



# 80,000 Seeds: Rural Families in the Midst of Change

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When I reflect on the waves of change that impact our rural families and communities, what regularly floats to the top is the number 80,000. When I was a boy between the ages of six and twelve, I could quite often be found accompanying my grandfather as he went about the task of planting his spring crops. Winter wheat had not yet been brought to South Dakota, so all planting at the Johnson farm was done in the spring. Eighty thousand was not a number that my grandfather worried himself with when it came to planting corn in those days. Most years, he took a portion of his own harvested corn and had it cleaned for planting. We would then take it from his seed bin, place it in the planter, and off we would go, pulling his two-row corn planter. My grandfather normally received around \$2.50 for a bushel of corn, and it maybe cost him a few cents to prepare it for planting. Only in the last years of his farming career did my grandfather buy his seed corn and even then that bushel of seed corn would only be marginally more expensive than what he would sell it for in the fall.

Today, 80,000 seeds are what you buy when you buy a bushel of seed corn. You do not buy it by weight or volume; the sellers actually count out 80,000 seeds. The price for those 80,000 seeds will range from \$100 to \$300. You choose from a menu of types and kinds. You can pick seeds based on days to maturity, whether it

*Changes in agricultural technology and possibilities brought by transportation and the Internet have resulted in great population shifts in rural America. The impact on communities and churches is immense. The challenges are daunting, but so are the opportunities.*

is Round Up ready, or whether it will harvest itself at the end of the season. (I'm joking about the last one. Just seeing if you were paying attention.) Starting this year, you can place those 80,000 seeds in a 48-row planter and then pull it with a tractor that is guided by GPS. Fertilizer is applied at a variable rate as the tractor moves over the field, using satellite imagery and soil testing to determine how much fertilizer is needed for each portion of the field. Yields can be determined by the computer in the combine even during the harvest, so one knows in the moment whether or not the planting and growing plan have come together to produce the best crop possible. When the harvest comes in, today's farmer in South Dakota can expect to harvest 140 bushels per acre. My grandfather averaged 45 bushels an acre.

Where once it took a large crew of men and women to bring in the wheat harvest, today a single person (or at the most three or four) can harvest hundreds of acres in a day. It is typical to see a 16- or 32-row corn planter and combines that can harvest sixteen rows at a time. This fall (2012), combine operators will be able to use a driverless grain cart to follow along with the combine. The impact of technology on our rural families is profound and it is transforming our communities, our schools, and our churches.

This summer, I did an ordination at an open prairie church in eastern South Dakota. It was the first ordination of a son or daughter born and raised in that congregation. The uncle of the young woman who was ordained was obviously proud of his niece and her accomplishments, but he was surprised at my amazement at the automation and capacity of his farm, which was across the road from the church. He had more grain handling bins and equipment than a small town elevator, and he farmed all of his property with one hired man. He has been farming for over thirty years and during his time on the family farm the neighborhood has mostly disappeared. Once, each section contained at least one family farming that one square mile; today, he farms more than twenty sections himself, with no one living on those acres. The disappearing families affect everything as the community is slowly swept away.

When my wife LaDonna and I first moved to South Dakota with our two children thirty-one years ago, West River really was west of the Missouri River, and one would experience the dramatic drop in population density and the lack of any significant-sized communities. Today, "West River" (with the accompanying drop in population density) has moved about a hundred miles to the east and now starts at the Jim River.

## THE IMPACT OF NEW OPPORTUNITIES

There is no part of rural life that has not been profoundly impacted by changes in technology and science. I have friends that ranch in one of the most remote areas in South Dakota. Their county qualifies as "frontier" since there is less than one person per square mile. Their driveway is more than fifteen miles long.

The neighbors still gather in the spring for branding and working calves, but now the work is done inside portable corrals and on calf tables instead of using horses, with calves being roped and thrown and worked on the ground. When it comes time to sell those calves in the fall, it's all done by video conferencing with buyers logging into the web site from all over the world and viewing the calves to make their purchases.

My friend was the only one of the three children in his family that continued in ranching and, from his own five children, only one shows any interest in carrying on the work of this ranch that has been in their family for more than a hundred years. When my friend and his siblings went to high school back in the 1970s and early 1980s, their opportunities for travel and study were quite limited. No foreign language was available in their high school and those who didn't play a sport or compete in rodeo found their options limited. For those five children who are in school now (even though the school is even smaller today than it was in the '80s), their opportunities are significant. Each of those five kids takes a foreign language class that is delivered via the Internet, and all are taking AP classes in science, math, and English. Each of them has friends in foreign countries with whom they are in weekly contact via Facebook or e-mail. So, where once the only possible apparel was blue jeans with cowboy hats or baseball caps, now one is not surprised to find goth or rocker apparel as well as pink or blue spiked hair in that rural community.

With the increased opportunities for children to participate in sports, academics, or intellectual endeavors in our state comes the ever expanding need for the family to travel on the weekend. I served as senior pastor at Lutheran Memorial Church in Pierre from 1993 to 2007, and starting around 1998 we began to experience a decline in participation for our Sunday morning Sunday School and in Sunday worship. At the same time we had experienced an increase in participation for our Wednesday Sunday School, which predated my arrival. So we conducted a survey that showed that a significant number of our young families were out of town for events almost every weekend. Even our own family was no exception. In March of 1999, I was watching our youngest daughter play basketball in Rapid City, my wife LaDonna was with our youngest son watching our Pierre wrestling team at the state tournament in Watertown, and our oldest son was playing indoor soccer in Sioux Falls. We covered almost the entire state in one weekend. That same experience was being replicated by any number of families in our community.

At Lutheran Memorial we finally asked our young families what would be helpful. In response we developed a series of "faith talk" guides that families could use while they traveled, and we started a Wednesday night worship service. It took several tries to get Wednesday evening "right": we developed an after-school study program for middle school kids, Wednesday Sunday School, a community meal, adult education, a worship service, and then confirmation. Finally, we worked with churches from around the state and we published their worship times for our con-

firmation students and parents. I see this trend for increasing travel on the weekends continuing.

#### THE IMPACT OF POPULATION CHANGE

Another area that directly impacts our families is the closing of schools or the consolidating of schools in a county. Beyond the fact that students now have to go to school either with or, even worse, *at* the school of their fiercest rival, the economic impact when the last school closes is devastating to those small communities. No matter if it is through a direct outlay or through increased taxes, it will cost more for the family to send their children to school. Those small towns will lose a primary centering and gathering place and the out-migration of people from the community will most certainly accelerate. For most of our towns, the closing of the last school will mark the beginning of the end for the town.

With the ever increasing size of the farms in South Dakota and the increased opportunity to see the outside world (even if only through the Internet), the chance that children will move away following graduation also increases. More than 60% of our counties have steadily lost population since the dust bowl days of the 1930s. So, much pressure is now placed on the nuclear family, the extended family, and the communities to make the community “work.” We had not heard the phrase “food desert” until three years ago, but we certainly know what one looks like in much of our state. For much of western South Dakota, driving to a full-blown grocery store can mean a six-hour round trip drive and even to buy a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk can require a two-hour round trip drive.

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Providing basic emergency services in counties as big as Rhode Island becomes an issue when, after all the volunteer hours of training, the EMT or firefighter just can't take one more shift because the likelihood they will be called to assist a family member or a lifelong friend becomes just too painful. Raising up qualified educators, coaches, or someone to write a community newspaper within a county gets to be an issue when so many of the inhabitants of our rural counties are either aging or leaving. For many of our churches located in open prairie or in small towns, finding someone to play the organ or piano can be difficult, if not impossible.

The disparity in population density within the state makes for interesting issues in how we govern and how we do church and community. There are now more people living on the west side of Sioux Falls than all the farmers and ranchers in the state put together. South Dakota Legislative Districts 23, 24, 25, 28, and 29 include approximately 150,000 voters, but those voters are scattered over 40% of South Dakota. Compare that to Sioux Falls, which covers 0.1% of South Dakota

and has seven legislative districts within the city. I believe that, in the next ten years, congregations, communities, and counties are going to have to close or, at the least, consolidate with their neighbors. It is not outside the realm of possibility that the northwest quarter of South Dakota could become one consolidated county. At the same time that we are having to close schools, churches, and counties, we are also having to open and build new schools and churches in those places to which people are moving within the state.

I have lunch with two of my friends on a regular basis. The three of us come from families where the Lutheran faith was part and parcel of our daily lives. All of us have been a part of the church and all three of us have mostly lived in small towns. One is now a bank president and the other is a judge, and all of us have responsibilities in recruiting people to come and serve in South Dakota. We regularly find ourselves laughing out loud as all three share the same issues in recruiting people who might be willing to serve in small-town South Dakota. We now have several counties in South Dakota where only one attorney is working. Of those attorneys, three are well into their retirement years, and they would like to retire but cannot find another lawyer willing to come and live in that area. Money is not the issue; it's the lack of appropriate work for a lawyer's spouse, the remoteness of the county, or the sparseness of the population. My banker friend has the same issues in staffing his banks.

#### THE IMPACT ON PASTORS AND CONGREGATIONS

I had been bishop-elect for all of thirty minutes or so when I met my first seminarian assigned to the South Dakota Synod. She was so excited about wanting to do rural ministry. As I listened to her describe her perfect first call in a rural setting, I became concerned enough to ask, "What town or area do you have in mind?"

"Sioux Falls," came the answer.

"Sioux Falls?" I said, "Sioux Falls has 150,000 people in it. Why do you think Sioux Falls is rural?"

"Well," she replied, "I checked and Sioux Falls only has one Starbucks." She was wrong about the number of Starbucks (six that I know of), and now the population of the metropolitan Sioux Falls area is closer to 250,000, but in her mind and from her experience of growing up in an urban area, our most populated community looked pretty rural to her. Imagine her serving in a county with less than one person per square mile or even one without a Starbucks. Forty years ago, most of our seminarians came from small towns and rural communities, but today most are coming from metro or large suburban communities. So the culture shock for our newly rostered leaders moving to rural communities can be significant.

The other issue for those young seminarians (I use that term on purpose, because in the past seven years there has been a significant drop in age of those coming to serve the church in full-time ministry) is that many of them are being called to places that in the recent past were much larger in size. They were either solo pas-

tor congregations or even multi-pastor sized parishes. We have a young pastor serving by himself in a county seat community that, only twenty years ago, was a parish able to support a full-time senior pastor with twenty-five years of experience, an associate pastor right out of seminary, as well as a full-time secretary and full-time parish worker. The other congregation in the parish left ten years ago over a dispute. The church in town survived a vote to leave the ELCA, and then that vote was followed by the resignation of the pastor and the departure of a portion of its members. The young pastor who is now serving them just ended his first year and is still excited about the challenges and the blessings that have come with his call. I have multiple connections into this congregation, so I know that his proclamation of the gospel has been well received and that he is rapidly developing into the leader that is needed in this congregation and community. At the same time, I am also concerned for him and his family as they work through the changes that this new call and life in a much smaller community has asked of them. They are experiencing a significant cultural change from what they grew up with and what they had experienced while at seminary.

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Now, given all these negatives, you are perhaps wondering why I continue to serve within this synod and more importantly why, as the bishop, I invite folks to come and serve in this very rural state. For me personally, I continue to be energized by the call to ministry in this ever-changing landscape. There are indeed dark days, but I can think of no time in the past fifty years when the church has been more needed. Pastors and laypeople living within the gift of new life in Jesus Christ are making a difference in the lives of many as they live out the command to “Go and make disciples” and to feed hungry souls.

As Christians, we understand death in all its many forms and permutations. We know that death can end relationships, families, and communities. But, as Christians, we also know that death does not get the last word. I believe that Christ calls forth new life in the here and now. I continue to be surprised and delighted by the work of the Holy Spirit as new leaders and new beginnings are called forth.

I recently preached at the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of NeSoDak, our oldest Bible camp in South Dakota. If you do the math, those crazy Lutherans opened a Bible camp during the second year of World War II. I had the chance to talk to four of the very first campers who were in attendance that anniversary Sunday (yes, they were all very old). The women reported that they had all come on the train and had walked the seven miles to the camp from the train station and the men had all hitchhiked.

Through its camping ministry this past year, the South Dakota Synod was equally wild. We opened a brand new Bible camp, called Joy Ranch, located just north of Watertown. It took thirteen years of dreaming, planning, and building. Joy Nelson of Watertown had a dream that children with special needs would be able to come to camp and have the same experience as every other child who comes to camp. So in the summer of 2012, children and adults who are differently abled had the opportunity to interact with Norwegian Fjord horses, take a ride in a horse-drawn wagon, or, with the help of a special saddle, even go for a ride on one of the horses. Every part of the camp is handicap accessible, from the lakefront to the riding arena. All are welcome.

Now, in order to pay for all that infrastructure and equipment, the camp also has a retreat center on the same grounds that offers every comfort. The support of time, talent, and money has been significant to bring this dream to reality. What started as a dream of one person was caught by individuals and communities like the South Dakota Synod WELCA group that raised money for the kitchen, as well as the community of Watertown and congregations across the South Dakota Synod who raised money, donated building materials and necessary equipment, and volunteered countless hours in bringing this dream to fruition.

I have witnessed a young pastor during his first four years of ministry revitalize a congregation and the community in which he resides. He has a gifted spouse and together they have marvelous abilities to proclaim the gospel and to live out the new life that Jesus Christ is inviting them into. The congregation is no longer just concerned about its own survival, wondering whether or not they can pay the light bill. The congregation made the decision to move from a half-time call to a full-time call so that their current pastor would come. They have built a parsonage for their new pastor because there was no adequate housing for the family. They have looked into the needs of the community and the county and they have started a community food pantry and are making plans for a food backpack program in the schools. They have increased their mission support to the synod and the ELCA. The children choose a Global Mission emphasis that they learn about, pray for, and support with their offerings. I believe they are changing the culture of their community through their leadership and living out the promise that comes through Jesus Christ.

The needs of our rural counties are many and the need for gifted, Spirit-led, rostered leaders will continue. How we address those needs and how we raise up, educate, and support those called to serve will continue to evolve and change. I am privileged to see the impact of Spirit-led leadership across our synod, to see communities of faith being revitalized and followers of Jesus making a difference in the lives of many.

Blessings on the future we are being invited into. ☩

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