 years in Iron County. Second, as we have seen all across rural Missouri the attendance in the Southern Baptist churches is averaging less than 25 percent of the adherents they claim on a given Sunday. A third point, but one not present in the chart, is that 56 percent of the residents of Iron County are not claimed by any of the denominations involved in the RCMS project. This brings us to two related points. One is that there are many churches in Iron County that did not report, so the county is more churched than the data suggests. But second, there are some persons claimed by the reporting churches who have dropped out or moved away. It seems to me that there is a good bit of outreach and evangelism that needs to be done there.

The township where the towns of Ironton and Pilot Knob are located was included in the MRCS study. Across the 50 years of the study, 29 congregations have been identified there. Four churches, three of them United Methodist, have closed. The remaining congregations include four Southern Baptist, two Lutheran, two Assembly of God, two Independent, and one each Presbyterian, Missionary Baptist, General Baptist, United Baptist, Full Gospel, United Pentecostal, Nazarene, Church of Christ, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Methodist. In terms of congregations the stock seems to be tilted toward the newer Pentecostal and holiness groups.

#### Christian Denominations in Shannon County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att.
Catholic	0	133	1	70
Christian	3	187	2	299
S Baptist	6	697	8	1,551/349
U Methodist	8	529	5	332/115

This data corresponds with what is reported elsewhere in the region, except here the Christian denomination, in this case the Independent branch, is growing. Two of the Shannon townships were included in the MRCS sample. They contained 6 churches, two of which have closed or moved. Two are Methodist, one is Church of God, and the other is a Church of God Prophecy.

The RCMS data leaves more than two-thirds of the people in Shannon County unclaimed by any church group. Certainly, this is the result of the missing of many persons who worship in an independent church that did not participate in the gathering of the data. Yet, there must still be many persons who have not affiliated with a church.

Another interesting fact about the RCMS data is that in 1990 it reports a Mormon congregation with 371 adherents in Shannon, but in 2000 no such congregation is reported. However, in Iron County while there is no Mormon congregation reported in 1990, in 2000

there is one with a reported 129 adherents. How can this be explained? (In the Alabama County where I live the RCMS reports a Mormon congregation with 123 adherents, but no one I have talked with knows where it is located. Apparently, its physical location is in Tuscaloosa, but is composed of residents of Pickens County.)

Observations

In certain areas the mix of congregations that report to the RCMS and those that do not will give an erroneous picture of the number of churched and unchurchd persons. This is truth where there are many independent and African American congregations. So, one must always dig a little deeper than the RCMS data. We will find that historically the Ozarks have been home to many independent congregations, more so than in the other parts of the state of Missouri, particularly where churches and people of a Western European heritage are dominant.

**The Lead Belt**

Some of the earliest European penetration and settlement in Missouri was in the area southwest of St. Louis. It came to be termed as the Lead Belt or the Mineral Area. Much of the Lead Belt lies in Washington, St. Francois, and Madison Counties. Today the area has turned to other economic activities since much of its mineral wealth has been mined and used elsewhere. US highway 67 has been improved as a major artery, providing good access to St. Louis. Some St. Francois residents now commute.

Population	1950	1990	2000
Washington	14,689	20,380	23,344
St. Francois	35,276	48,904	55,641
Madison	10,380	11,127	11,800

The area gained population over the past 50 years. It grew from 60,345 to 90,785. Half again as many people live in these counties as did in 1950. Growth continued through the 1990s and will likely do so for years to come as the St. Louis area expands to the south.

Churches of Washington County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	6	255	4	371/307
Catholic	4	3,547	4	3,732
Presby	3	227	2	135/54
S Baptist	6	658	8	2,209/588
U. Methodist	10	992	7	576/252
Christian	2	116	1	171

First, only the Southern Baptist gained market share in this county, at least in terms of the number of adherents. But again note the disparity between the adherents numbers and the worship attendance numbers. Second, here too, Methodism and Presbyterianism declined both in actual numbers and in market share.

The Church of God (Cleveland) grew dramatically in the 1990s. The Assembly of God churches declined in the 1990s. The Church of Christ, here, as in many other rural counties, declined rather dramatically.

I was interested to see the large number of Baptist Missionary Association (BMA) churches in Washington County, 11. And they report adherents at 1,713 with 697 in average attendance. This places the BMA in third place in number of adherents and ahead of the Southern Baptists in number of worshipers. While the BMA is also present in St. Francois and Madison Counties, it is a minor presence. There is probably an interesting story of missions, migration, or of church and denominational conflict here. The BMA is centered in Arkansas and came into existence only in 1950. It is very fundamentalist and “Landmark” in its faith and practice. Landmarkism appeared among Baptists in America about the time of the Civil War. It claimed that the Baptist way was the only Scriptural way. It partakes of the elements of the “restorationist” movement. Often the BMAs and the non-instrumental Church of Christ will debate which is the most biblical, thus “the only true church.” These sentiments are to be found widely in the rural Ozarks, but most often the churches remained affiliated with the larger Southern Baptist movement.

More than half of the people in Washington County are not claimed by any of the churches participating in the RCMS study. None of the townships in the MRCS are located in Washington.

#### Churches of St. Francois County

Denomination	Cong 1950	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	9	835	14	1,535/1,173
Catholic	3	2,912	5	4,257
Lutheran	4	1,012	4	1,512/513
Presby	2	530	2	211/62
Christian	5	919	6	747
S. Baptist	15	6,812	23	12,959/2,622
U. Methodist	17	4,716	10	2,386/1,035

First, in terms of market share, the Assembly, Catholics and Lutherans have kept up with population growth. The Southern Baptists have grown more rapidly than the population. The others have lost in real numbers as well as in market share. Again, it appears that there is a tremendous number of inactive Southern Baptists.

Here as in the other Lead Belt counties there is a presence of another sub-denomination of Baptists, the United Baptists. Historically, this name stems from a union of Calvinistic and Evangelistic Baptists on the Western frontier in the early 1800s (centered then in the Appalachian

highlands). Most of the Baptist churches in the South from then until the 1840s referred to themselves as United Baptists. This distinguished them from Regular and Separate Baptists. With the formation of state Baptist conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention (1845), most Baptist Churches in Missouri and their regional association affiliated with the SBC. However, some, mostly rural, Baptist churches did not join and continued to be known as United Baptists. One finds a few other United Baptist congregations in the Ozarks, as well as in the Appalachian Mountains. (Note: historically, in Baptist life conventions were organized to support mission work, education, orphan homes, and other ministries. They had no judicatory function. Associations were formed for the purposes that are often identified with judicatories, but with the exception that they had no “church power”; that is, they could not dictate to the local congregation. They offered counsel, not control.)

The Church of God (Cleveland) is also well represented in St. Francois County with 8 congregations and 1,389 adherents. But here as well as in Washington County more than half of the residents are not claimed by any reporting denomination.

### Churches of Madison County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000Adh/Att
Assembly	3	185	2	78/165
Catholic	1	882	1	466
Christian	2	345	2	452
Lutheran	1	161	1	192/92
Presby	2	140	1	63/30
S Baptist	9	1,508	12	2,608/1,586
U Methodist	8	1,330	3	478/222

This county has the lowest population and is most distant from St. Louis. When I passed through there recently, I noticed a large Independent congregation in Fredricktown. Apparently, it is reported in the RCMS as having 1,200 adherents. That is about 10 percent of the population of the county. For such a large Independent congregation to develop, it has probably drawn members from the more established denominational congregations. This may explain some of the decline noted among several of them.

Here the Catholic numbers have dropped rather significantly. My thinking is that this reflects the movement of young Catholics to St. Louis for better jobs, and this has not been compensated for by the movement of retirees or commuters into the county.

Again, we see the common pattern across rural Missouri of the Methodists closing churches and having fewer members and of the Southern Baptists adding churches and gaining members. Note also that Madison County is unique among the counties we have looked at so far in that the weekly worship attendance in these churches is more than half of their adherence number. There may be one or more interesting stories here—better record keeping, churches that have attractive activities, or a response to the competition from the big Independent church in Fredericktown.

## The German Ozarks

The area west of St. Louis to Jefferson City, on the south side of the Missouri River and south and east of St. Louis to Cape Girardeau is often called the German Ozarks. The area wraps around the old Mineral District. Scattered through the area are small towns with “high spire” churches. Usually, it is a Catholic, Lutheran or United Church of Christ church, and it dominates the town. These towns were formed as “colonies” from the Germanic states.

In this series of studies we will look at two of the counties which have remained rural and where the German heritage dominates still. One is Gasconade on the Missouri River, and the other is Perry on the Mississippi River. Gasconade was settled, largely, by German Reform and Catholic families. Perry has an interesting history as the location of an early German settlement which played a role in the development of the Missouri Synod Lutheran denomination. But it also drew many Catholics from the German states. Both settlements occurred in the two decades before the Civil War.

Both counties have populations of less than 20,000, today. Both have experienced some growth over the past 50 years. Gasconade counted 12,342 persons in 1950. In 2000 there were 15,342 residents. Perry counted 14,890 persons in 1950. In 2000 there were 18,132.

### Christian Denominations in Gasconade County

Denomination	Cong 1950	Memb. 1950	Cong 2000	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	4	2,109	3	2,270
Christian	1	46	3	437
Lutheran	3	522	4	710
Presbyterian	4	349	3	138
S. Baptist	6	1,163	9	2,254
UCC	13	2,659	8	2,508
U. Methodist	10	1,154	6	614

Again as throughout rural Missouri, generally, Methodism has suffered very large declines both in congregations and in membership. The Southern Baptists gained in both, although they slipped some in number of adherents during the 1990s. I suspect that there is some mixture of cause and effect to be found in the fact that the Methodists declined both in number of congregations and adherents while the Baptists gained in both. It seems that at least for Protestants, the addition of congregations tends to result in the expansion of membership.

Somewhat untypically the Christian movement, in this case the independent congregations wing, gained congregations and members in this rural setting. When population growth is factored in the Catholics were plateaued. The Lutherans added a congregation and grew in number of adherents.

The UCC closed several congregations, but lost only a small portion of market share. The Presbyterians lost one congregation and a large number of adherents.

Almost 4 of ever 10 residents is not claimed by any denomination. Given that is not very

likely that there are many congregations in that county that did not participate in the RCMS data gathering process, this would seem to indicate that there is a considerable amount of evangelistic work to be done in Gasconade.

The MRCS project has found 9 congregations in the Gasconade township that was in its study. All have been present from the first study in 1952. There are three Southern Baptist, two United Methodist, and one each of Christian, UCC, Pentecostal Church of God, and Full Gospel.

#### Christian Denominations in Perry County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	6	6,763	8	8,322
Lutheran	10	4,678	8	4,099
Presbyterian	2	191	2	185
S. Baptist	3	568	4	647
U. Methodist	4	515	3	426

The Catholics added congregations and grew at about the rate of population growth. The Lutherans did not grow with the population. Neither did anyone else. The Baptists lost about 300 adherents in the 1990s. I think that it is fair to say that the experience in Perry County is reflective of experience across the nation. The older Protestant denominations, those born or invigorated by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century frontier revivals, have not had much effect in rural areas where the bulk of the population came as a colony from non-english speaking Europe. The bonds of culture and kinship are strong even when the language and the memories of the “old county” have passed.

#### Observations

For 150 or more years in those rural areas that were colonized by denominations with a Western European Heritage, and where there has not been a significant influx of persons who do not share that heritage, denominational adherence does not change much. Some will be lost to other groups. Some will drop religious faith. Some will marry into or convert to the dominant faith. But in terms of market share, it seems that things rock along pretty much the same.

No Perry County township was included in the MRCS.

#### **Retirement and Recreation Counties**

Since 1950 several rural counties in retirement and recreation areas in Missouri have grown dramatically. Here we will look at how this has impacted church life in seven of these counties. Miller, Morgan and Camden are at the Lake of the Ozarks. Taney, Stone and Barry are at Table Rock Lake. Taney is also the location of Branson, Silver Dollar City, and the Shepherd of the Hills Country. Barry contains very popular Roaring River State Park. And Hickory is the site of Pomme de Terre Lake. The county seat of Hickory is Hermitage which was the location of an important anthropological study of a small town in the late 1930s. It was published as

*Plainview, USA.*

In 1950 six of these seven counties had fewer than 10,000 persons. Today six of the seven have more than 20,000. Most have more than doubled their population. One has quadrupled. In 1950 the Baptists were the dominant denomination in each of these counties. This continues to be the case. In 1950 three of the counties had no Catholic parish. Today they all have at least one and in most the Catholic faith has expanded dramatically. Much of this growth is the result of the retirement of urban Catholics to the lake country.

Against this backdrop let's turn to an analysis of the data from the RMCS and MRCS studies. We will begin with Hickory.

### Congregations in Hickory County

When Carl Withers studied Hermitage, the county seat of Hickory, he found most of the basic set of Frontier Revival based churches in place. The Christian church was the largest and best housed, the Methodist had the most prosperous membership, and the Baptist was rather weak and shared a pastor with three nearby rural congregations. There was also a Holiness church in town. A rural Church of the Brethren, and two more rural Baptist churches rounded out the stock of churches in the township. He estimated that many of the towns citizens ( 25 to 33 percent) had rejected the fundamentalism of the churches and were not involved in the Christian faith in any on-going way.

About 25 years ago a large recreational lake was formed in the county. Hermitage began to market itself as the "Gateway to Lake Pomme de Terre". Slowly the county has gained residents, many of them retiring from urban jobs to live on and fish from the lake. In 1950 Hickory County had only 5,387 residents. Today it has 8,940. Certainly a third or more of them are retirees. This changes the mix of religious backgrounds of the populous. Catholic and Lutheran churches have been added to the community.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	1	38	3	290/239
Catholic	0	0	1	250
Christian	7	549	3	246
Brethren	1	85	1	39/18
S. Baptist	13	1,744	7	1,536/444
UCC	2	77	1	23
U. Methodist	9	543	3	363/198

Hickory is one of the few counties in Missouri that reports fewer Southern Baptist congregations and adherents in the face of overall population growth. It may be that Baptists were highly represented among those who moved from the marginal farms of the area to urban jobs. It may be that some of the churches that were listed as Southern Baptists in 1950 left the denomination and united with the Bible Baptist movement which has its headquarters in nearby Springfield. The fact that there are five congregations with 743 adherents in the 2000 data of the

RCMS material that are affiliated with this movement suggests the likelihood of this explanation.

The Catholics have constructed a fine facility south of Hermitage, near an arm of the lake. There is a fine United Methodist facility nearby. The old Hermitage Methodist church relocated to this site and seeks to meld townsmen and the retirees into a single congregation. Back in town the Baptist church remains at one corner of the courthouse square. A newer, much smaller Christian church building is over near the school facilities. A Missouri Lutheran congregation has been formed in Hermitage. It has targeted retirees. There are Assembly and Nazarene congregations, new to the town since the development of the lake.

Out in the county there is a small Amish settlement with a 65 adherent congregation. Some of the Amish are growing hothouse vegetables. The description of this project that I read recently made it sound like an application of cutting edge low technology.

The RCMS material found 58.3 percent of the residents not claimed by any church body among those they were able to gather data from. Given that there are likely several independent congregations that did not participate, this still appears to be high for a rural county. Could it be that many of the retirees have not bothered to join a local congregation? Maybe some of them have not found in the current mix of congregations there one in which they are comfortable? Or has the observations of Carl Withers more than 60 years ago concerning Hermitage continued to be true; that is, a kind of grassroots rationality and agnosticism that rejects the Gospel story? In any case this is something that those who minister in rural America need to address.

### Congregations at the Lake of the Ozarks

The Lake of the Ozarks is a major private power company project, and was formed in the early 1930s. The lake boasts of more than 1,000 miles of shore line. Initially, the residential development focused on vacation facilities and some week-end cottages. In time people began to retire to live at the lake. More recently, there has been the construction of condominiums along the shores. Outlet mall stores and additional recreational facilities have been added. Early on the Disciples of Christ built a beautiful community church to serve merchants, retirees and visitors in the community that grew up around Bagnell Dam. (The township where the dam is located is one that was chosen for more in depth study by the 1999 team of researchers at the University of Missouri. It will be addressed in their forthcoming book of ethnographic studies of rural churches.) The development around the dam which is in Miller, spills over into Morgan and Camden Counties.

Here we will look at these three rural counties that have been greatly impacted by the development of the lake. Miller County had 13,734 residents in 1950 and in 2000 this number had grown to 23,564. This is about 10,000 with about 3,000 of this increase occurring in the past decade. Camden County had only 7,816 residents in 1950. This jumped to 37,051 in 2000. And Morgan County had 10,207 residents in 1950. This nearly doubled by 2000 to 19,309. All three had their greatest growth in the 1990s. And with an aging, affluent regional population this trend may well continue for several years to come.

Like any significant recreational area, these numbers are dwarfed by the number of visitors who pass through the area annually. Many of the churches in such places have multiple ministries—locals, merchants, retiree residents, seasonal workers, seasonal residents, and visitors. Many local churches will focus on only one or two of these groups. They need to be aware of the differences that they must address. If not their church, then whose will seek to enlist, evangelize and disciple the other groups of citizens? No group should be neglected.

Looking first at *Miller County*:

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	3	272	4	452/355
Catholic	5	1,809	5	3,790
Christian	10	1,305	4	1,271
Nazarene	2	200	2	363
Lutheran	0	0	1	188/100
S. Baptist	21	3,419	18	5,983/1,429
UCC	1	50	1	55
U. Methodist	3	462	3	670/299

Looking next at *Camden County*:

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	2	55	4	724/632
Catholic	0	0	2	1,750
Christian	6	520	4	1,393
Nazarene	0	0	1	468
Episcopal	0	0	1	92/87
ELCA	1	101	2	632
M. Lutheran	0	0	3	764/518
Presby	1	68	2	214
S. Baptist	20	3,091	17	5,096/1,549
U. Methodist	2	181	4	1,202/438

Now looking at *Morgan*:

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	4	288	3	648/474
Catholic	0	0	2	970

Christian	3	307	3	712
Mormon	0	0	1	559
ELCA	3	424	2	346/142
M. Lutheran	2	533	2	384/147
Presby	2	172	3	178/94
S. Baptist	11	1,741	13	3,926/845
U. Methodist	5	1,039	7	1,644/645

Here, as in many other Missouri rural counties, the data indicates that the Catholics and the Baptists have experienced the most growth, perhaps even some gain in market share. The Catholic data here is interesting. Three of the five parishes are in eastern Miller County and are part of the German Ozarks. They are old ethnic congregations. The other two, particularly the one at the Bagnell Dam, have grown from the arrival of retirees and persons to work in the businesses that serve the retirees and recreation seekers. The four other Catholic parishes in the three county area seem to have been formed to service the retirees and the recreation service owners and workers who have relocated into the area.

The Baptists did not grow with the population in the 1990s. Much of their stock of churches is comprised of local folk. One church near the dam has been effective in reaching the merchants and including them in an older congregation, how-be-it one that was relocated when the lake was formed. Baptist have started some new congregations that are focused on reaching retirees and recreational folk. These have experienced mixed success.

The Assemblies of God have shown good growth in each of the counties. One Nazarene congregation reports surprising growth in the 1990s. There are at least two strong independent congregations near the dam. They both use contemporary worship and have good pastoral leadership. But overall, the effectiveness of the churches in responding to the growth of the county seems to have been limited at best

The Lutheran congregations are a mix of old ethnic and new congregations for the urban retirees. These, mostly near the dam, have done well. Frankly, I am disappointed with the showing of the Methodists and the Presbyterians in the Lake of the Ozark area, for the most part. The Christian Church (Disciples), seem to have a much better record. It has seemed to me that their ecumenical focus would fit well for the creation of new congregations in a setting like this, particularly given the declining importance of denominationalism in the general culture.

In the area, but not related to the Lake development, are several Anabaptist (Mennonite and Amish) denominational congregations. These are the continuation of early colony-like settlements.

The Mormons have formed a large congregation near the dam with 599 adherents.

While the Catholics and some Protestant groups have planted new churches for the new people, the area has become increasingly “unchurched” over the past 50 years. Given the nature of those who are not churched, the rhythms of their lives, and the growing secularism of the society, reaching them for the churches will not be easy. But there are some examples in the area of effective church plants. These will be discussed in the volume of ethnographic studies.

The MRCS has two townships in Morgan and one in Miller Counties. One Morgan

township has had seven congregations. One has closed. One has moved out of the township. Two are attempting to reach the new lake people. The other three serve the local folk. One is independent. Three are Baptist. One is Christian. This township grew dramatically in the past decade.

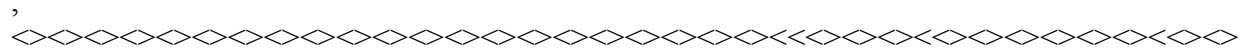
The other township in Miller County includes Bagnell Dam and the related development. Since 1950 it has grown from 1,885 to 5,127. Our researchers have identified 22 congregations in this township over the past 50 years. Only two have closed. Most of the churches are older and for the locals. The exceptions are the new Catholic church, a new Calvary Chapel church, and the older Community church which is affiliated with the Disciples of Christ. Most of the churches for the new people are on down the US Highway 54 in Camden County. The other township is rural with a stable population of about 1,000. It has had a total of seven churches, two of which are closed. The current denominations are Baptist, Christian, Church of Christ and Assembly of God.

### Congregations around Table Rock Lake

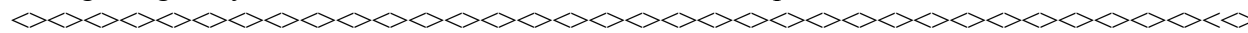
The area south of Springfield has been a tourist destination for generations. Beginning with a smaller lake, Taneycomo, the area added Marvel Cave and then Silver Dollar City Amusement Park as attractions. The story line of a popular novel set in this community, *The Shepherd of the Hills*, was developed into an outdoor drama. The “shepherd” is a former urban minister who moves to the Ozarks and finds an important and fulfilling ministry among the rustic locals. About 50 years ago a major Corps of Engineers lake, Tablerock, was impounded. Beginning with the Pressley Family country music show others were added until there are almost 40 theaters in Branson serving up a variety of musical faire. More recently an outlet mall has been added, along with a variety of other recreational activities. Branson is now a major tourist destination, particularly for retirees.

A little to the west there is Roaring River State Park in Barry County with the best trout fishing in the region. Second homes and retirement homes are springing up on the shores of the lake in Barry and more so in Stone.

Here we will look at the population, congregations and church membership in the three counties. Taney had but 9,863 people in 1950. By 2000 it had reached 39,703. The 1990s saw about 14,000 of this increase. More than two-thirds of that number are not claimed by any congregation. Stone only had 9,748 residents in 1950. Today it has 29,658. Almost 10,000 were added in the decade of the 1990s. Nearly two-thirds of the population is not claimed by a congregation. Barry had 21,755 in 1950 and has grown to 34,010. It added a little more than 6,000 in the 1990s. Nearly two-thirds of the residents are claimed by a congregation.



In 1961 my parents moved to Barry County. They operated recreational facilities adjoining Roaring River State Park. My father also became the Elementary School Principal at Purdy. My father died in 1968. Mother continued to live in Cassville until 1984. I was in and out of the area frequently during these years and occasionally since. I have particularly watched the development of the First Baptist Church of Cassville into a near mega church in a small town setting. Regularly, this church has more than 700 in worship.



*Looking first at Taney County*

Denominations	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	1	71	5	700/439
Catholic	1	22	2	1,583
Christian	1	257	5	844
Episcopal	0	0	1	192/81
ELCA	0	0	1	307/177
M. Lutheran	0	0	2	612/309
Presby	5	537	4	1,169/834
S. Baptist	3	243	8	4,209/1,606
U. Methodist	0	0	2	922/462

*Next, a look at Stone County*

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	4	79	6	788/408
Catholic	0	0	1	1,176
Christian	2	120	4	514
M. Lutheran	0	0	1	424/200
Presby	2	345	2	353/210
S. Baptist	10	1,221	18	4,679/2195
U. Methodist	1	67	3	869/437

*And now Barry County*

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	5	208	9	713/521
Catholic	3	1,031	4	2,356
Christian	5	645	6	1,156
Nazarene	2	26	2	340/129
Ch. of Christ			10	560

Episcopal	1	32	1	97/42
M. Lutheran	2	379	3	409/201
Presby	2	312	2	383/160
FW Baptist			5	532
S. Baptist	31	5,599	30	11,331/2,840
U. Methodist	16	2,930	8	1,855/818

First, let me make note of the tremendous growth of Catholicism in this area during the past 50 years. Most of this can be attributed to recreational and retirement development. From three ethnic and one mission congregation in 1950 with a little over 1,000 adherents, the Catholics have grown to 7 congregations and about 5,000 adherents. Similarly the Lutherans have grown in these counties because of in migration of retirees. Not a few came first to Branson for the music shows and then decided to retire there. Robert Gilmore, former dean at Southwest Missouri State University and a close student of Ozark religion was a key figure in the planting of a Evangelical Lutheran congregation in Branson.

The Presbyterians have done better here than any other section of rural Missouri that we have studied. It seems that they had a good base here and have been able to maintain and grow modestly. Near Purdy in Barry County is a rural church which was founded by Waldensian settlers. (Apparently, the Frisco Railroad recruited several Italian colonies to settle along its line west out of Springfield. This is a source of the old Catholic congregations in Barry County as well.) The church cooperates with the Presbyterians. Methodism was weak in this part of the Ozarks. Many of its adherents were swept up in the Holiness and Pentecostal movements a century ago. Methodism had to build back. The family of churches related to the Stone-Campbell movement is most represented among the locals in the non-instrumental Churches of Christ. Here as elsewhere across Missouri they are static or in decline. The data suggests that the Disciples of Christ branch has met with some success in reaching the retirees. They have pretty well kept up with population grow in the Table Rock region.

There is an independent-charismatic church in Branson that reaches a thousand or more. There are two Mormon congregations reported. One is in Monette. It has been there for many years. It grew significantly in the 1990s. And in Stone County there is a congregation with nearly 500 adherents.

The Baptists were very strong in Barry County in 1950. And they have grown significantly. The First Church in Monette typically has 500 in worship. And with 700 at Cassville this does not leave many for the other 28 Baptist churches in the county. As we have seen in the other rural counties, the adherence numbers are 4 to 5 times higher than the average worship attendance. Both Monette and Cassville have industry and a balanced economy. The two large congregations are interesting mixes of locals, workers, managers, professionals, and retirees. The Baptists related to the Missouri Baptist Convention were weak in Taney County in 1950. Most of the churches had broken with the denomination two generations back. So, the Southern Baptists started almost from scratch. They have grown faster than has the population over the past half century, but they did not keep pace in the 1990s. The same is true in the other counties.

Two Stone County townships are in the MRCS sample. Both have grown. The one with

the village of Cape Fair in it has six churches. Most are Baptist. The other has the village of Galena in it. It has seven churches. Most are Baptist. All seem to be local in focus.

### Conclusion

The influx of new people from a different setting, religious background, and sub-culture presents interesting challenges for community life, evangelism, and church planting. I am impressed with how well the Catholic church has responded here and elsewhere across rural Missouri. They seem to be well along in the process of their rechurching of rural Missouri, and America. They have had the wisdom not to expect old ethnic congregations to reach the new comers. Rather, they have planted new parishes and let the old ethnic ones run their course.

The Lutherans also have been effective in creating new churches for their folk who have moved to a new area. I do not find much evidence that they have worked at evangelizing the unchurched.

Generally, I have been disappointed by the work of the Methodists, Presbyterians and Disciples of Christ. For the most part, they seem to have fallen into a pattern of decline.

Also, generally, the numbers do not suggest the vitality among the Assemblies or the Nazarenes that I had expected. They grew in some places and not in others. There is little evidence of their expansion during the past 50 years in rural Missouri.

I am still mystified by the developments among the various Independents. In my trips around rural Missouri and other places I note many congregations of varying sizes that are Independent. It appears that those who are using contemporary worship are more likely to be having growth. And those who are narrow theologically are plateaued or in decline. Unfortunately, our two methods of gathering data miss many of the Independents. They do not report to denominations and that is the source of most of the data for the RCMS, and they tend to locate in places of more than 2,500, so they were missed by the MRCS.

Without complete data from the independents, most African American congregations, and other small groups it appears that congregational Christianity is in decline in many rural places. I doubt that their data would change this picture in most locations, or overall. There is work to do.

And even the data that we do have is suspect. Take the Baptists. The gap between the numbers of adherents and worshipers is not good. There is work to do.

The growth of Mormonism in rural Missouri and elsewhere is a matter of concern for orthodox, trinitarian Christians. There is work to do. Perhaps, if the outreach zeal and efforts of the traditional denominations had matched that of the Mormons, their growth would not have occurred.

The data that shows the large number of rural churches that have closed is depressing to me. There is work to do.