

Whatever happened to ten rural churches rated as successful in the 1920s? One, Sardis Baptist, near Hartwell, Georgia, today is one of the larger rural churches in Southern Baptist life. The other nine, which also have a story to tell:

- Orlinda Church, Tennessee
- Caney Creek, Arkansas
- Plainview Church, Texas
- Mt. Elon, South Carolina
- Gresham and Noonday Churches, Texas
- Olive Chapel, North Carolina
- Long Leaf, Louisiana
- Liberty Church, Virginia

Chapter 1

10 SUCCESSFUL COUNTRY CHURCHES REVISITED

"Whatever happened to . . . ?" is a frequent conversation starter when old friends get together. Sports figures, entertainment personalities, and other headliners of a bygone era are subjects of feature stories which bring the public up-to-date on their lives. Americans seem to like to be updated on the fortunes of friends, family, and the famous.

In 1922 the Sunday School Board and the Home Mission Board did a major study of the 20,000 village and country Southern Baptist congregations. From these, ten were selected (as representative of the most effective rural churches) for a special in-depth survey. When I discovered this publication, I began wondering, "whatever happened to . . . ?" With the help of directors of associational missions, I found out.

The stories of these ten churches proved to be both interesting and illustrative of changes in rural America and her churches across the 70 years that have intervened.

1. *Orlinda Church, near Portland, Tennessee*, remains a strong open country church. The nearly 400 members of 1922 are now almost 500. Sunday School attendance has averaged about 159 for the past 20 years, but this is down some. Tithes and offerings run about \$100,000 a year. The church has maintained an active calendar of events across the years.

The sameness of statistics, however, masks significant changes. It is not longer a church and community populated exclusively by farm families. Young families with jobs in Nashville are opting to live in rural Robertson County on "hobby" farms. The congregation is growing younger as these people come into the church. A newly constructed education/fellowship wing addresses the needs and interests of children. This 150-year-old congregation expects "the best yet to be" as it responds to expanding opportunities. Soon it may need to consider birthing sister congregations in order to reach the growing community for Christ.

2. *Caney Creek, Arkansas*. The story of this church is very different. In 1922 this church had 1,200 persons living within six miles who might be reached by the church and 300 were members. Today only about 100 persons remain in the community. However, with a resident membership standing at 77, this church—though reduced in size—is certainly even more effective.

Caney Creek has the distinction of being the last rural church to be pastored by a president of the Southern Baptist Convention. This was in 1902-1904. The pastor was James P. Eagle, who also served as Governor of Arkansas. He had founded the church in 1898 on his plantation near Lonoke. It sputtered along with fewer than 50 members until 1914 when a great revival took place in the community. Out of this came a vision by a layleader, W.K. Oldham, to propose to the three other struggling congregations in the area that they merge and move to a central, neutral site. They agreed and the new congregation grew quickly to 300 members.

Because of the demographic changes, a much smaller Caney Creek again has a bivocational pastor. Opportunities for evangelistic outreach and growth are very limited just now. But the church can grow in ministry and in broader involvement of its membership. Recently, it developed a picnic area and a baseball field on its grounds. It can be a healthy smaller-membership church doing the will of God in its place. This seems to be the case.

3. *Plainview Church, Texas.* This church was correctly named. Prairies all around. It continues to be a model of a good solid country church. The foundation for this was laid in the 1920s with the ministry of I.N. Burnett. He is remembered as a community-minded pastor. He recognized if he were to build a strong church, the local school should be a good one and farm families should use modern technology to increase their income. He recognized that when the people feel good about their community, they are more likely to take pride in their church. It worked. Plainview Church remains the anchor of the community. Within the church Pastor Burnett focused on a strong Sunday School ministry. Bible study is still a major emphasis.

Today the church is served by a seminary student. The 85 resident members have an active congregational life. During an extended interim by the late Professor V. Gideon of Southwestern Seminary, the church became an increasingly generous supporter of missions. They came to recognize that the work of their field might no longer challenge a full-time pastor. So, by calling good part-time pastoral leadership, they would be able to give more money to the world mission enterprise.

4. *Mt. Elon Church, South Carolina.* This congregation, too, is a rural one. In 1992 the average Sunday School attendance was 130. Today it has slipped below 100. In 1920 it was reaching most of the prospects in its community. This is no longer the case.

Like many of our churches, its income is excellent. Apparently it has gotten into a rut. The opportunities for evangelism and growth are there. The church should recross the 100 barrier and could grow even beyond 200, I am told. Seemingly, it needs to redream the dream that led to the formation of Mt. Elon 160 years ago.

5./6. *Gresham and Noonday Churches, Texas.* The summer of 1921 found George Wilburn, a seminary student, working to revive these village churches. Revivals broke out in both places. Key community leaders were saved. Others rededicated their lives to the Lord. Initially, these congregations were served by a single pastor. They flourished.

Today both churches have full programs and their memberships approach 300 each. Each as a well-trained pastor and staff. The city of Tyler has grown this way. They are becoming suburban churches. The receipts are good. Their future is bright.

A few old-timers can still recall the revivals in the dreadful summer of 1921. The miracles of salvation God wrought then continued to bear fruit in these two good and growing churches.

7. *Sardis, Georgia*. This church is typical of several hundred large, rural Baptist churches found in the Piedmont from Virginia through Georgia. In 1922 it had 514 members. It has grown to 900 members. In 1923 Sardis shared its pastor with Reed Creek, then the largest Southern Baptist rural church with about 600 members. Today contributions at Sardis top \$200,000 a year. Its facilities are as fine as are to be found. However, in recent months the pastor of thirty years, Ray Wilson, died suddenly. A new era is about to begin.

Several years ago Like Hartwell covered a large portion of Sardis' traditional church field. This could have really hurt the church and put it into deep decline. Instead, it became the "second" church for the nearby town of Hartwell. First Church in town targets people with "urban" expectations for worship. So, Sardis is the "country" alternative. This strategy has worked.

8. *Olive Chapel, North Carolina*. This church was a struggling rural church with worship only once a month in 1894 when S.W. Olive "came home" from Southern Seminary. He planted his life there. He built the church and the community. He was a missionary, not only of theology, but of hygiene, scientific agriculture, and good basic education.

The church grew and became a leader in Sunday School work. This focus not only produced a great rural church, but it also became a training ground for denominational leaders. Garland Hendricks and Willis Bennett, respectively, founders of the church and community departments at Southeastern and Southern Seminaries, are among its former pastors as is Bob Watson of the North Carolina State Convention staff.

Olive Chapel isn't really a country church any more, at least in setting. Raleigh has grown out to meet it. Its next challenge is to accept and assimilate the new people. It won't be the same anymore. Hopefully it will become what God wants it to be in the 1990s.

9. *Long Leaf Church, Louisiana*. This church has had an up and down history reflecting mostly the fortunes of the sawmill community that it serves. Today the church has fewer than 50 resident members who are led by a long-term bivocational pastor.

In a real sense the story of Long Leaf has been repeated in hundreds of village churches across the country. Mining, milling, and oil field towns have waxed and waned as resources have been depleted or markets changed. Special thanks should be given to pastor Eugene Austin and those like him who serve faithfully in these small churches.

These pastors stay by their stuff. Little recognition or reward comes their way. They rejoice in the small victories that come as people are born into the kingdom, grow in grace and mature in a caring small church. Their affirmation comes from the people to whom they minister and from the God whom they serve.

10. *Liberty Church, Virginia*. This church began as a country church in 1834. In 1898 it

moved to town, the little courthouse town of Appomattox, made famous by the surrender of General Robert E. Lee which resulted in the ending of the Civil War. Today the city of Lynchburg is moving to Liberty Church. Today are the more than 700 resident members worship in a fine brick facility that covers much of a city block. They contribute more than \$300,000 annually to the cause of Christ. Under the impact of urbanization it can hardly be thought of any more as a "rural" church.

In doing this study I was impressed by how these ten churches capture the story of so many of the 20,000 Southern Baptist rural churches of 1922. Several have become "Suburbanized" and grown into large and prosperous congregations. Farm families have been joined by city workers and business and professional people. Conversely, several have seen the community wither around them. They have either declined or successfully refocused their field of work. Still others appear to be much what they were almost 70 years ago. Most have an exciting future.

Today Southern Baptists still have about 20,000 churches in places of less than 1,000. But this includes a lot of changes. Many communities have grown beyond 1,000 and so their churches have been placed in a different population category. Some churches have merged. Others have died outright. And still others have been planted since 1922. The 2 million members reported by the 20,000 churches in 1922 are now 4 million.

Imagine your church had been featured in such a booklet 30 to 70 years ago. What might have been its evaluation then? Now? And what if it might be studied about 30 years from now in 2021? What might the evaluation be?

Some of the factors that impacted these churches over the past seven decades, which they could not control, were urbanization, the economy, population. But other important factors they could impact are:

- strong Sunday School with trained leaders
- active, progressive community involvement
- mission vision
- effective pastoral leadership
- evangelistic outreach to prospect.

Attention to these matters can make a difference in most country and village churches, even today.