

Chapter Seven

Religion in the Agricultural Regions

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In this chapter we will consider what has happened in two types of rural counties beyond the Ozarks. One will look at the area of North Missouri which adapted well across first two-thirds of the 20th Century to “general agriculture”. But with the development after 1970 of “commercial agriculture”, it found itself with “comparative disadvantage” in grain production. (See Chapter Two.) Operations have shifted. And population has dropped as a consequence. The second type of rural county will be the Bootheel, or Southeast Missouri on the Mississippi River. This area has been able to adapt and compete in modern commercial agriculture. But machines have replaced farm workers and the population there has dropped even more dramatically. We will look at a set of two counties there. We will see what the data has to say about the growth and decline of the denominations and of congregational life. (In Chapter 10 we will look at a third set of farming counties, those who have been impacted by changes in the processing of meat and poultry.)

Commercial Agricultural Counties

James Street used a small, farm service town, in North Missouri as the setting for two novels that focused on the role of Protestant pastors in the churches and communities which they serve. *The Gauntlet*, tells the story of Rev. London Wingo and his family as he comes in the late 1920s from studies in a seminary to pastor in this small town, near Moberly. Street himself had been a seminary student and pastor in this same period, so one suspects that at least some of the material is autobiographical. He deals with themes such as cliques in a church, power conflicts between the pastor and the church leadership, and struggles between the wife of the pastor and the older women of the church over lifestyle issues. He pictures the church as being dominated by the mainstreet merchants. Tensions arise as he seeks to evangelize the small time farmers who live outside the town. Wingo’s wife, Katie, dies at the end of the book. Street suggests that Wingo learns from this life lessons that make it possible for him to become an effective pastor.

The second book, *The High Calling*, is set about 20 years later in the late 1940s. Wingo, now a widower with a high spirited daughter in her 20s, returns to the town, but as pastor of the second church of his denomination, one that serves a mill town. In the intervening two decades he had served a large church in the suburbs of Kansas City. While this book deals well with the issues of getting a new church up and going, it focuses even more on the courtships of his daughter and of himself. A secondary theme is a storyline related to spontaneous, life changing revival that occurs in the church, something that Wingo sees as a work of God.

I became acquainted with the commercial agricultural communities of North Missouri in the 1950s. My father traveled to many of the towns in his work for the area distributor of Youngstown Kitchen cabinets. During vacations from school I sometimes accompanied him. I attended junior college in the region. And from 1958 to 1962 I pastored a rural church there. My subsequent studies of rural church and community life have been done with these experiences as the primary backdrop.

For this study I have selected six of the rural counties of North Missouri. Four of them

have experienced a net loss of population over the half century. Two each of the commercial agricultural counties are in the western, the central and the eastern parts of North Missouri—Clinton, Atchison, Daviess, Livingston, Scotland, and Pike. (I also looked at six additional counties in that area. My findings from them confirm the trends noted here.)

Congregations in Clinton County

It was Clinton County where I spent almost five years as a pastor in an open country church, first as a seminary student, and then bivocationally. It is close enough to Kansas City and St. Joseph that it has experienced some “exurban” growth in recent years. Much of this is in the Southeastern part where highway I-35 provides access to Kansas City. The 1950 census found 11,727 persons in the county. In 2000 this number had risen to 18,979.

Cameron is the largest town. It sits at the junction of I-35 and US 36. It was once the home of Missouri Wesleyan College, long since closed. About a decade ago it became the site of a state prison. Later a veterans’ retirement home was built there. It has a Wal-mart store. While its downtown is no where near as strong and vibrant as it was in the 1950s, it seemed to be pretty stable when I visited it recently. My church, Smith Fork Baptist, was midway between Cameron and Plattsburg, the county seat. Plattsburg had some nice stores and businesses in the 1950s. They have all closed and been replaced by several antique shops. There were three small villages near the church, Osborn, Turney, and Perrin. All three have dried up. Perrin was an Irish Catholic community. Today the mission parish is closed and merged with Plattsburg.

Smith Fork church, too, is much reduced in size. Some of this is the result of loss of population, but some might be attributed to pastoral leadership. Several decades have passed since the church was pastored by someone who got out and aggressively visited in the community and sought to build the church up. Instead, the pastors have focused upon their preaching ministry. At first it was students. More recently, it has been bivocational men. Smith Fork celebrated its 100th anniversary while I was there as pastor. I doubt that it will reach its 150th.

Lathrop, another Clinton County town was once a major player in the Missouri Mule industry. This is long passed. But today it is experiencing some renewal as young families are settling there and commute to Kansas City for employment. The area around Trimble in the southwestern part of the county is also being impacted by persons who want to live in the country, or on a lake, and will commute to Kansas City daily to a job.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong	2000 Adh./Att.
Assembly	2	134	3	204/205
Catholic	2	931	2	1,122
Disciples	5	1,114	5	1,927
Presby	4	301	2	62
S. Baptist	8	1,521	7	3,757/809
U. Methodist	7	1,092	5	1,597/522

Only the Catholics and the Presbyterians seem to have lagged behind the rate of

population growth. The others denominations have gained some, at least in terms of reported numbers. During my tenure there I felt that the Methodists were stronger in the towns and the Baptists were stronger in the countryside. The Disciples had abandoned the countryside and had concentrated in the towns. The Catholic parishes in Plattsburg and Cameron were strong. It appears that the Baptist churches in the larger towns have grown well during the past half century. The open country and village churches have not done so well.

The Free Will Baptist churches in the county grew very well in the decade of the 1990s. The Brethren Church continues to have a small congregation there. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, newly renamed the Community of Christ, has two congregations and 516 adherents. This is a continuation of a long-time work in the county.

The MRCS included two townships from Clinton County. One centers in the village of Trimble. The other centers in the village of Hemple. Over the half century there have been 8 churches in them. Two have closed. One was a very old rural Baptist church. The other was a Cumberland Presbyterian church. The Trimble area includes portions of the Smithville Lake. Churches to the south of it have grown dramatically in the past decade. Hemple is closer to St. Joseph, but that city has been in decline for several decades. The Hemple area has been static.

Congregations in Atchison County

The northwestern most county in Missouri is one where the hegemony of United Methodism has continued to the present. In the 1950s 16 of the rural counties of the commercial agriculture area of Missouri found Methodism as the dominant expression of the Christian faith. For the most part the Baptist denomination has replaced Methodism in this role over the past 50 years. An exception is Atchison county. The RCMS study lists this county as the most Methodist one in the state.

I was almost born there. My father was principal of the high School at Watson in the mid-1930s. Realizing that he needed more income, he took a job in sales in Kansas City a few months before my birth. My parents attended the Baptist Church in Rockport. There was not one in Watson, then or now. They often comment about how weak Baptist work was there. I suspect that it was because the area was settled by persons who came from the northern states and from Europe. They were not Baptist in heritage.

The Presbyterians owned and operated a small college in Tarkio until very recently, but the number of Presbyterians in the county has been low, at least over the past 50 years. The census found 11,727 persons in Atchison County in 1950. By 2000 this had dropped by almost half to 6,430. Much of the farm land in the county lies in the Missouri River bottoms. Consolidation in commercial agriculture is the probable cause for the steep decline in population numbers.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Memb.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	1	165	1	56/50
Catholic	1	98	1	288
Christian	4	600	4	416
ELCA	3	1,264	2	910/252

Presby	2	243	2	314/113
S. Baptist	5	890	4	1,349/213
U. Methodist	6	1,426	5	1,408/361

Given the rather dramatic drop in population the adherence numbers look impressive. But the attendance numbers raise some important questions concerning the effectiveness of the churches in Atchison County. Here, as in many other of the rural counties that we have looked at, the perception comes that either the denominations have not kept their membership roles clean, or church attendance is not a high priority, or both.

The growth of the Catholic church in Atchison raises some questions that need to be answered. Generally, Catholicism has tended to mirror the changes in demographics. The exceptions have been when there has been an influx of new residents. In this case was it the result of movement of Catholic farmers from Iowa to somewhat less expensive land in Missouri, or an influx of Hispanic farm workers, or both?

The MRCS included but one township in Atchison County. Initially, it had a Lutheran congregation. It has since closed. So, this is now an “unchurched” township, only the second in the original 100 townships selected in 1952.

Congregations in Livingston County

At the heart of Livingston County is the small city of Chillicothe. It has 8,800 residents. This is down from more than 14,000 early in the 20th Century. At one time Chillicothe had two colleges. Its business college was one of the premier ones in the region. As other colleges and universities added business schools and courses, the college failed. The town was also a railroad center. But like other railroad center towns, it lost jobs and people as the primary means of transportation changed. It did have the advantage of being at the junction of two US Highways. It appears that the city stabilized in the 1990s and is again growing as a regional trade center. Over the past half century the total county population dropped from 16,532 to 14,558. (Early in the 20th Century Chillicothe itself had nearly that many residents.)

Early settlers came from Ohio and other northern states. This explains the name, Chillicothe. But there were also a good number of settlers from the South as is evidenced by the significant presence of Southern Baptists in Livingston County.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Mem.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	1	61	2	295/149
Catholic	2	831	1	1,241
Christian	6	1,191	3	589/174
Episcopal	1	93	1	106/50
Mo. Lutheran	1	193	1	158/60
Presby.	6	429	3	210/82

S. Baptist	12	2,258	14	5,724/1,210
UCC	1	27	1	158/57
U. Methodist	13	2,329	5	1,671/597

The developments of the past half century in Livingston County seems to parallel what we have found in other rural Missouri counties. The Baptist numbers have grown in the face of declining population. But the numbers of Baptists participating in church life seem to be rather flat. Again the Methodists closed churches and their numbers dropped. The Christian churches had a similar experience. The Catholics grew over the period significantly, but in the last decade, like the Baptists, have lost adherents. As with several other rural population centers in Missouri, and elsewhere, a new Mormon congregation appeared in the 1990s. It reports 145 adherents.

The MRCS has two townships in Livingston. Both had small populations, less than 1,000 in 1950 and both have lost about half of their populations. There have been six congregations there. Two, one Methodist and one Christian, have closed. They were both in the village of Ludlow and may have merged to become the Ludlow Community Church.

Congregations in Daviess County

Gallatin is the county seat of Daviess County. During the Mormon Wars of the late 1830s, Joseph Smith was a resident of its jail for a brief time. A rather large Amish community has developed in the Jamesport area since World War II. It reported 900 adherents in 1990. This number was reduced to 414 in the 2000 report. The number of Amish congregations was constant at six. I imagine that some of the Amish “hived off” and moved to other places during the decade. Due primarily to high birth rates, the total number of Amish and other Anabaptist denominations have grown in recent decades across Missouri and in other rural areas, particularly.

The MRCS has had the township which contains the town of Pattonsburg in its since 1952. This town was devastated by a flood in 1993. It has been relocated to a higher site. This township was selected by the MRCS team in 1999 for more intense study. This will be reported elsewhere by them. The researchers have identified 9 congregations in this township across the past 50 years. Two of them, both Free Will Baptists, have closed. One Disciples church became independent.

Like most agricultural based counties in Missouri, the census found fewer people in 2000 than in 1950. The decline was about 3,000 from 11,180 to 8,016 over the 50 years. However, there were a little over 200 more persons counted in 2000 than in 1990. Perhaps things have stabilized.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Mem.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att.
Assembly	1	11	2	130/93
Catholic	0	0	1	60
Christian	11	1,286	3	708
Presby	3	100	2	54/36

S. Baptist	13	1,704	8	2,588/459
U. Methodist	15	2,562	8	658/241

Here one finds one of the several counties where the Southern Baptists have replaced the United Methodists as the denomination with the most adherence during the past half century. Yet in terms of participation in worship the Amish rival the Baptists. The Catholics dropped almost half of their adherents in the 1990s. The Mormons have returned to Gallatin. They have formed a congregation and claim 249 adherents.

Congregations in Scotland County

Scotland, like the other upper tier counties in rural Missouri was hard hit by the Family Farm crisis of the 1980s. Some of this is reflected in the change of denominations reported in 1952 and in 2000. The population dropped from 7,332 in 1950 to 4,983 in 2000. The county seat is the small town of Memphis.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Mem	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	0	0	1	146
Christian	6	913	2	447
Presby	5	365	1	89/39
S. Baptist	11	912	5	880/246
U. Methodist	10	1,095	7	620/176
UCC	1	185	0	0
Mennonite	0	0	3	563

Apparently, there has been a very major movement of Mennonites into Scotland County. On a given Sunday there are probably more of them in worship than any other denominational group. Have they pretty much replaced the Christians of the Reformed tradition? The Mormons reported a small congregation there in 1990 but not in 2000. The Catholics did not report a congregation in 1950. They did in 1970. They peaked at 260 in 1990 and have since dropped more than 100 adherents. The numbers for the Baptists and the Methodists also declined in the 1990s although the county population increased some. Perhaps the development of the Mennonite settlements replaced many of the Catholic and the Baptist and Methodist farmers, and this explains their decline. (The Old Order Mennonites did not participate in the data gathering before 1990, so I do not know when they moved into Scotland County.)

A review of all of the Missouri Counties reveals several other rural counties where there are colonies of Mennonite and Amish congregations that have moved in over the past 50 years. There were no MRCS townships in this county.

Congregations in Pike County

The Stark Brothers Nurseries, a major supplier of fruit trees, is located in this county on the Mississippi River. Several other nurseries are located in the area as well. Pike is included by some in the area called Little Dixie. The name of its seat of government, Bowling Green, suggests that some of its early settlers came from Kentucky and were impacted by the frontier revival, the Second Great Awakening. The large concentration of Baptists and Disciples here would seem to support this observation. There is also a large number of Catholics here, as is the case in most of the Mississippi River counties. In 1950 Pike counted 16,062 residents. In 2000 this had increased to 18,351. This increase came in the last decade.

There is one MRCS township in Pike County. It has nine churches. None have closed during the past 50 years. These include four Baptists, a Methodist, a Christian, an Episcopal, a Holiness and one church that is apparently non-denominational.

Denomination	1950 Cong.	1950 Mem.	2000 Cong.	2000 Adh/Att
Catholic	2	1,420	3	1,680
Christian	10	1,442	9	975/243
Episcopal	3	282	3	61/17
Mo. Lutheran	1	63	2	216/71
Presby	14	1,283	9	743/290
S. Baptist	20	2,977	20	4,716/1,069
U. Methodist	10	1,200	5	438/177

Again we see the dramatic decline of most of the Mainline Protestant denominations which had deep roots in the Frontier revivals. The Catholic story is complicated when one adds the data from 1990. Then the Catholic parishes reported 2,745 adherents. This means that there was a drop of over 1,000 during a time when the population of the county was growing. In fact it appears that Christianity as a whole suffered significant loss of adherence in the 1990s when the population was growing.

In 1990 the Old Order Amish reported three congregations with 450 adherents. In 2000 these three congregations were down to 201. Perhaps, this is another example of the “hiving off” of some of the families as they relocated to other rural area. Here too the Mormons report a new congregation with 110 adherents.

Religion in the Bootheel

Our family was finally able to purchase a new car in 1948 and set off on a much anticipated family vacation. My father did not take us to the usual sights. Rather, as a former agriculture teacher, he loved to look at land, crops, livestock and communities. One destination on this trip was the Bootheel, the several county delta like bottom land of the Mississippi River in Southeast Missouri. I saw cotton growing for the first time. I also saw the poverty that came with the practice of share cropping, but did not really understand it. Small, often unpainted houses, were clustered at points along the highway. Children of stair step dimensions played in

dust yards.

This year of 1948 marked the beginning of the end of this form of share cropping economic system in the Bootheel and across the Cotton Belt. The mechanical cotton picker was introduced. The need for “hands” to pick cotton, as well as to tend it, soon passed. Thousands of subsistence-type farm jobs were lost. Families moved away to Memphis, St. Louis, Chicago and other cities. Tractors replaced mules. Chemicals, not hoes, controlled weeds.

The 1950 census New Madrid County, Missouri, reported 39,434 residents. In the 2000 census this was more than halved to 19,760. Neighboring Pemiscot County reported 45,624 residents in 1950. By 2000 this was more than halved, and 20,047 citizens were found.

Today the old tenant houses have been bulldozed and burned up. Other crops have been added to the mix. Some of those who left in the 1950s have returned to the Bootheel to live out their lives on meager retirement checks. Not a few have the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. Most of the labor intensive work is now done by migrant Hispanic workers who cycle through the area annually. The resident population in the 1990s, was still declining, but much less sharply than in the past. Riverboat gambling and Interstate travel has helped the area some economically, it would appear.

Many of those who moved from the area were African American. (But, over the past two decades there has been a swelling stream of persons, in retirement, returning from the cities to ancestral land in the Bootheel.) The RCMS material, which does not capture most of the African American congregations, does not give an accurate picture of all that has happened to religious life in the Bootheel. But by supplementing it with data from the three townships in the MRCS material, we can achieve a better understanding. And we will take a deeper, congregational, look in Chapter Nne.

Primary Christian Bodies in New Madrid County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	6	553	6	424/231
Catholic	2	1,525	2	569
Christian	1	143	1	118/31
C. of God (And)	4	401	3	204
Presby	3	296	1	52/21
S. Baptist	15	3,226	14	6,120/795
U. Methodist	9	1,703	8	716/273

The first observation is that other than the Catholics, Methodists and the Presbyterians, the other denominations have gained market share over the past 50 years. Second, the Southern Baptists have actually grown in the face of such significant decline in population. However, the Baptist need to take note of the fact that less than 20 percent of their adherents are in worship on a given Sunday. It may be that their membership records are carrying a large number of persons who no longer live in the area, or many have found another church home and not had their names removed from the membership list, or an awful lot of the Baptists have lost interest in their churches. Third, since these denominations are comprised primarily of white Americans,

there is a need to dig deeper to discover whether or not the losses in population over the 50 years were primarily among African Americans.

We have one township in the MRCS in New Madrid County. The researchers found 15 congregations there. This number has been constant since 1952. Included are four Southern Baptist, one United Methodist, two Churches of God, two Churches of God in Christ, one General Baptist, one Missionary Baptist, one Church of Christ, one Pentecostal Church of God and two non-denominational churches, one of which was formerly connected to the Assemblies of God. Three or four of these congregations would be predominantly African American.

Primary Christian Bodies in Pemiscot County

Denomination	1950 Cong	1950 Memb	2000 Cong	2000 Adh/Att
Assembly	4	298	4	248
Catholic	1	933	1	235
Christian	2	111	1	163
Presby	2	376	1	367/121
S. Baptist	21	6,192	19	8,654/1,229
U. Methodist	7	1,717	7	935/325

Again we find that most of the denominations have maintained well in the face of declining population. The exceptions are the Catholics and the Methodists. Again, the Baptists are having less than 25 percent of their adherents attend worship. I fear that this may not bode well for them in the future.

The MRCS has two townships in Pemiscot County. They reported 25 congregations in 1952. Today, the number is down to 17. Six of the 8 that closed seem to have been African American. Given the decline in population in these two Bootheel counties it seems probable that a number of churches would close, so, while sad, this is not a surprise.

The Bootheel area has experienced tremendous change in the second half of the 20th Century. It is not the same place that it was. Apparently, church membership has held up in the face of the halving of the population. Certainly, it is much better than one would expect. However, there are indications that church participation is not what it ought to be. We need to look more deeply at what has happened there because of the racial factor.

Apparently, it had continued to be a place where Southern Baptists are dominant. The growth of Caruthersville from the establishment of the gambling industry there may stir another ingredient into the mix of life there. Baptists have generally opposed gambling. What impact will this have on their congregations?

Conclusion

Looking at several other of the rural Commercial Agriculture counties of north Missouri, and others in the rich agricultural area of the Bootheel, I found a similar picture. The Mainline Protestants have experienced major losses in congregations and adherence during the past 50 years. It is much deeper than declines in populations. The losses are usually there even when there has been population growth. The picture for the Catholics is varied. Generally, they have

lost adherents or have gained adherence in relationship to population shifts. But in some instances there has been an influx of Catholic persons, either relocating or seeking work, which has swelled their numbers. They have been very strategic in planting new parishes.

The churches of the Anabaptist heritage, or peace churches, have expanded into many of the rural counties in Missouri. Some of this is the result of relocation from more expensive land in the East. Some of it is the result of biological growth and the hiving off of groups to resettle.

The Mormons have been very aggressive and have opened new congregations in several of the counties. This suggests to me that the older Christian denominations might have actually grown had they been as active and aggressive and strategic about church extension and evangelism.

This report underscores the need for the Mainlines to get serious about being Great Commission Christians. I hope that they will.

The Missouri Baptists need to awaken to the fact that their membership and adherence numbers can mislead them into being “at ease in Zion.” Baptists now may well be experiencing much of what the Mainline Protestants experienced in recent decades. They may see rural churches closing and their actual membership numbers decline. This did happen in some of the counties over the past decade. It may well accelerate in the coming one.

Finally, there is much work to be done in rural places. In many of the rural counties of Missouri less than half of the residents are claimed as adherents. Given the nature of the claims, which appear to often be too high, it is apparent that there are many persons who are not active in the Christian faith. Rural areas seem to be much less churchied than “common knowledge” would contend.

When James Street published *The High Calling* (1951) rural Missouri was doing well. One of its sons was in the White House. Mainstreets were flourishing in the small towns. Roads were being improved. Commodity prices were good. The churches were making improvements on their facilities. Many churches were adding activities and for the first time some ever were able to afford a pastor of their own and have worship services every Sunday.

But as agriculture became more mechanized and crop yields improved, the farmers of North Missouri lacked some of the advantages of farmers in the northern Corn Belt. They were not able to compete. Gradually, grass lands replaced row crops. Farm families moved to the cities in search of work. Wal-mart stores were built on the edge of many of the country seat towns. This often dried up both their mainstreet and the mainstreets of the farm service towns 15 to 20 miles around. (For a fuller discussion of this see Chapters two and three of *The Rechurching of Rural America*.)

Some help came from small industries that settled in the small towns in the 1960s. But by the 1990s many of them have relocated to Third World countries.

Apparently, at several locations across Missouri colonies of Anabaptist farmers, Amish and Mennonite, have been formed. Their low input agricultural practices and simple life style seems to make it possible for them to survive, even thrive, on farms of this region.

Apparently, even in some of the relatively depressed larger towns of the region, the Mormons have been able to form new congregations.

In the Bootheel I sense a need for the planting of new African American congregations, ones that will appeal to the “returnees”. Here, as elsewhere, rural communities and farm service towns are drying up. The need for rechurching the area seems to have reached a crisis. Serious strategic thinking is called for.

Some excellent ministries for transient Hispanic farm labors have been initiated. This

seems to be an expanding need. More will be said about this in Chapter ten. All of this suggests the need and the relevance of the driving theme of our report, rural America is being rechurched, it must be done intentionally and faithfully.