



## **The New Face of Town and Country America and Its Challenge for the Church**

MERLE W. BOOS

Town and Country Ministry, Division for Mission in North America, Lutheran Church in America, New York, New York

### **I. SMALL TOWN AMERICA IS CHANGING**

Small towns and rural areas are changing before our eyes. A new community is emerging in town and country America.

Approximately one-third of the population of America lives in hamlets, settlements, villages, towns, and small cities and in open spaces of the new emerging town and country setting. Most recent census information confirms earlier noted trends that people are increasingly immigrating into town and country areas. Between 1970 and 1980, when the nation's metropolitan areas grew by 9.1 percent, non-metropolitan areas (defined by the Census Bureau as those places with less than 2,500 people outside of urbanized areas) increased by 15.4 percent. In the 1970s, a net of four million people moved into non-metropolitan areas.

A first reaction to the census data might be to assume that rural and small town growth is simply people moving out of big cities to close by areas, yet some of the most dramatic population growth in the 1970s happened in counties well removed from the influence of major cities. Counties with a density of less than ten persons per square mile grew faster (almost 21 percent) than more densely populated counties in the 1970s. Counties with no city above 10,000 people grew by over 13 percent during the decade, compared to an almost 3 percent decline during the 1960s.

The shift in population growth toward town and country America has been underpinned by a number of factors. A major emerging characteristic of town and country areas is the increasing development of recreational and retirement areas. Many of the most rapidly growing rural counties with resort-retirement developments are in the West and South, particularly in Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, California, and Florida. Counties with 50 percent or more population growth during the 1970s, with recreational and retirement developments as a major factor, also occurred in northern Arkansas, southern Missouri, northern Wisconsin, northern Michigan, and central Idaho.

A slow down in the displacement of people from agricultural jobs and an increase in jobs in mining, manufacturing, trade, and services in town and country areas also contributed to the population growth trend. For example, mining

and petroleum-related industries have caused a large influx in population to southern Appalachia, south Louisiana, west Oklahoma, and into the western Energy Corridor which includes Arizona,

New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, eastern Montana, and western North and South Dakota. During the 1970s, the decentralization trend in nearly all types of manufacturing accounted for 24 percent of all new jobs in town and country America.

Demographers Gladys K. Boles and Calvin L. Beale, in their study on “Commuting and Migration Status in Non-metro Areas” done for the Department of Agriculture, reported that “non-metro residents remain overwhelmingly independent of metro labor markets, despite the comparative ease of automobile commuting today.” They credit this fact, in part, to the growth of non-agricultural work in rural areas and small towns in the past 15 years. Another finding from the Bowles and Beale study: Household heads living in non-metro communities travel only a median 4.6 miles to work each day, compared to 7.6 miles traveled by household heads in metro areas. It also takes these people less time to get to work—14.5 minutes versus 22.2 minutes for the average metropolitan resident. These statistics exclude farmers and people working at home. Clearly, both jobs and people are moving away from metropolitan areas, changing the face of town and country America.

One of the major changing characteristics in town and country America has to be farming. Those identifying themselves as American farmers have dwindled from six million in 1930 to about 1.45 million today. According to the recent Census Bureau report, only one person in forty-one lives on a farm today compared to one out of every three people in 1930. The farm population is declining because agriculture requires ever fewer workers to produce increasingly large harvests. Most farmers now live off the farm—a reversal since 1970. It should also be noted that today nine of ten farm families in America have some off-farm income.

Despite the loss of numbers of those who are directly engaged in farming, the future of town and country areas in America is more optimistic than it has been for many decades. Areas that have good potential to continue a strong momentum for growth up to year 2000 will have at least two of the following characteristics: good transportation facilities; an openness to newcomers; attractive recreational-resort facilities; a young work force; good public education and medical facilities; progressive financial institutions; and a diversity of available jobs. Areas with less optimistic futures will be characterized by lack of good transportation facilities; lack of land available for development of housing, industry and recreational facilities; and lack of motivation for welcoming growth.

These changes that are presently reshaping small towns and rural areas across America will continue in the years ahead. This new, emerging face of town and country America presents an opportunity and a challenge to the church. With the changes in town and country America, how is the church to face the challenge to assist congregations, to guide and inspire them so that ministry will, in the future, be effective and strengthened for mission outreach and development?

## II. THE CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCH

Before directly dealing with that specific question I believe it is important to recognize that the church’s presence and mission in town and country is not new. There are more churches in small towns and rural areas in America today than in any other type of community. Ministry in a town and country setting is not, then, like invading a new field. We are deeply indebted to all those pastors and lay leaders who have so faithfully served in small towns and rural areas over the years. The church is truly blessed today for the thousands of dedicated pastors that daily tend

their congregations in the countryside. We should also be thankful for the mighty army of lay persons who have given of themselves in support and maintenance of the town and country church and those who continue to support this important mission and ministry thrust today.

A major concern is the attitude with which the church views the value of ministry in town and country areas in the future. Over the past decade there has been a positive trend, as church leaders have strongly supported ministry in non-metropolitan areas. This positive stance from denominational leaders has been heard by the leadership of congregations. I sense more and more that pastors feel town and country has ministry opportunities and is a bright place for a clergyperson to be. Consequently fewer and fewer pastors serving town and country congregations and parishes are looking over their shoulders at some sort of “active” ministry in the city or suburbia. I also see an increasing number of new leaders coming out of the seminaries with a firm commitment for ministry in a town and country setting.

That positive stance from those who teach future town and country pastors will also be very important. Such a positive stance has not always been present in the past. I remember what a rural pastor shared during a town and country workshop that was held back in the mid-1970s. This pastor returned to seminary for a conference designed for ministers who were out on first calls for up to two years. During the conference the pastor met one of his professors in a hallway of the seminary. “Where are you at now, young man?” the professor inquired. “Well, I’m serving a three-point parish in a rural area,” the pastor replied. The professor quickly responded, “Young man, I hope you like to read books because there is nothing going on to challenge you in those types of ministries or communities.” The pastor shared with the conference participants that a suggestion was made to the professor that he might consider spending some time out in the parish, to experience first hand the opportunities and challenges for mission and ministry in rural areas today. While the attitude projected by the professor and other leaders in the churches back during the 1960s and early 1970s did rub off on students and pastors who desired “to be where the action was,” it is of less effect today on men and women who are making decisions about where they want to serve the People of God. I am hearing stronger support in our learning institutions for pastors serving in rural areas and that very fact will mean so much as the church faces the opportunities and challenges in town and country America in the future.

While denominational executives are increasingly pressing the point of the validity of town and country ministry and are stressing with seminary students

the real needs of town and country churches, another major challenge for the future must be faced. How well will denominational bodies deal with the problem of an adequate basic salary for ministers serving in those areas? The potential of an effective ministry occurring is often delayed or denied by not seeing to it that the pastor has an adequate salary. Unless this is dealt with in the future, we will see a continuation of the short-term pastorates that has weakened ministry in rural areas in the past. If a full-time ministry is warranted, then the church must be willing to compensate the pastor adequately so that he or she can give full energies to the congregation. Denominational guidelines for ministerial compensation must be encouraged as a basic educational step for the congregation, with other steps including an evaluation of the nature of the ministry in the place and the experience of the pastor.

It will be important that denominations recognize that some congregations may not be

able to fully support a full-time ministry. This will be increasingly true of town and country congregations situated in isolated areas or in communities where growth is not apparent but where there are people yet to be served. We are now at the point (or quickly arriving there) where a church or parish must have at least 150 or more active members to provide the financial resources and share in responsibilities for carrying out support for a full-time pastor. This is not to say that the smaller congregation is not vital or viable, but the real fact remains that resources are just not available to support the needed program and a full-time pastor. It will be important, then, that increased emphasis be placed upon the dual-role (i.e., bi-vocational, “tent-making”) pastorate and all that it offers to ministry in that place. Several denominations are now addressing this concern. One major denomination reports that currently over 50 percent of their seminary students are pursuing second careers. Interest in dual-role pastorates is increasing among those now entering the ministry. Steps to help prepare congregations for this valid form of pastoral leadership need to be taken. Again, the potential of an effective ministry occurring is often delayed or denied by not facing the realities and opportunities offered to us in extending ministry in diverse community situations.

Town and country ministers will also need increased support and guidance in adjusting their ways of ministering in the new American rural culture. At a time when town and country churches and communities are being shaken and shaped, or re-shaped, by population shifts, economic trends, technological developments and in the growth of networking (the interdependence factor), a well trained and orientated clergy is of utmost importance. The extent to which the church exercises the responsibilities, opportunities and needed actions to serve in diversified town and country areas across America depends in very large measure upon its leadership. The increasing complexity of American rural culture will continue to demand more of the clergyperson that ministers in town and country areas now and in the future.

This increasing complexity of the American rural culture should signal to the church the need for strengthening the preparation, orientation and continuing education for ministers who will be serving or are presently serving in town and country. We need to restore or strengthen Rural Church Center programs or Town and Country Church Institutes. Special training for ministers in

and for students entering rural ministry should have opportunities similar to those often provided for their peers in metropolitan America. Such centers or institutions should assemble faculties that include top specialists in the town and country church, rural sociologists and rural economists, agricultural and business leaders, as well as theologians who would emphasize preaching and teaching methods that will effectively serve the needs of people in modern day rural America. To be avoided is the romanticizing of rural America, as it once was.

Denominations should also take seriously the congregation or parish as a “teaching community.” It will be increasingly important for denominations to be much more actively involved in providing resources for the assignment of interns in town and country congregations and parishes. Within the setting of the local church, students will then have the opportunity to meet people, to be surrounded by people with differing priorities and needs, and will get a deeper insight into the reality of the forces and dynamics in *today’s* town and country culture and how that affects ministry there.

A great challenge also stands before the town and country church in the areas of lay leadership development. St. Paul writes about “equipping the saints for ministry.” The challenge is to break with the attitude that so many members hold, namely, that the church’s ministry is gathered up in the role of the local pastor. It will not be easy to do this. Workshops and seminars will be needed for pastors to develop skills for working with volunteers. In order to make the role of the lay leader effective, three actions are basic: *education, encouragement, and support*. If those three basic actions are provided for the laity, then I sincerely believe we will see an effective church at work in ministry of outreach and service. The sooner a pastor develops competence in working with the laity, the sooner the whole ministry of the congregation will show results.

Another challenge that faces the church in town and country is how to support and strengthen the smaller membership congregation in the future. A general definition of a smaller membership church is one of two hundred or fewer persons. Over fifty percent of the congregations in major Protestant churches are covered by this definition and a great majority of those are in town and country. Where individual congregations are too small and their resources so limited that they are unable to support a full-time pastor, the approach of denominations has been to link or yoke congregations in order that full pastoral services could be provided. In areas where smaller membership congregations are clustered geographically, the cooperative parish has seemed to be the wise course to follow.

There are several advantages of a linked or yoked parish but there are disadvantages too. It will be important in the future to explore alternatives for providing pastoral service in smaller membership congregations, including training and support for lay ministers and the utilization of the bi-vocational or dual-role pastors.

I also want to affirm the cooperative parish concept. Two excellent cooperative ministries quickly come to mind. In each situation, every congregation in the parish is now able to hold services every Sunday. There has also been an emphasis placed upon lay leadership development within the parish, which

would not have been possible without a supportive structure which would allow that to happen. So long as the aim of a cooperative ministry is not to close certain marginal congregations but rather to enlarge programs and effectiveness in ministry, affirmation and support will be available to the pastors and laity who give leadership to this exciting form of ministry.

One of the major assets of a smaller membership congregation is its staying power. We have them in great numbers now and they will remain in great numbers in the future. This should not hinder any intentional plans to support and grant guidance to encourage growth in terms of outreach and effectiveness. I can see no great virtue in worshipping smallness, but the smaller membership congregations have gifts to share and it is on that sharing that attention should be focused.

The town and country church and its leadership will be increasingly tested in the future along the lines of two very simple but basic questions—How well do we listen to the people? And, How much do we care about people? Ministry in town and country today and into the future is and will be among persons of differing values and interests rather than the homogeneous communities that have been traditional in the past. The church is the only institution in the

community that has no pressures placed upon it except that of listening and caring for people. The church, then, is the “bridge” to effectively deal with differing values and interests.

Merely because there are fewer farmers and farm families today should in no way diminish the need of listening to their cares and concerns. Agriculture is among the ten most stressful occupations in America. Basic reasons for a major portion of that stress include the increasing complexity of farming, the conditions of the weather and markets, the difficulties in farm estate planning and, in some areas, isolation. Furthermore, in the face of tremendous odds as a result of commodity price fluctuations, inflation, increasing middle person margins, tax inequities, government program inequities, and absentee land ownership, the family farms, especially those of small and medium size, are struggling for economic survival. The leadership of the church must be very conversant with agricultural concerns. For the church to be relevant to those farm families in the future, ministers must listen to the people and care.

Town and country America is a challenging and a bright place to be. We should expect no less from it in the future. If the church has the will, then the challenge will be met. If the leadership of the church in town and country does not accept the challenge and directly face changes that impact rural Americans, then they will only be frustrated, alarmed, angry, and bewildered. But, thank God, we have within the potential to change our hearts and minds and behaviour. Let's do it!

#### *Further Reading*

Rockwell C. Smith, *People, Land and Churches* (New York: Friendship, 1959).

Jackson W. Carroll, *Small Churches are Beautiful* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

Samuel W. Blizzard, “The Place of the Social Sciences in Theological Training for Rural Ministries” (Occasional Paper).

Richard Louv, *America II* (Los Angeles: Mifflin, 1983).

Loren B. Mead, “Few Members, Many Gifts” *Alban Institute Action Information*, vol. IX, no. 3 (1983).