



# Imagining Futures of the Rural Churches in America

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**I**MAGINING THE FUTURE? THE HISTORIAN IN ME HAS ENOUGH DIFFICULTY WITH my proper subject, which is the past. “The past is a foreign country,” it is said. “They do things differently there.” As for the present? I think of President Eisenhower’s comment on trends: “Things are more like they are now than they ever were before.” But as for the future? It is nowhere as of now, and we do not know how they will do things there. Someone once said, “I have seen the future, and it is very much like the present, only longer.” We cannot know what aspects of it will be “like the present.” So we wrestle with ways to deal with the future of rural churches.

## I. EFFECTIVE IMAGINATION AND ITS PRACTICAL RESULTS IN CHURCH LIFE

Deal with it we must, if we would serve rural and urban America and the world beyond it through the rural churches and their associate agencies. For evidence of this, let me cite a study by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

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*Meeting the crisis in rural America requires a common vision and effective planning. The voices of rural congregations and their advocates will be the best resources, and can provide insights useful for the rest of church and society as well.*

America.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, church attendance is by no means the only relevant measure of vitality, but it is one valuable indicator. Thus the authors of the ELCA study interviewed pastors of churches that “saw changes in their worship attendance which outperformed their population’s change by an average of 14 percent between 1990 and 1994.” Which “area of effectiveness” was related to “strong worship attendance in relation to changes in population”? The answer: “rural congregations that are highly effective at developing and sustaining a common vision for the future” saw such gains. Pastors of congregations that saw changes between 1990 and 1994 that “outperformed their population’s change by an average of 19 percent” described these churches as “highly effective at planning together for the future.”

Common vision plus congregational planning for the future were the highest ranking indicators for all the pastors. In ninth place was the one we might have anticipated would have been first: “providing meaningful worship.” Of course, it is likely that most of those pastors and congregations somehow take such worship for granted: if they did not put energy into it, congregants would not so faithfully attend, no matter how much the leadership envisioned or planned for the future.

Other indicators pointed to elements like these: encouraging participation from persons with different backgrounds, encouraging stewardship of all sorts, ministering with young adults, participating in social ministry and activities, raising social justice questions, and providing small group ministry opportunities. The important point at the moment, however, has to do with the future: these active congregations all promote “a common vision” and they engage in “planning.”

## II. A VARIETY OF APPROACHES TO FUTURES

How, in the light of clues like these, might rural churches deal with the future? With so much talk of the future in these millennium-turning years, I can distill some frequently recommended approaches.

First, some announce outright occult or miraculous claims that they foreknow some details of the future. We will dismiss them for present purposes.

Second, some will simply make predictions. Yet what really matters often defies all predictions and comes, as it were, out of a clear blue sky. In church life, for example, think of the unforeseen Second Vatican Council and its consequences. Or the unforeseen rise of Pentecostalism from tiny beginnings in 1900 to world prominence by 1999. Who predicted the present celebration of differences among people and peoples during the midcentury period when a push toward homogenization dominated? Who foresaw the celebration of differences over gender, race, ethnicity, social location, identity, class, religion, and taste? Or who pictured in advance the move into politics by evangelicals in America since the 1970s? Or the middle-class public’s surge toward “spirituality” in putatively “secular” America? None of the above were predicted or predictable. The familiar observation of chaos

<sup>1</sup>Gretchen Olson Kopp and Kenneth W. Inskeep, *A Profile of Rural Congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* (Chicago: ELCA Department of Research and Evaluation, 1996).

science that says the fluttering of butterfly wings in a Peruvian canyon can become part of an enormously complicated process that eventuates in a tornado in Kansas should keep us modest about all long-range predicting. Hence, say good-bye to dreams of homogeneity.

Third, people can project trends. Most of those who engage in work such as envisioning rural church futures do much projecting and do it credibly. Such projection demands that people figuratively live off the interest and maybe dip into the capital of past performances on the part of this or that social force. Projection depends on the presumption that there will be some inertia as well as some secondary effects among social forces. Therefore we can say that in this little catalog of approaches to the future, projection is the first to have some promise.

Add to this a fourth approach and call it prophecy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called prophecy “hope projected backward.” The prophet looks ahead. He or she measures the divine ideal and reckons with human shortcomings over against it. Then the prophet utters judgment followed by—and this is key—some plan toward the realization of a better situation. Such a plan could begin with repentance and resolve and then issue in practical actions.

Thus Jeremiah spoke for Yahweh to elders of the exiled Jews who yearned for return to Jerusalem, the homeland where they dreamed of rebuilding a temple (chapter 29). To be sure, Jeremiah looked with hope beyond the present exile, but he also urged the exiles to seek in the meantime the welfare of the city to which God had sent them. They were to engage in long-range projects such as building houses, planting trees, and seeing new generations come forth. In some version of that spirit, we, or the prophetic sorts among us, can deal with the future of rural life and rural churches. Prophets foresee both the judgment and promises of God and then, under judgment and guided by promise, they seek a better future and inspire or lead others to welcome it.

Often there will be circumstances in which no political action, no act of economic prudence, seems credible. Still, under God, there will be people who gesture, witness, criticize, and prophesy, always with some kind of specific future in mind. While it would be bad taste for someone to claim prophet status for herself—and it would likely represent a bad guess on the part of devotees who would nominate such a person for that vocation—it is still possible to be prophetic.

Another creative way to deal with futures—with vision and planning still as the outcome—is to write scenarios and scripts in the mood of philosopher Hans Vaihinger, who taught readers how to imagine the future *als ob*, “as if” this or that outcome prevailed, and then to flesh out strategies for living in the imagined circumstances. Such scripts are useful, particularly if their authors stand ready to delete, restore, and revise elements of them in the light of changing situations.

Finally, for now at least, if people envision God as the power of the future, they can deal with that future by relying spiritually on God. They will first “wait upon the Lord.” Then they will act when they sense God acting and calling them

into the realms of adventure, surprise, and endurance. If we are outsiders to their vision, not part of the company of those who share a particular vision of God, it is still possible for us to see practical outcomes of their visions, even as we come forth with another set of them.

### III. NOT AN INFINITE, BUT A VERY LARGE NUMBER OF IMAGINED FUTURES

In every case, such imagining of futures occurs beyond bounds of the conventional. This is an important point, since it is easy and almost instinctive to rely on what comes to mind first when we write scripts for the future, to rely on what we can take for granted. How do we rethink this? One enemy of those who would deal with futures is a sense that “everything has been tried.” Such thinking needs to be replaced with more imagined possibilities than the tired and obvious ones.

Let us engage in a little exercise to suggest that there are many untried options out there:

Often I quote *The Oxford Companion to Chess*, which tells us that “there are  $2 \times 10^{43}$  different legal positions on a chess board, and it has been estimated that the number of distinct 40-move games is  $25 \times 10^{115}$ , far greater than the estimated number of electrons in the universe ( $10^{79}$ ).”<sup>2</sup> No doubt estimates of that final figure have been revised upward ever since the astronomers who used the Hubble telescope and other such instruments reported their discovery of 100,000 billion new galaxies, each with, roughly, 100,000 billion “stars.” And that is not the limit of things. Still it is safe to guess that the number of options on a chess board keeps ahead of the expanding universe.

I often follow up this chess illustration by telling of the time I asked a University of Chicago mathematician if those figures sounded proper. “Oh, yes.” In other words, I responded, they are “infinite.” “Oh, no!” he shot back. Infinity was for the Divinity School. For disciplines such as astronomy and mathematics, he counseled, just think of a *very* large number.

There are several trillion more cells in the human cortex than there are places on a chess board. So multiply that larger number by the number of people who care about rural America and rural churches and you have, no, not infinite, but, yes, “a *very* large number” of possibilities to imagine when dealing with their future.

### IV. THE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES OF THE HUMANITIES

Biblical prophecy, human history, the social sciences, and other sources help stock the ready imagination. But in the repertory of options, one that often gets overlooked by imaginers is the role of the humanities. Just as I could never get very far in religious instruction without running students through some sort of cate-

<sup>2</sup>David Hooper and Kenneth Whyld, *The Oxford Companion to Chess*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1992) 281.

chism, I want to spend a moment pointing to the humanities as resources alongside or beyond the more obvious instruments such as the social sciences.

Of course, there is no humanities catechism. Congress, when it established the National Endowment for the Humanities, simply listed academic disciplines such as literature, history, philosophy, “comparative religion,” and the like. (Archbishop William Temple once said that there is no such thing as comparative religion; there are simply people who are comparatively religious!) Today we call comparative religion “religious studies.” Take them together and define them? Impossible.

I was once on a commission on the humanities that set out to define them. Soon despairing of that task, we pointed to what the humanities “do.” Picture how to apply this description to the present and future tasks of imagining circumstances, situations, and strategies that are or can be connected with rural America and rural churches:

The humanities mirror our own image and our image of the world. Through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental human question: what does it mean to be human? The humanities offer clues but never a complete answer. They reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality, despair, loneliness, and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope, and reason. We learn how individuals or societies define the moral life and try to attain it, attempt to reconcile freedom and the responsibilities of citizenship, and express themselves artistically. The humanities do not necessarily mean humaneness, nor do they always inspire the individual with what Cicero called “incentives to noble action.” But by awakening a sense of what it might be like to be someone else or to live in another time or culture, they tell us about ourselves, stretch our imagination, and enrich our experience. They increase our distinctively human potential.<sup>3</sup>

It is through the humanities, for example, that an urbanite like me can and does in some ways stay “close to the farm,” as a collector and reader of Great Plains novels and poetry about rural life. For another example: a Catholic archbishop once told me that he is in a “bit of trouble with Rome,” not for anything he has ever said but because he listens to circles of women as they discuss controversial subjects. But this hierarch then supplements this listening on the scene with the reading, each summer, of the complete works of major women novelists. Why? Because these artists help him see.

I would never suggest, of course, that reading Willa Cather or Wright Morris is equivalent to being on the scene in rural ministry and in direct daily contact with farmers. It falls far short of what one learns from being a farmer, whether in easy times—have there ever been such?—or in crisis. But I do suggest that art, music, poetry, novels, cinema, songs, interviews, historical records, and humanistic social sciences give insights that will help those who must imagine new visions and plan new plans for rural America and rural churches.

<sup>3</sup>Commission on the Humanities, *The Humanities in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1980) 1.

Vice versa, since I am arguing that we belong to a complex “social ecology,” I think that suburbanites and rural people, especially if they are in ministry, would benefit if they read similar humanities-based materials about the inner city—the other main locale for “crisis,” for “decline,” for “diminution,” and the like in society and religious life in today’s cultures.

#### V. THE RURAL CHURCH IN A COMPLEX SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ECOLOGY

Like all human phenomena, the rural church is part of a complex social ecology. The point was made by Winton Blount, postmaster general in the Nixon administration and, more happily, a Birmingham, Alabama, business person who did much of the positive interacting with Martin Luther King, Jr., and other African American agents of change some years ago. At a seminar for executives discussing “Great Books” as a humanities-based way to get at management problems, Blount listened for a while to a corporate head who had just survived a hostile takeover. At one point this CEO uttered the kind of line one expects to hear from any of a number of University of Chicago Nobel economists. It holds, and this executive proposed, that a company owes nothing to anyone except a good yield to investors.

Mr. Blount lost patience and expressed emphatic disagreement. No, he urged, we and our companies and associations always belong to some kind or other of a complex cultural and social ecology. If a firm like his would attract executives, it must see to it that there are art galleries and theaters in the area. There must be support of nearby colleges and universities, where liberal arts and other graduates might prepare for their professions. Even selfishly, purely selfishly, he reminded all, a company does better if its surroundings prosper. But that is not enough, he counseled. It is important to speak of responsibility beyond the self and self-interest.

So it is with the rural church. It belongs to a complex ecology, a social setting that includes governmental, educational, and other agencies, local and national. The rural church also is part of a complex ecclesial or churchly ecology, placing it alongside inner-city and suburban churches, global churches, seminaries, research agencies, publications, and the like.

#### VI. CONNECTING IMAGINATION AND HOPE

If, and as, the other elements in the environment prosper, so might the church. If its leaders and members are faithful to their calling in the midst of such complexity, there will be a general growth in responsibility. Key to the strategic importance of imagination is its ability to alter the outlooks of individuals and groups. Philosopher José Ortega y Gasset said that real history is made less by earthquake, war, or famine than by the sensitive crown of the human heart tilting, ever so slightly, as, for example, from optimism to pessimism or from despair to hope.

If we isolate the farm, with all its problems today, and the rural church, in its often declining and precarious circumstances in America at this century’s end, it is

likely that pessimism or despair—both uncongenial to the life of faith and church—will reign. But locate and deal with them in the larger picture and both their contributions and hindrances may appear in a different light.

Here one might profitably invoke the insight of death camp psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. He observed concentration camp victims sharing bread and comfort and hope on the day they knew they were to be executed. This proved to him, and through him we are reminded, that the human freedom that can never be taken from us is the one that allows us to choose our attitude in any given set of circumstances.

Any humanities scholar of the New Testament would notice along with any Christian exegete that considering dire circumstances sets one up for the acts of imagination we associate with Jesus' parables and stories. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur says that we will never understand a parable until we note that in every one of Jesus' stories, there must first be upsetting, overturning: the first shall be last and the last first. The smallest seed, the mustard, grows into a great tree. The grain of wheat that dies, lives. The lost gets found. The uninvited get invited to the banquet. Those who take high seats get dumped to the low, and the low get elevated. And so on.

#### VII. SUGGESTING A FIRST SET OF DIRECTIONS FOR IMAGINATION, VISION, AND PLANNING

Here we are left, then, with the "low" or "lowly" rural church, which is seldom the focus of church-growth enthusiasts. It is overlooked by most denominations as they routinely go about their work. If rural congregations and their advocates gain or regain their voices in the complex social ecology of today, what might they bring to the rest of the church and society? Or what in churchly and societal trends will throw light on their circumstances? Time and space allow us to do little more than point in several directions, suggesting themes that deserve book-length treatment each.

##### *1. Imagining global faith and globalization*

Most rural churches in America are Christian. Most Christians of the world are not in North America. Most Christian growth is in the poor world of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the subcontinent and rim of Asia. There are also impressive gains in the former Soviet Union and, often underground, in China. This world is dependent upon agriculture—aren't we all?—in decisive ways. Issues of development, resources, and farm life are urgent in the hungry world. It is hard for North Americans to keep in mind the reality of dependency upon the land. The farmers among them know better and can provide a more vivid sense of contact with and more suggestions for learning from the rest of the world.

Globalization also has to do with market realities. The investment world in Hong Kong, Seoul, Bangkok, and Tokyo shapes much of our own. Urban investors and employees in the financial sector are aware of drastic changes in some dimensions of the global economy. Farmers are most aware of other such changes, and

much of the farm crisis results from the globalization of economies. Farmers and their interpreters and advocates in the churches can teach from experience the effects of such change. They may not know fully how to respond, but their awareness can increase the attention needing to be given to this sector.

### *2. Imagining the consequences of deregulation and the victory of the market*

The deregulating impulse has been extremely responsive to market dictation but unresponsive to the situation of people caught by sudden change. If everything is treated scientifically and social-scientifically, a culture comes up with one kind of response. If the humanities come into play and we are drawn into realms of story, philosophy, and the like, other kinds of responses will supplement these.

### *3. Imagining ecological issues*

Mention “globe” and you have called to mind the environmental concerns that press so strongly at this millennial turn. Let the politically-minded scientists and publics argue over the effects of global warming, pollution of air, land, and stream. One school maximizes it, to its own political advantage. The other school minimizes it, for similar reasons. The farmer knows from experience what happens when the atmosphere, the soil, and the water supply are spoiled and knows the delicate issues raised by the currently necessary use of pesticides, with all their side-effects. While academics and politicians argue over these issues from the safe distance of laboratory, study, or legislature, the farmer is on the front line.

Has his or her church been of help in providing theological rationales for care of the earth and responsible use of resources? There is much on which to report and from which to learn on this front, if imagination is put to work. What about the humanities? The poets and folk-singers, the poster-makers and the educators of children have done much to increase awareness and imagination on this front. One hopes they find a special inspiration from and home in the churches.

### *4. Imagining stewardship*

Just as deregulation has been a corollary issue to globalization, so stewardship has to come up when environment receives attention. But in this case, there are more specific teachings in the biblical tradition than there are on deregulation, teachings on how one stewards both exhaustible and replenishable resources. For many believers, stewardship means an annual effort each November for a congregation to set a budget and for its members to pledge to meet that budget, an effort in which issues other than “your treasures” only get smuggled in along with the appeal for “treasures.” Rural Christians have a more immediate sense of what stewardship means and can both contribute to revision and renewal of their own understandings and teach the larger church and society something of what goes wrong when stewardship gets neglected and what can go right when people devote themselves to it.



### *5. Imagining new social forms*

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur once wrote that drastic social change involves (a) resources; (b) distribution of resources; (c) interpretations of these. We are now considering “b.” Most Christians have given up on communism and most forms of socialism, as has most of the world, certainly all of the free world. The market has won. But the gap between rich world and poor world abroad, and between rich and poor in North America, has left us with serious questions for institutions that help assure fair distribution of resources and their yield. We are in urgent need of interpretations, social and political philosophies, to deal with these.

A permanent underclass has been developing. It is both urban and rural. Churches give some, never enough, attention to the former, the urban scene. The rural, rich in problems and in experience, deserves attention and seeks the advocates with credentials to inform, teach, and participate in an address to the scandal of underclass existence in an affluent society and age.

### *6. Imagining belief and ministry in situations of decline*

Because suburban life offers possibilities for growth where there is new housing and where there are superhighways and malls, and because some forms of church life have found a “market niche” that inspires growth in numbers, much church leadership has drawn its models for life in the kingdom of God from the market; it preaches “growth” and “success” as inevitable among the faithful and the well-programmed. Most of the literature on church growth overlooks the fact that faithful ministry goes on and has to go on where possibilities of growth are few. One study of the rural church found that only 39 percent of congregations surveyed had more than 100 at worship weekly; 29 percent had between 50 and 100; 32 percent had fewer than 50. They are a stench in the nostrils of church-growth experts. Doubling the parking lot and advertising more effectively or welcoming the stranger, usual counsels for growth, mean little where there is rural population decline and where younger generations move to the city.

The imagination of ministry in such situations will be able to draw on many biblical and traditional resources. Many rural churches are small and deal with smaller populations surrounding them. Shall they all be abandoned as losers? Or can they and their leaders imagine ways to deal with their own morale, their own opportunities for service, their own ways to present alternatives to the market-growth-commodification models that are coming to dominate?

### *7. Imagining fresh approaches to change*

Cities long dependent on rural life have undergone drastic change. As stockyards and meat processing firms left Kansas City, Omaha, and the like, urban leaders there improvised some new approaches to metropolitan life. They became centers of high technology. Similarly, many farmers have shown inventiveness—sometimes through costly failed experiments—to find different uses for their soil and environs. The rural church has a task of interpreting and imagining

in order that it can keep seeking other ways to adapt. Some rural churches have profited from their proximity to exurbia, and town and country churches serve well the retirees who move “back” to them. But others on the rural scene venture with new farm products, and they will be imagining more of these. The humanities speak much about the metaphor and image of the city, in poetry and politics alike. But long before the city emerged, there were pastorals, and there was a literature about country living that deserves to be recovered to provide impetus for the future.

#### 8. *Imagining the nature of emergent community and associational life*

Glenn Tinder has written that two elements color biblical approaches to politics: accent on “the exalted individual” and on “the prophetic community.”<sup>4</sup> Urbanites can care for both of these, too. But the nature of town and country community offers many models for such care for the individual, such community lived in the light of prophetic critique. The “family farm” has experienced in acute ways many of the “family values” issues as central to “community” concerns in our time, and its churches have come up with and can come up with more addresses to these. It is time for an inventory of resources, experiments, and scripts for the future.

Philosophers and philosophy have much to say about community, association, and the individual; the humanities, prised through town and country or rural experience, are rich in possibilities for guidance into futures.

#### 9. *Imagining theological recovery itself*

I have long observed *Kirchturmgeschichte*, which translates to “history done from one’s own church tower.” There is also church-tower theology. That is, most North American theological endeavor in the past half century has occurred in metropolitan areas by urbanites who forget what they do not see from their own settings. Rural church leaders may also be church-tower visionaries, but they do bring distinctive insights and can help other churches recover forgotten biblical and traditional themes that can speak to our day.

Theology is one of the humanities; it produces and draws upon various environments in which believers respond. Gil Waldkoenig, for example, has studied the writing of E. W. Mueller, long active in promoting understandings of rural life in Lutheran circles. Waldkoenig, while noting that Lutherans, unlike Reformed and Catholic Christians, did not come up with a “social gospel” in America, found Mueller developing notions of “symbiosis” and “ecology” that derived from Lutheran resources and farm experience.<sup>5</sup> Scholars can point to similar expositions in Catholic and other religious life.

<sup>4</sup>See Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989).

<sup>5</sup>E. W. Mueller, *Lost Land: E. W. Mueller’s Vision for the Development of the Rural Community*, ed. Gilson Waldkoenig (Hampton, CT: Tyrone, 1995); Gilson Waldkoenig, *Symbiotic Community: E. W. Mueller’s Approach to the Rural Social Crisis* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996).

*10. Imagining how decisions are to be made*

The urban and academic theorists tend to say and think that only secular rationality goes into political decisions in a republic. Yet while there is no reason to denigrate rationality, more and more observers and prescribers are seeing a need to surround this secular claim with those that are closer to religion. Farm animals, farm soil, nature, to say nothing of fetuses, children, the comatose, the voiceless and powerless, cannot speak for themselves through “secular rationality.” Nor will their advocates determine their entire lives on such a narrow term.

There are special reasons for the rural church to supplement secular rationality in decision making. Here we will only point to some of the ways and resources. We make up our minds about life and death, staying or leaving, and the like, in the light of intuition, community, tradition, memory, affection, and hope—all of which get special insight and nurture from informed church life and with definite “spins” in rural church life. It is time to imagine more ways in which this complex of approaches can have influence.

VIII. RECALLING THE ROLE OF ENVISIONING AND PLANNING  
IN RURAL CHURCH LIFE

I have pointed in only ten directions for the focus of imagination, directions for which the rural church experience is not unique but distinctive. Those with such experience are likely to be able to envision many more. Out of such envisioning can come those two features so determinative for rural congregational life and, by analogy, life far beyond its scope. Recall that the “effective” congregations were (a) those that were “highly effective at developing and sustaining a common vision for the future” and (b) those that were “highly effective at planning together for the future.” They can lead the way for the rest of us who seek new thoughts, strategies, approaches, and realities. Imagine that! ⊕