

TRINITY BIBLE COLLEGE & GRADUATE SCHOOL

**DISCOVERING TRENDS AND STRATEGIES FOR CHURCHES
AND MINISTRY IN THE SANDHILLS OF RURAL NEBRASKA**

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ABSTRACT

The current state of ministry in rural Sandhills of Nebraska struggles with the following questions: “How will relevant ministry survive as the church moves into the future? What will the ministry look like? Who will lead outreach? How will missions be supported moving forward?” Rural communities face many struggles in these times; they experienced decline and loss of families over the past several decades, which resulted in smaller churches. World Population Review reports Thomas County Population in 1980 at 973 people and 2018 numbers at 720.¹ Many trends ignored or thought small rural ministry as less than larger metro churches. Karl Vaters stated in, *The Grasshopper Myth*, “Half of all Christians in America and far more than half of Christians worldwide attend a Small Church.”² This study researched the challenges and issues of current ministry, and the opportunity for churches to partner and cooperate together ensuring productive ministry and evangelism for the future.

Research included interviews of pastors, lay leaders, members and adherents, and small-town residents using a questionnaire designed to provide answers to focused questions with persons involved in the rural ministry context and community. What percentage of pastors serve in bi-vocational roles? What level of education and experience do they have? What roll do lay people play in leadership? What level of cooperation can exist a level of cooperation between area churches, from different denominations and groups, working together in agreement with each other to ensure successful ministry in the future? This research gathered responses from diverse groups in the churches and ministries engaged to ensure representation of multiple

¹ WorldPopulationReview.com; Nebraska, February 17, 2020. (accessed 2020-5-28).

² Karl Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth* (New Small Church, New Song Media, 2012), 41.

viewpoints ensuring good research data from interviews from current ministries and those engaged in evangelism whether clergy or lay leadership.

DEDICATION

So many people have helped and supported me in this endeavor. To these great encouragers I dedicate this work. To my dear wife Cindy who has supported this effort from the beginning and encouraged me throughout the entire project. Also Bethel Assembly of God Church in Thedford Nebraska, at the crossroads of the Sandhills, for putting up with my newfound skills of research and discovery and my attempt to orate all this to them on Sundays.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO ISSUES IN RURAL MINISTRY	4
Shrinking Population in Rural Communities	4
Limited Talent and Resources	7
Influx of Ethnic People and Groups	10
Aggregate Age of Rural Population Moving Upward	12
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	14
Classical and Current Works on Missiology	14
Current Books and Articles on Rural Communities and Ministry	18
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	23
Delimitations, Research Scope, and Reliability,	24
Questionnaire and Categorizing Responses	26
Clergy	27
Lay Leaders	29
Members and Adherents	30
Personal Interviews Identifying Rural Sandhills Church Praxis	31
CHAPTER4: RESEARCH FINDINGS	37
Current Climate of Rural Sandhill’s Churches Responses	42

Identify Areas of Concern and The Challenges in Rural Ministry	42
CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS	47
Opportunities for New Practices	47
Applied Information Creating a Climate of Change	50
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY	58
Texts	58
Websites and Online Resources	59
Interviews	60
Lectures	61
Scriptures	61
APPENDIX	63

INTRODUCTION

The church faces multiple challenges today in the realm of rural ministry. These include, but are not limited to, declining populations, average age of population constantly increasing, young people leaving the communities where they grew up to work and raise families, and ethnic or alternate culture groups relocating to rural areas from distant lands and cultures seeking the American dream. Further, the rural church appeared in decline, following trends in business and population as young people left for education and opportunity in the city. Carr and Kefalas, in the work titled, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America*, state, “The flight of young adults is a natural occurrence, an inevitable consequence of progress.”³ Rural pastor and author Brad Roth wrote in *God’s Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church*, “At the turn of the twentieth century, mainline Protestant denominations in the United States awoke to the challenges rural congregations faced.... Denominational offices were particularly concerned with the decline of rural congregations as population centers shifted to the cities.”⁴ A declining church, now motivated to investigate and discover methods and practices that will enable the rural church to turn the corner to survive and thrive while moving to the future, identifying ways to share the gospel, meeting the spiritual needs of the rural community, maintaining the ability to employ ministers, and providing sustainable income, so they may remain in the rural communities.

This group of churches and people constitute a significant portion of the population in America. Karl Vaters stated in, *The Grasshopper Myth*, “93% of American churches are small,

³ Patrick J. Carr, Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston MA, Beacon Press, 2009).

⁴ Brad Roth, *God’s Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, VA, Harold Press, 2017), Location 19.

while 80% are very small.”⁵ Looking at this number, leadership of denominations and fellowships lacked focus on the larger portion of the American church while highlighting less than ten percent of the ministry as measured by people in the pews. In the Assemblies of God, 75 percent of all churches report fewer than 200 people in weekly attendance. Nearly 60 percent report fewer than 100. And nearly one-third report fewer than 50.⁶ Reflection on rural ministry and outreach while looking toward the future for success with growth necessitates current research.

The research for this paper utilized interviews and questionnaires engaging rural pastors, lay leaders, members, adherents, residents, and Master of Arts in Rural Ministry (MARM) students in an attempt to discover answers and create a strategy for future ministry in the Sandhills of Nebraska that translates to other rural communities around the region, nation and world. Research included interviews concerning the needs, trepidations, and issues of the rural church, challenges rural ministry currently faces that require the attention of leadership, along with identifying avenues of cooperation between churches and ministries for corporative missions and outreach. Researchers Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, in *Comeback Churches*, described the mission, “Notice the apostles brought everyone together and identified the challenge...The challenge was a catalyst for growth instead of a cause for division. It is unified instead of divided.”⁷ The rural church community faces the challenge of survival, which may become the catalyst for expansion and multiplication. The church faces significant challenges

⁵ Karl Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth* (New Small Church, New Song Media, 2012), 41.

In AG churches 39.3% remain less than 50 and 66.2% of churches remain less than 100, 70% of people attended in 98.1% of churches under 1000 and 30% attended in 1.9% of churches over 1000 in 2016 Statistics.

⁶ Karl Vatters, *The Shape of Leadership* (Influence Magazine, 2018-4-09) accessed 2020-5-20.

⁷ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches* (Nashville TN, B & H Publishing Group, 2007), Location 31.

and must consider moving forward in partnership, including the possibility of crossing denominational lines while verifying the message and mission according to the Acts model of evangelism and expansion in the New Testament in growing God's church.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO ISSUES IN RURAL MINISTRY

Rural communities have typically exhibited unique cultures in their everyday ways of life. Many who lived in villages enjoyed a schedule that included Friday evening school activities and sports; Saturday “go to town day” for shopping, business, and social interaction; weekend and holiday dances and socials; and Sunday attending church. During the interview process, Pastor Jim Loutzenhiser remarked, “as a kid in the Sandhills we looked forward to the weekend. Saturday was the day everyone came to town. There was shopping, baseball games, socials, and all kinds of interaction. Come Sunday, all were back for church and fellowship.”⁸ Life included hard work, and consistency in schedule week after week, season after season.

Starting in the late 1980s and moving into the new millennia everything began to change. Few noticed the minimal changes until they increased to an undeniable point. Donnie Griggs quotes Robert Wuthnow in, *Small Town Jesus*, “Relatively little research has been devoted to small towns since the 1950s...small towns were viewed as part of a declining sector populated by fewer people, and of interest more as the location of food production and tourism than as places where people still lived.”⁹ The villages decreased, while farms and ranches grew bigger, necessitating people travel longer distances on a regular basis for goods, services, and entertainment, and less time became available for relationships in town on Saturday. Sunday changed from church day for many to recreation, rodeo, and organized sports time. Some former regular church attendees called it “family time,” which became an excuse for doing other

⁸ Jim Loutzenhiser, Personal Interview, March 15, 2020.

⁹ Donnie Griggs, *Small Town Jesus: Taking the Gospel Mission Seriously in Seemingly Unimportant Places* (EverTruth, Damascus MD, 2016), Location 98.

activities in lieu of church. Critical issues facing small town America slipped away without reflection or examination.

Shrinking Population in Rural Communities

Looking back at the idealistic “good old days” rural community that included farms and ranches across the vast rural expanse of the United States produced a picture of Mayberry USA mixed with Bonanza and Green Acres. Instead, the people in rural communities traditionally identified with hard work and industriousness, individuals respected each other, and school and the church constituted the center of social life. Some high school graduates went to college, some served their country in the military, and some joined their families on the ranch or farm working the land, raising livestock and hoping someday to take over the family operation.

Somewhere after World War II, the 1950s, and Korean Conflict, this began to change. Kimberly Zarecor, associate professor of architecture at Iowa State University stated, “Population loss like Sheffield's is happening in small towns across the U.S. The big picture for all rural communities that don't have a connection to a growing metro area is that they are going to get smaller over time.”¹⁰ More young people attended college or technical school and did not return home. Andrew Van Dam, in an article about rural shrinkage for “The Washington Post” said, “rural areas serve as urban America’s farm team: All their most promising prospects get called up to the big leagues, leaving the low-density margins populated by an ever-shrinking pool.”¹¹ Choosing to stay in the city provided more choices in entertainment, employment, restaurants, activities, and churches. Roth observed, “Life and ministry in a rural church lays

¹⁰ Kimberly Zarecor, “As Rural Towns Lose Population, They Can Learn To 'Shrink Smart,' ” (June 19, 2018) April 22, 2020, npr.org.

¹¹ Andrew Van Dam, “The Real (Surprisingly Comforting) Reason Rural America is Doomed to Decline,” (May 2019), April 22, 2020, The Washington Post.

bare our smallness.”¹² A byproduct of the attrition of the rural population contributed to this motion away from “coming home” during the onset of automation and more capable machinery and equipment.

Irrigation and new agricultural practices meant fewer laborers and more production requiring less help along with less exertion than before. What took four men five or six weeks to accomplish now took two men three weeks to finish. The aggregate size of the family farm grew from a quarter section or two of land to several sections. The average cattle ranch in the Sandhills of Nebraska operates on about 25,000 acres.¹³ In the past this acreage provided adequate revenue for several ranches with multiple families and ranch hands to operate them.¹⁴ Now one family and one extra ranch hand can accomplish the work required to operate the ranch.

The Thomas County population has trended downward. City-Data reported, “County population in 2017: 651 (all rural); it was 729 in 2000.”¹⁵ This represents just over ten percent reduction in seven years. Thomas County contains two incorporated villages, Thedford and Halsey, along with one unincorporated community. Thedford, the county seat and biggest village, has a population of just less than 200 people. City-Data qualified the entire county as rural including the villages, consistent with most rural farm and ranch areas of the country.

The one unincorporated community in Thomas County, Seneca, with current population of around 25 people declined from a railroad center boasting a past population of approximately 500 in its heyday. Seneca has lost more than 90 percent of its population since its peak of nearly

¹² Roth, *God’s Country*, Location 44.

¹³ Wayne Eatinger. Personal Interview on the Ranch, November 2015.

¹⁴ Wayne Eatinger, Personal Interview, March 15, 2020.

¹⁵ City-Data, (updated on February 2020, accessed on April 8, 2020). City-Data.com

500 people in 1920. This hamlet boasted three banks, three hotels, three service/gas stations, public school, and a large railroad yard. Ranchers could purchase a new tractor with implements or a new vehicle. The Farmall tractor dealership became known for new tractors, fitted with innovative sickle mowers that revolutionized hay production.¹⁶ Along with the commerce and railroad, the town included several churches, restaurants, grocery retail stores, and bars.¹⁷ Seneca touted a large community center where they hosted dances, weddings, community dinners, concerts, and many other community related gatherings. This declined to one event per year celebrating Thanksgiving, an occasional funeral, and one church that partners with a church in nearby Thedford, sharing a pastor, to survive in the hamlet. One research respondent, Cindy Masten, stated, “Partnership between rural churches has become necessary to survive.”¹⁸ Evidence of the rural church challenges abound as it struggles to find relevant avenues and motivate the future of outreach and ministry in small town churches.

Although the demise of Seneca transpired over many years, it illustrates the common track that the many rural communities travel today. As the population decreased, the local tax base eroded away with each lost business or family, which accentuated difficulty for merchants and retailers to exist, further accelerating the decline in population. The Thomas County Nebraska website stated, “In the county the population was spread out with 23.60% under the age of 18, 4.40% from 18 to 24, 23.90% from 25 to 44, 27.80% from 45 to 64, and 20.30% who were 65 years of age or older. The median age was 41.4 years.”¹⁹ These statistics demonstrated that over 47 percent of the county population remains 45 years old or above, and the college and

¹⁶ Marvin Blauvelt, Personal Interview, February 2020.

¹⁷ Wikipedia.org>Seneca, Nebraska, April 8, 2020.

¹⁸ Cindy Masten, Research Interview Questionnaire, February 17, 2020, Question 11.

¹⁹ ThomasCountyNebraska.us, Demographics, February 24, 2020.

career group of 18-24 included 4.4 percent signifying the lack of college age young people returning to Thomas County.

Reflecting on these statistics with the figures and data from the state of Nebraska showing the migration from rural to metro, “53% of the 93 counties in Nebraska reported declining numbers between 1990 and 2000, and this trend has continued as more urban areas have experienced great growth.”²⁰ created concern for the Thomas²¹ County’s vitality. This trend will continue barring any major shift in population migration to metro areas of Nebraska. Griggs declares, “Small towns have all but been forgotten by many people and by many churches.”²² The church must engage the rural community, their circumstances, and not just focus on the unchangeable population migration from country to city. Even though the population in many rural communities experienced significant decline, half of most rural counties remain unclaimed by any church. The church must be the one entity that does not forget rural, rather must be the one that provides answers and optimism to the future. The current white fields continue to need harvesters, necessitating the need for workers to engage in harvest before it is too late.

Limited Talent and Resources

The average age of the population in Thomas County stands at 44 years, limiting the available talent as older people move out of active participation in the church and community. This figure compares to a median age in the state of Nebraska of 36.4.²³ There is a minor disparity in average age figures due to the small variation in date of reports between resource

²⁰ WorldPopulationReview.com; Nebraska, February 17, 2020. (accessed 2020-4-10).

²¹ Stone, Tina presentation to Rural Matters, September 11, 2016. This data examined ARDA numbers by county in America.

²² Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, Location 109.

²³ Nebraska Population. (2020-05-04). (accessed on 2020-04-11), <http://worldpopulationreview.com/states/nebraska/>

sights. The older segment of people becoming unavailable for service, their life experience, their contribution to economy, and service in the local church becomes lost to the community when they retire and often leave the community at that time. In Thedford, a large segment of the retired church members and adherents traveled to see family and friends a significant portion of the time. Friends and family often lived several hours away because of the remote nature of Thomas County, which disengages a group of people that would have available time to engage in service to the church.

The budget shortages often prevented investment in ministry and outreach combined with the reduction of talent and expendable assets in the rural context. Not every ministry necessitated a high cost; yet most rural churches had trouble paying utilities, insurance, repairs and upkeep, salaries, Sunday School and small group material, and consumables that left little for other ministry efforts. How do ministries contextualize outreach within their communities on a minimal budget? Developing resources as a key may define future church ministry in rural communities, which will lead to finding new avenues and ideas to thrive.

The one resource needed more than all others in today's church, the power and leading of the Holy Spirit. Aaron Morrow, Pastor of River City Church in Dubuque IA, tells rural leaders, *Small Town Mission: A Guide for Mission-driven Communities*, "Evangelistic fruitfulness will not come unless God also reforms our life of prayer."²⁴ Rural churches often focused on the short supply of finances, but the greatest asset available to the rural church remains the Holy Spirit and His wisdom, direction, and speaking through the church.

²⁴ Aaron Morrow, *Small Town Mission: A Guide for Mission Driven Communities* (GDC Books, 2016), Location 576.

Influx of Ethnic People and Groups

Traditionally in the rural area, far from the bustling metropolitan city, very little changed in the people and population continued the trend downward in total population. Small and gradual changes that occurred appeared like nothing ever changed overnight. Change progressed by children growing up, then going to college in the big city or going to work in the family business or ranch. Eventually, they married and had children thus the life cycle repeated. An abrupt change arose for many small, rural communities and the traditional cultural activities and accepted community characteristics.

Immigration had become somewhat normal in the city, but now rapidly came to rural communities, creating larger cultural changes. Agriculture based business and processing of farm products demanded many laborers at a reasonable cost. Some communities changed to a majority immigrant shifting the community to a new ethnicity. The United States government dispersed refugees arriving from the conflicts in the east to rural America in large numbers.²⁵ *Omaha World Herald* stated, “Since 2002, 11,949 refugees from 36 countries have resettled in Nebraska.”²⁶ Not all live in rural Nebraska, but many have found their way into the rural communities. Lexington Nebraska, with 69 percent of the population being non-white, along with 60.4 percent of the population Hispanic,²⁷ is a rural community close to the Sandhills, where the Federal Government relocated many refugees hoping to find employment in agriculture and meat production became a prime destination. From this community, these people

²⁵ Somali Refugee Community Education, November 19, 2018, (accessed on March 20, 2020), [DHHS.ne.gov/Pages/Refugee-Resettlement.aspx](https://www.dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/Refugee-Resettlement.aspx)

²⁶ DataOmaha.com, Refugee Resettlement, October 5, 2018. (accessed March 20, 2020), [DataOmaha.com](https://www.dataomaha.com/).

²⁷ City-Data, (updated on February 2020, accessed on April 8, 2020). [City-Data.com](https://www.city-data.com/)

groups moved into surrounding areas to find work, establish residents, raise families, and become involved in the community and politics.

The influx of foreign people groups changed the rural communities as new and different products arrived; unfamiliar celebrations and festivals became important and mainstream, the need for contextualization in ministry heightened as local people withdrew from the new and different residents. Morrow stated, “For a variety of reasons, people in small towns are not typically open to change in comparison to people who live in larger cities.”²⁸ For this reason, rural churches faced everyday ministry and mission challenges, while dealing with people of different race, color, religion, celebrations, and practices.

Ministry does not stand alone; effects on community school, sports, retail offerings and outlets, and emergency services challenged the rural towns with new and different issues accompanying these people groups. The entire community must adapt to change. Dr. John Wunder, Professor of History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, describes it this way, “Assimilation is really defined as forced cultural change; it requires coercion.”²⁹ The rural church needs inclusion in this conversation to stay relevant in the future, investing time and energy to remain at the front of change. At times the church has remained silent, as rural communities strive to find their way to the future and survival, the church must stand up and add its voice to the conversation and lead the change.

Aggregate Age of Rural Population Moving Upward

In the past few decades’ rural communities changed from finding ways to build a new school or gymnasium to finding methods to build and manage elderly housing. Two years ago, in

²⁸ Morrow, *Small Town Mission*, Location 1139.

²⁹ John Wunder, “Nebraska Immigration History,” University of Nebraska Lincoln, Professor of History. March 2020. Accessed April 21, 2020. [sdn.unl.edu > ne_immigration_history](http://sdn.unl.edu/ne_immigration_history).

May of 2018, the graduating class at Thedford High School involved two students; the current class included four students. The population that matures, continues to age as time transpires, needing facilities that meet the needs of lost mobility, nutrition management, and basic medical attention to remain accessible in the village. Thedford, as a community, engaged in raising the funds to construct a community center that provides aging citizens a pleasant location to spend a portion of their day, for meaningful leisure, recreation, and interacting with others.³⁰ No longer can these elderly men and women attend school functions and sporting events, these previously provided a large portion of their socialization and community interaction. The medium age of Thedford population at 41.4 years,³¹ considerably older than the Nebraska average of 36.4, demonstrating the continual increase between metro and rural communities.

Providing for seniors falls on the church community in some cases. Although the church continues to have the ability to minister to this group, these seniors remain the same ones that previously led the ministry and mission of the church. A byproduct of lost mobility and independence includes the inability to assist and serve in ministry. A website search for the government or elderly housing in Thedford's zip code showed zero options for elderly housing.³² With no options, the only choice becomes the exodus of those that require these types of facilities. The closest options for this group are 30 miles away at best and 70 miles for larger facilities and options. Acceptable housing that meets the needs represented in this group needs addressing for the elderly to remain in the community.

³⁰ Shannon Ahlstrom, "Thomas County Development," Personal Interview, November 2019.

³¹ City-Data.com, February 2020.

³² City-Data.com, February 2020.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many of those who have voiced ideas and thought pertaining to the rural context have come from a position of small but very close to big. They write about the small town that is just a few miles from a metropolis. This does not constitute rural as this research describes it. Others describe rural ministry from the third world perspective. All have something to add to the conversation albeit this research focused on rural America, namely Nebraska and the Sandhills. Although old writings compared with current literature, Patrick wrote of his love for the Irish and brings much to the table when the talk is about contextualization in the country. It is this kind of compassion and devotion that exemplifies rural mission and outreach. One thing is certain; there is no fast and true recipe that fits all locations. Rural ministry is different in each location making it necessary to contextualize and become a part of each community. Success will begin with good preparation and a genuine encounter with God.

Literature on Missions as Applied to Rural Mission

The call to missions, and spreading the gospel to the entire world, originates in the Great Commission that Jesus gave to the apostles before He ascended into heaven. John Caldwell Theissen, author on missions and small churches, wrote in *A Survey of World Missions*, “And now, on the Mount Olivet, He had given the final command and an outline of the program: ‘Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth.’ (Acts 1:8) There is no doubt about the mandatory character of these words; all the apostles could do was

obey.”³³ This call remains today and includes the rural church, even the rural church of the Sandhills in Nebraska. Educator, Gary Tyra observed in, *The Holy Spirit in Mission*,

...it is a grace-empowered, Spirit-enabled, experience-driven embrace of a theological realism that veritably compels rank-and-file members of Pentecostal churches in the Majority World to speak and act toward their unchurched friends, neighbors, coworkers, and family members in a prophetic, missionally faithful manner.³⁴

This reflects the mandate of the Great Commission and remains relevant for the church today.

Theissen further stated, “It is certain the apostles had no adequate idea of the enormity of the task committed to them.”³⁵ The missional building of the rural church seems as enormous today. This command to carry the message to the whole earth has not rescinded so believers must go, must take the good news to the world, including to rural Thomas County, raising up new leaders for future missions. The church must guard the message ensuring that it remains pure to the New Testament Gospel modeling the church’s example in Acts of Spirit empowered ministry.

History tells the story of reaching the rural communities, reaching back to a time before America became a nation. The great revival in Europe that began in Ireland provides extensive information and strategy for the practicum of taking the good news to the lost. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*, George G. Hunter III wrote,

So I continue to commend and interpret an ancient model from which Western Christians can draw as they face this daunting challenge. This ancient movement, now known as ‘Celtic Christianity,’ calls to us from the second half of the first millennium and shows us the way forward in the third millennium.³⁶

While differences in missions and evangelism persist today, practices and procedures that remain universal and transcend time, continents, and people groups become pertinent and applicable to

³³ John Caldwell Theissen, *A Survey of World Mission*, (Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove IL, 1955), 2.

³⁴ Gary Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), Location 1062.

³⁵ Theissen, *A Survey of World Mission*, 3.

³⁶ George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press), 2010), Location 81.

the rural context. Rural ministry finds praxis in leaning on these past truths, contextualizing current opportunities, and identifying ways and means to bring the gospel to unreached areas. Drawing from historic and current experiences for reflection and looking for new methods to share the message for maximum impact may revitalize rural mission.

Patrick had a great history with the people of Ireland beginning with his enslavement and then returned bringing the gospel message to the very people that had imprisoned him. Patrick loved this people to the extent that he returned to Ireland after escaping the life of slavery and forced labor. Contemporary commentator Carey Nieuwhof instructed church leaders, “Don’t miss this, Christians: It’s hard to reach a world you don’t love...or know.”³⁷ On the matter of contextualization, Hunter further stated,

Indeed, the fact that Patrick understood the people and their language, their issues, and their ways serves as the most strategically significant insight that was to drive the wider expansion of Celtic Christianity and stands as perhaps our greatest single learning from this movement. There is no shortcut to understanding the people.³⁸

Too often, in the past, the recipe for evangelism did not include time for investing and reflection on the culture, practices, history, religion, and people that constitute the emphasis of the outreach or mission. If contextualization does not embody outreach praxis these efforts may fail or not experience significant missional impact. Before the missionary can love the people, he or she must know them, demonstrating they are valued by the missionary and by their God who sent them. Theologian and educator of University of Edinburgh, Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*, describes ministry,

Practical theology is a dynamic process of reflective, critical inquiry into the praxis of the church in the world and God’s purposes for humanity, carried out in the light of Christian Scripture and tradition, and in critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge. As a theological discipline its primary purpose is to ensure that the church’s public proclamations and praxis in the word faithfully reflects the nature and purpose of God’s

³⁷ Carey Nieuwhof, “Church Leadership” 2018, 1. March 16, 2020, ChurchLeaders.com

³⁸ Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 8.

continuing mission to the world and in so doing authentically addresses the contemporary context into which the church seeks to minister.³⁹ Success becomes possible only as the church minister reflect the Word of God in life and praxis.

The genuine concern and love for a community becomes the driving force for contextualization, knowing and understanding the culture. Rural people seldom recognized methodical work that appears as “going through the motions” as truly caring for a group of people without demonstrating authentic concern. Anderson recounted, “Only in action can the meaning of love and compassion be revealed. Critical, analytical thinking is important, but it is not omniscient.... knowledge of God entails knowledge of the human person, the two are distinct but intertwined.”⁴⁰ Genuine love and compassion for a people leads to purposeful contextualization. Outreach with compassion demands that the missionary insert themselves into the culture, history, and lives of the target group, which earns a voice in the gospel conversations. Klaus, former President of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary observed, “Paul took the initiative in connecting face to face with Athenians...Paul understood he was in an alien culture and engaged that culture because to reach his goal he had to build bridges to that culture.”⁴¹ This implies that the term length of the work becomes significant to guarantee success as well; more influence occurs when spending additional time in the community. Many times, long-term residents consider the pastor ministering in the same rural location for ten years or more an “outsider;” however, they acknowledge more influence now than earlier times in the community. The opportunity for positive responses and audience increases in influence over time as the individualistic community gives them that opportunity to

³⁹ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Particle Theology Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove IL, 2001), 22.

⁴⁰ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 23.

⁴¹ Byron D. Klaus, *And That's the Way I See It*, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield MO, 2013, 34.

speak and be heard comes from time and continued service, which local people valued and observed, escalates influence of the minister in the rural context.

Current Literature on Rural Communities and Ministry

Numerous books and articles discussed the church and how to launch or build new ministry works. John York declared in, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit*, “The process of church planting is central to the mission statement of any national church anywhere in the world. To fail to have a plan for opening new churches, or cells of believers, is to signal betrayal of the mission of God.”⁴² However, focused material about building, revitalizing, or planting a rural church becomes difficult to locate. Most publications that discuss rural ministry as their focus, have print dates in the last ten years, and are becoming more prominent as the rural ministry context gains traction. The quantity and quality of material produced speaking to the rural context, although increasing in number, remains limited. The disciples in the New Testament did not have resources or guidelines that explained reaching the world with the gospel message in diverse contexts or locations; although following Jesus’ example provided a pattern for cross-cultural ministry. He told the disciples to wait on the empowerment of the Holy Spirit before proceeding in the mission to build the foundation of the New Testament Church. Without the help and direction of the Holy Spirit the mission would have failed, and the church would not have advanced.

Today, the church and missionary-pastor have a compelling desire to bring relevant ministry to rural areas through authentic love. Mark Mittelberg wrote in *Building a Contagious Church*, “Every Christian in the world—regardless of spiritual gifts he or she may have or may

⁴² John York, *Missions in the Age of the Spirit* (Springfield MO: Logion Press 2008), 241.

not have—is part of the church to which Jesus gave the Great Commission.”⁴³ Kevin Harney in *Organic Outreach for Churches* reinforced this desire to share the gospel, “When our hearts are filled with love for God, for our community, and for the church, we are ready to strategize about outreach.”⁴⁴ The praxis of evangelism, whether metro or rural, brings the gospel to those who have not had an opportunity to make a decision for Christ. Dallas Willard in, *Living in Christ’s Presence: Final Words on Heaven and The Kingdom of God* affirmed, “Isn’t this the gospel: that when others not only hear the content of it but also see how we live it and present it, they say, ‘I want that. I want to be a disciple of Jesus.’”⁴⁵ Being known as genuine and authentic becomes the first step towards impacting people. Missiologist, pneumatologist, and educator, Denzil Miller wrote in, *From Azusa to Africa to the Nations*, describing authentic ministers,

God can mightily use anyone who will commit himself or herself fully to His purposes. It does not matter to God what cultural or economic background the person may be from, or how marginalized or poverty-ridden his society may be—God can use any person from any background to impact the world with the gospel, if only that person will consecrate himself or herself fully to God’s mission and be genuinely empowered by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

Locating good material and putting others’ experience into practice, will also benefit our mission. Living the gospel in the context of rural life will form the difference in seeing people impacted for the kingdom, bringing growth and life to small town America, and seeing souls saved, which guarantees the future validity of the rural church.

Texts not primarily written to the small-town context contain literary nuggets for relevant rural ministry. Klaus wrote about his own small town history in western Nebraska saying, “Christianity that has targeted people for evangelistic efforts without ever hearing their life story

⁴³ Mark Mittelberg, *Building a Contagious Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 169.

⁴⁴ Kevin G. Harney, *Organic Outreach for Churches* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan 2011), 57.

⁴⁵ Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence: Final Words on Heaven and The Kingdom of God* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 20.

⁴⁶ Denzil R. Miller, *From Azusa to Africa to the Nations* (Assemblies of God World Missions, Springfield MO, 2005), 37.

is now considered bigotry and the realities of a pluralistic society are becoming increasingly lethal to even civil society.”⁴⁷ Small town ministers must hear the story of the community and people “to earn the right to speak into their lives” find opportunities that rural people will listen with an open heart. As he articulated, not only will the minister become ignored, but the influence of the minister becomes damaging, even lethal to the effort if the minister fails to contextualize. Klaus continued discussing his home-town, Whitney Nebraska, “Real people with real questions deserve real Christians with real compassion motivated by real gospel.”⁴⁸ In small communities, genuine ministry becomes immediately apparent, so the lack of genuine concern and compassion compels the rural community to appraise the messenger as irrelevant and they will ignore them rather than accepting them as a true missionary.

Because of the lack, in some cases, of heartfelt outreach and ministry, irrelevance becomes the result. Harney suggested, “The real issue facing the Western church today is that the efforts of very few churches are actually bearing fruit. Many churches have hit a growth plateau or are in decline. They want to reach out, but they are not willing to pay the price. They are not willing to count the cost.”⁴⁹ Too many times the church rushed out into the harvest field unprepared, without taking the time and effort to reflect on essential harvest methods, thereby ensuring the failure of the mission.

The church and/or the missionary must prepare well and endeavor to complete the harvest work. Miller declares, “Pentecostal missiology was characterized by three burning beliefs: (1) that Jesus was coming soon, (2) that the lost in all nations must be reached before He comes again, (3) and that God was pouring out His Spirit in the last days to empower the church

⁴⁷ Klaus, *And That's the Way I See It*, 34.

⁴⁸ Klaus, *And That's the Way I See It*, 35.

⁴⁹ Harney, *Organic Outreach for Churches*, 31.

for the task.”⁵⁰ This, in part, characterized proper preparation for missions and outreach. Projects or outreach endeavors that were not finished for lack of adequate time or depleted resources often stood out as less desirable than not having started the work in the first place. Wes Kelly, past MAPS construction coordinator for Mexico stated in an interview, “One of my greatest challenges is dealing with mission groups that come to Mexico with grand ideas but not enough time or resources to finish the project. This leaves me with multiple unfinished projects that stand as a memorial to poor planning and disappointment.”⁵¹ Other times the church received the vision ahead of God’s timing and in their exuberance to get on the field of ministry to experience results they engaged the vision before God’s perfect time. Harney further stated, “Once our hearts and minds have connected with the outreach vision of God, it’s now time for our hands to get active.”⁵² Reconciling all the complicated and difficult contextual issues necessitates the important connection of all ministries depending on the Holy Spirit through seeking wisdom and following His leading as the effort of mission and outreach come to fruition.

York declares missions as the central theme of all those who call themselves the church. Church and mission cannot be separated. Mittelberg declared that no matter what the believers’ gifts or talents, their location in the world—if saved then the *Great Commission* binds and requires them to use these gifts and talents for evangelizing the lost. A Christian’s life should demonstrate a great excitement and desire to share what they have with the lost and that exuberance will motivate believers to reach out to others with the message of good news. The Christ centered life will cause people to desire to live with the freedom and power in Jesus Christ, rather than living in defeat and fear that comes with a lack of God’s presence in our daily

⁵⁰ Miller, *From Azusa to Africa to the Nations*, 38-39.

⁵¹ Wes Kelly, Personal Interview, Juarez Mexico, 2000.

⁵² Harney, *Organic Outreach for Churches*, 137.

existence. Miller expounds on the theme as he brings commitment into the equation declaring that God can use people totally and radically committed to Him and desire to do His work and His will to share the gospel. He stated that location or economic position will have no effect on the ability or results of effort as long as there total commitment to the Lord exists.⁵³ In rural ministry context, authenticity becomes a key to influence and leading change in people's lives and the converse is true, rural people immediately recognized inauthentic life and any opportunity to lead them in change will be lost.

Considering these comments substantiated the contextualization position of this research. These theologians and missionaries all presented from experience on the mission field whether home or abroad and spoke from a 'boots on the ground' perspective. All have gleaned their knowledge from personal experience, which adds credibility to their comments and validates their positions for rural context. The authors reviewed did not disagree in any way, but quite the opposite all agreed with the message presented through different perspectives and personalities.

⁵³ Denzil R. Miller, *From Azusa To Africa To the Nations*, 37

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology, a qualitative study utilized a questionnaire for personal interviews in conjunction with a literature review. The value and importance of good research is paramount to action in the future. Missional educators, Marvin Gilbert, EdD, Allen R. Johnson, PhD, and Paul Lewis, PhD, declared in, *Missiological Research: Interdisciplinary Foundations, Methods, and Integration*,

Research has been described as a means of systematic inquiry into a problem—a problem that states, in so many words, that valuable information is unknown, but not unknowable. Phrased differently, research is a respected means of resolving our collective, but personally, ignorance. For a missiologist, research is a respected means of resolving ignorance about how the church works in the cross-cultural context.⁵⁴

To find the knowable and dispel the position of not knowing the key to rural ministry motivated this project. Interviews included personal contact, in-depth phone conversations, and utilizing electronic means to sort thoughts and responses to the questionnaire. The research analyzed the responses to the question, “How will ministries, in rural Nebraska, look in the future and who will lead?” Currently, in most locations, ministry has declined or failed to maintain positive growth and healthy identity. The study intended to guide future praxis that ensures missional success in rural communities doing relevant ministry. Dean Flemming describes the quest in, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*, “Every church in every particular place and time must learn to do theology in a way that makes sense to its audience while challenging it at the deepest level.”⁵⁵ This search led the quest to learn from people in the rural community, and churches while challenging leaders to work together for

⁵⁴ Marvin Gilbert, Alan Johnson, and Paul Lewis, *Missiological Research: Interdisciplinary Foundations, Methods, and Integration* (Pasadena CA, William Carey Publishing, 2017) Introduction.

⁵⁵ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), Location 48.

future mission and ministry ensuring a bright future for the rural church in the Sandhills of Nebraska and beyond.

Reaching out to rural ministers and their congregations launched from a standpoint of hope and excitement for the future of mission and ministry in rural Nebraska. Small town churches and ministries have something unique to offer the world differing from mega churches. Vaters describes it, “Because we are small we have blessings to offer the body of Christ, our communities, our cities, our nation and our world that no one else can offer in quite the way we can.”⁵⁶ The uniqueness of rural community and people allows them to bless and lift up people in all other contexts with their hard work ethic and genuine concern for others and their welfare.

Delimitations, Research Scope, and Reliability,

This research project contains limiting surveys only to those serving in the Sandhills of Nebraska as a representation of the rural ministry context. The scope of rural, small town ministry goes far beyond just the Sandhills. The vast majority of the people and church bodies in the United States and in the world worship in rural communities. Most Christian churches in America are small. In 2012, the National Congregations Study found that the median Sunday morning attendance for churches in the United States was 75 people. The study also found that 43% of American churches had fewer than 50 regular participants, 67% had fewer than 100 regular participants, and 87% had fewer than 250.⁵⁷ Each of these different locations have distinct personality or identity that necessitates unique application to move to the future with relevant ministry and outreach. A Nebraska example identified distinct differences between

⁵⁶ Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth*.8.

⁵⁷ Stephen Witmer, *The Secret Small Churches Know the Best* (desiringgod.org 2018-01-21), accessed 2020-05-19.

ranching communities and row crop or farming areas. Some similarities exist but the real issues and everyday challenges utilized contextually different approaches for these distinct communities. More than two contexts exist in these agricultural communities, but this illustrated that each community retains its own identity and personality making each one use a distinct praxis to move forward in mission. Applying the current generic literature created frustration for the outreach and evangelism in the rural context, as no prescription or recipe can apply to all locations and situations.

The scope of this research remains narrow by design to provide direction and answers to a specific group in missions and outreach. A broader scope provides important generalities, but this research defined by size and location described as the geographical area known as the Sandhills of Nebraska researched specific praxis. In doing so, it provided specific data and found practices designed for the region, answered pointed questions based on local issues, and looked forward to evangelizing rural Nebraska.

The data gleaned from this research speaks to the circumstances and attitudes in the Sandhills of Nebraska based on the responses to the survey questions. Others may find further insights, but that necessitates additional research beyond the scope of this study. As others conduct similar studies, the consistencies or inconsistencies for their context will become apparent to the researcher stressing the need for contextualization in various locations or situations. Knowing that every community functions in different ways requires energy and commitment to identify those differences.

Questionnaire and Categorizing Responses

The purpose for the research emerged from the current issues that faced rural ministry and mission in the Sandhills of Nebraska. The small, remote, and rural community continued

declining in population, school enrollment and commerce over the last few decades. The *Lincoln Journal Star* newspaper stated, “The latest population figures from the U.S. Census Bureau show a continuing trend in Nebraska of urban growth and rural decline.”⁵⁸ The economy changed as people left the small towns and migrated to larger metropolitan areas taking resources and commerce with them. Young people left to attend college or technical school, saw opportunity and immediate employment, and did not consider returning to small town Nebraska and the country. Carr and Kefalas stated, “The decisions that young people on the edge of adulthood make about whether to stay or leave home have profound implications for the future of rural America.”⁵⁹ The issue continued to grow and the decline eventually left ghost towns. Businesses have left, elderly people eventually leave to find retirement facilities, young people do not return to raise families, and the churches and schools follow the same path of decline.

The empirical qualitative research analyzed the current climate in rural ministry, identified practices while looking forward to missional outreach in the rural context, which lead to the development of a questionnaire that identified the practices and new ideas that will carry the small town church into the future with vibrant growth and health. This list of questions requested a response from clergy, lay leaders, and regular membership and adherents on several levels. With one questionnaire covering three categories, this document does include a small number of questions that did not apply to various groups interviewed. Compiling data and trends pertinent to the findings considered questions not relevant to specific groups when developing statistics and research commonalities.

⁵⁸ Mark Olberding, “Census: Nebraska’s Big Counties Keep Growing, While Rural Counties Decline” *Lincoln Journal Star*, 2019.

⁵⁹ Patrick J. Carr, Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston MA, Beacon Press, 2009).

The research qualifications limited participants to Sandhill's area churches and their congregants. This geographical area remained well defined and qualified as rural in its entirety. All government and anthropological studies considered the towns and villages in this area as rural, according to any current definition. Wikipedia defines rural as, "rural areas comprise open country and settlements with fewer than 2,500 residents."⁶⁰ This apt description depicted the study area. Also included in this study were MARM students who serve in a rural ministry context, bringing their thoughts and ideas regarding the challenges into the conversation of rural ministry in the future for confirmation of statistics.

Clergy

Looking at the pastors in the study area of the Sandhills, the group included a number where both husband and wife hold ministerial credentials. In some cases, they served together in one or more churches. This worked well in this rural area and the ladies found acceptance in the church without issues or prejudice. All the couples ministering together, as credentialed pastors, have great working relationships and it appeared that ministering together created a positive experience for them and the church.

The Nebraska District Assembly of God, Sandhill Section, included six churches and one cowboy church outreach.⁶¹ The ultra-rural environment and low population density of these communities affects churches and ministries; only one pastor of this group supported his family solely with church income. Working multiple part time jobs supplemented income for living expenses and current obligations. This created a burden for families and churches as the leadership balanced two or more daily work schedules. In the Sandhills, because of the

⁶⁰ Wikipedia, *Rural Areas in the United States*, December 8, 2016, (en.wikipedia.org, May 12 2020)

⁶¹ Sections, (neag.org 2019), accessed 2020-4-19.

remoteness from metro areas, medical facilities, and shopping, some pastors may travel 100,000 miles in a year or more serving their congregations.⁶²

The non-AG pastors and churches included in the survey statistics observed 29% serve more than one congregation located in different communities.⁶³ Some served multiple churches of the same denomination; others served churches of two different groups. Churches in the rural setting may change denomination or affiliation depending on the pastor's past affiliation with a denomination.

The survey group included leadership and attendees from AG, Lutheran-Missouri Synod, United Church of Christ, Church of God, Community churches, and Non-denominational groups. Congregation size, in these churches represented, range from 15 to 150. Most of these rural churches have attendance in the 25-50 range. The clergy interviewed expressed pleasure with the opportunity to participate and welcomed the invitation to share their thoughts and ideas while participating in the study. Pastor Lee Wonch, who pastors Amazing Grace Fellowship in Thedford and Talin Church in Arnold Nebraska stated, "It is amazing that we small town pastors have an opportunity to add our voice to a work like this that may influence rural ministry in the years to come."⁶⁴ Pastors offered relevant opinions on current trends and the climate of ministry in local churches. These rural pastors shared ideas, strategy, and desire for future ministry in the Sandhills. The group interviewed shared optimism and hope for rural ministry and evangelism going forward. The following sections describe the ministry and influence each maintains in the rural church.

⁶² Joe Masten, Personal Interview, 2010.

⁶³ Ron Masten, Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project, 2020.

⁶⁴ Pastor Lee Wonch, Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project, 2020.

Lay Leaders

Lay leaders in the study group tended to serve as long-term members in the rural church. Though typical for rural pastors to remain in the country churches for extended periods of time, most of the lay leadership served their church during multiple administrations. At times, third or fourth generation rural community families served in the home church. Some rural churches become known by family names as a result of those who pioneered the work and remained in the local church providing leadership and finances. In some cases, the lay leaders administered the church and its business, the pastor answered to the board or council while holding a small scope of authority in the operations of the church.

Research found charismatic and Pentecostal churches more likely to involve young people and couples while traditional denominations tend to have older lay leadership. This observation may have a significant impact on future ministry. In Thedford for example, retired people serve as the UCC church leadership for youth and kids that have lived there for decades. Similarly, men in their late 60s taught Sunday School kids at Amazing Grace church, all of which are grandparents.⁶⁵ Sunday School, as a discipleship opportunity, has become less prevalent in rural churches as children become a smaller percentage of the church attendance on Sunday morning leaving little reason to continue. Declining issues developed from the infringement of school and extracurricular sports and other activities into the traditional set aside church time along with older teachers. Grandparents tended to follow the kids as they participated in these activities that disregarded the past constituted customary times for church services. In the rural context, lay leaders remain essential to the mission of the church. Small rural churches do not have the budget to employ anyone beyond the lead pastor.

⁶⁵ Ron Masten, Personal Interviews, 2020.

Members and Adherents

Members and adherents form an interesting category in the small community rural church. A larger percentage of the congregations in the metro setting become involved in some part of the church's ministries and operations. Beth Caitlin, in an article from LifeWay, "When someone walks in the door, we want them to know we care. You can't hire someone to do that. You have to have all the people in the church welcoming them."⁶⁶ This response becomes less possible in large metro settings. Jesus expected all that identify as Christians would automatically engage in some sort of ministry in the church through the power of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷ Mittelberg comments, "Everyone may reach out in his or her own style, but we need one hundred percent participation. Every Christian in the world regardless of the spiritual gifts he or she may or may not have is part of the church to which Jesus gave the Great Commission."⁶⁸ Voluntary service, including most adherents, may remain a dream of the pastor; however, in the rural context a much larger percentage of the congregation became involved in ministry due to the sheer need of people to fill positions along with low total attendance numbers. Some adherents filled multiple positions in different departments, serving a variety of age groups. Because of this phenomenon, the category of members and adherents became a smaller part of the church in light of a higher percentage of the population involved in ministry.

The group included older people that have already "paid their dues" along with younger people, those considered less mature, without enough experience to effectively lead. Discipleship became a contributing issue to assist the younger people in the maturation process. This group

⁶⁶ Beth Caitlin, "Rebound in the Heartland: How Two Struggling Kansas Churches Grew Deep and Wide" (LifeWay <https://factsandtrends.net/2018/10/03>) May 12 2020.

⁶⁷ Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:16-17; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-2; Acts 1:8.

⁶⁸ Mittelberg, *Building a Contagious Church*, 169.

demonstrated some reluctance to respond to the study. They tend to have the most stories of what worked and what did not from the past and look to the future with skepticism.

Personal Interviews Identifying Rural Sandhills Church Praxis

Personal interviews included three specific targeted groups: credentialed ministers consisted of twenty people including five MARM students; lay leadership in the rural church constituted four respondents; and members and adherents involved six surveys. Except for two MARM students, all others included in the survey belonged to small rural communities located in the Sandhills of Nebraska. This geographical area covers just over one quarter of the state in the north central and northwest proximity of Nebraska.⁶⁹ Although the Sandhills, now covered with tall grass prairie, this geographical formation described by, History Nebraska Blog observed, “Is Nebraska a Desert? Yes...No.,” “The Great Desert is frequented by roving bands of Indians who have no fixed places of residence but roam from place to place in quest of game... is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence.”⁷⁰ Sandhills residents call small rural communities and ranches around this area home. The Sandhills reflected rich church history; many of the communities had been founded around church and school. Organized church services followed close on the heels of the country store or trading post and the tavern. As families arrived to join their men pioneers, church gatherings became the next item of community business driven by the women who were compelled to find fellowship that did not exist on the scattered ranches because of their remote locations. Churches served as the vehicle that brought the entire family together, on purpose, on

⁶⁹ Sandhills (Nebraska) May 2017. wikipedia.org, (accessed on April 17, 2020) [wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandhills](https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandhills).

⁷⁰ History Nebraska Website, Blog, *Is Nebraska a Desert? Yes....No*, 2020, (history.nebraska.gov, accessed on April 17 2020).

a regular basis. The challenge in this wild western desert became finding an available “man of the cloth” or preacher on a somewhat regular basis. The Sandhills embodied the picture of a circuit riding preacher as they often traveled from town to town attempting to fill all the needs of these new works. The current population of the Sandhills contains many descendants of these early settlers and a proud heritage of these early churches remains to this day. Traveling across these hills, abandoned schoolhouses and church buildings dot the horizon representing the early days of school and church, as small communities struggled to establish a healthy and growing outpost.

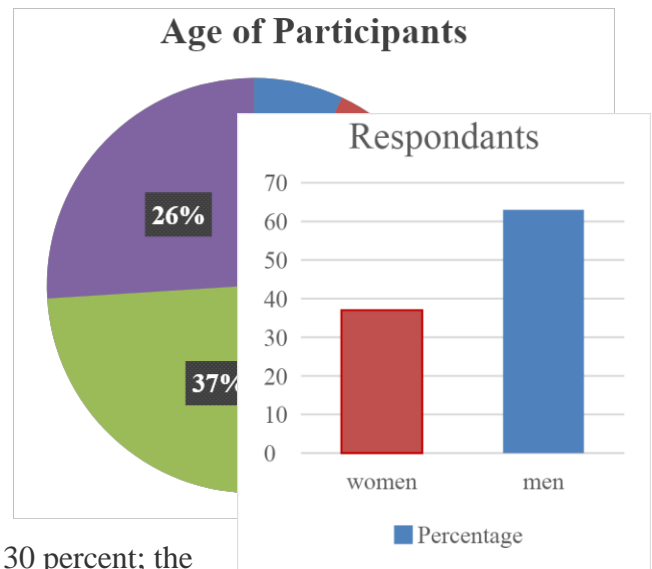
The interviewed group consisted of 63% clergy.⁷¹ Becoming bi-vocational out of necessity, described a significant portion of the ministers in this area of rural ministry. Some of the pastors served multiple congregations, but in our survey, this did not qualify as bi-vocational. This research defined bi-vocational as earning a significant portion of one’s income outside of the church and direct ministry activity. Having two ministry points in neighboring villages described a good portion of pastors, while some serve three different locations in three different communities, sometimes 60 miles apart. Lay leaders, those that engaged in scheduled ministry at least once a month, made up 15% of the test group, while members and adherents, people that attend more than once a month, comprised 22% of those questioned.⁷² Of the total group surveyed, 85% described their experience as overwhelmingly rural for most or all of their life, not counting possible brief excursions away for education. 15% of respondents stated that they

⁷¹ Ron Masten, Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project, 2020.

⁷² Ron Masten, Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project, 2020.

had resided in the rural context for a relatively short time and formerly identified city dwellers most of the time.

The age of the test subjects ranged from 23 years old up to early 80s with the average age of approximately 55 years old. Compare this figure with the mean age of the population in our rural context of 53 years of age; this represents the population as a whole, providing strong viability. The 20-35 age range contained



7 percent of the respondents; the 36-49 age range 30 percent; the 50-70 age range 37 percent; and finally, the 70 plus group represented 26 percent of respondents. 37 percent of the test group consisted of women and 63 percent men.⁷³ This representation of clergy, lay leaders, and members/adherents provided a broad base to glean strong data.

Many define rural America in diverse manners creating much discussion about what constitutes rural America. This research qualified the rural context considering the size of the communities and the distance from the closest Wal-Mart or similar large box store. Typically, these large retailers will locate far from the small market represented by rural Nebraska. The study finds that 85 percent of this study group must travel an hour or more to shop in one of these large stores. Although these people became accustomed to traveling long distances for most services, many small communities can procure most essentials closer to home, however not any extras. 67 percent of the people interviewed live in communities smaller than 1000 in population with 33 percent living in towns 1000 or larger. These larger communities tend to

⁷³ Ron Masten, Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project, 2020.

locate on the outer edges of the Sandhills with the interior communities being under 500 in population. Some counties in the Sandhills do not have 1000 people in the entire county.

When the interviewer asked the question, “Has your family traditionally attended church, or are you the first to do so on a regular basis?”⁷⁴ the group that stated their family did traditionally attend church was 96.5 percent. This figure supports the earlier statement that these rural people and communities viewed church attendance and the gospel as essential to the pioneer experience and sought to provide this early in the process of settling the Sandhills. As recounted in the history of the Nebraska Assemblies of God, *Nebraska’s Living Water*, written by Elisabeth James Lemp and Glenn W. Gohr,

They had been praying for a long time for someone to come their way that would bring the old time Holy Ghost Gospel....In 1926, a full gospel believer Mr. Newby from Oregon held the services in the second story of the old Tribune building where several people gave their hearts to the Lord. Then in 1929, the families then went together and bought the livery barn property.⁷⁵

Creating a place of worship became essential to the community for hearing the word and building a destination for community interaction. From a lecture by Dwight Sandoz to the MARM class, he described the church as, “Community responding in worship and obedience to Christ’s presence, studying scriptures to learn and live by God’s truth, group of spirit gifted members mutually ministering to each other, covenant relationships, and a community that is extroverted, driven by the Spirit into the world.”⁷⁶ Proper church demanded more than a random meeting of the community. This land could not qualify as civilized until a place of worship became indigenous to the people who settled each community, a real church. Overall the current practices and methods of ministry and outreach in the Sandhills remain unchanged from

⁷⁴ Ron Masten, Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project, 2020, Page 1.

⁷⁵ Elisabeth James Lemp and Glenn W. Gohr, *Nebraska’s Living Water: 20th-Century Assemblies of God* (Grand Island, NE: The Nebraska District Council of the Assemblies of God, 2010), 115.

⁷⁶ Dwight Sandoz, *Lecture to MARM Students*, Rural Church Multiplication and Revitalization, (Foley MN, 2018).

longtime traditions. Sunday School, although not as prevalent as before, remains important in most rural churches along with Sunday evening Bible Study. High School youth ministry and primary school ministry remain essential to the weekly schedule as well. Some of the smaller churches and ministries have declined to a point where anything beyond adult ministry becomes less viable with the reduction of children and teens from the rural community.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Current Climate of Rural Sandhill's Churches Responses

The questionnaire developed for this project consisted of two parts. Part one focused on background information on the participants with questions about age, rural experience, membership and leadership in the church, traditional church attendance in their family, distance from large retailers and shopping, school in the community, and population. Responses from our survey indicated that eighty five percent of the group claimed the majority of their life experience was rural while fifteen percent responded that they were city people most of their life. This group of questions helped to adequately identify the rural context and communities they hailed from.

All of those interviewed answered the question; do you hold credentials from a religious denomination or church organization? In the survey sixty three percent responded yes to the question and identified as credentialed clergy. Unlike congregations in larger metropolitan communities, traditionally only the pastor possessed any type of credential whether denomination based or local church credential. From the Nebraska District of the Assembly of God Presbyterian Manual, "Local Church Credential-Commissioned Minister, this credential was created so that the mentoring and ministry development process could begin for an applicant at his or her local church."⁷⁷ Because of the lack of credentialed ministers, lay people occasionally lead rural congregations that may or may not have Bible College or seminary experience. The pastor will typically hold credentials in the rural context while all others involved have no formal

⁷⁷ Bob Wine, *The Presbyterian Manual*, (Grand Island NE, 2019), 50.

training. Fifteen percent of the group claimed lay leadership rolls and twenty two percent represented members and adherents in the local rural church.

The age of the test group leaned toward the older end of the spectrum. 63 percent of all that participated fell into the group of 50 years old or older. This figure loosely agrees with the aggregate age of the population, which presents somewhat older than metro Nebraska. The youngest participant, 23 years old, interviewed for the study is on staff at a church that utilized traditional worship and church experience. Although involved in ministry her entire life, this became her first full-time ministry position. Being the youngest in our research, she nonetheless is well educated with an advanced college degree. The oldest, in his early 80s, pastors in the rural context representing the trend to serve into later years, beyond what their average contemporaries serve in the city. The experience shared from years of service created a positive ministry position; conversely the lack of energy and stamina may limit ministry exposure.

Life experience also weighted toward rural history in the group that responded to the poll. The question asked, “Have you been in the rural community all or most of your life, or would you say that the majority of your experience was spent in non-rural areas?” Of the respondents, 85 percent described themselves as rural for the largest part of their life. Roth says in his book, *God’s Country*, “Rural communities are profoundly interrelated through work, blood, and general neighborliness. My granddaddy and yours were friends (or rivals) and so are we.”⁷⁸ In spite of population drift, those that remain are typically long-term residents.⁷⁹ This also shows that people moving from the city to the country does not happen often, even in ministry.

⁷⁸ Roth, *God’s Country*, Location 129.

⁷⁹ The trend of population migration toward the metro areas substantiated and well documented in the Sandhills. See graphics in the appendix.

Young people that leave the country setting and the small communities seeking education do not often return. The city has many attractions to offer and multiple options in employment, entertainment, and social variety. The rural community does not offer opportunity in education or other activities that would draw the outsider from the metro area to the country. This migration then remains one sided with the city winning the day most often. Conversely, one couple in our test group deliberately left the city to find a rural experience that they had always dreamed about and finally fulfilled the dream. Leaving the city, migrating to rural, constitutes the minority of location changes in today's culture.

Interesting to note, USDA stats show the trend starting to reverse. "The decline in the U.S. rural population, which began in 2010, has reversed for the first time this decade. In 2016-17, the rural population increased by 0.1 percent, adding 33,000 people. This small overall increase continues an upturn in rural population since 2011-12, which stems from increasing rates of net migration from urban (metro) areas. Since 2011, fewer people have been moving out of rural areas and more people have been moving in."⁸⁰ This trend in population transition from the metro areas back to rural reversed the traditional population flow. One reason for this trend, families discovered a quality of life that comes with rural living so people that work in larger metropolitan centers commuted greater distances to live outside of the hustle and bustle of the city.

The question on the survey inquiring about the experience of the people polled offered mixed reviews. Answers to the question, "Would you describe your church experience as traditional or progressive?"⁸¹ Responses included 65 percent traditional and 35percent

⁸⁰ USDA, *Rural Population Trends*, (ers.usda.gov February 15, 2019) May 12, 2020.

⁸¹ Ron Masten, *Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project*, 2020, Page 2.

progressive. Participant's own assessment defined what constituted traditional or progressive experience. Respondents defined the parameters on their own and then offered an opinion to the question based on real life encounters.

The interviewer instructed the subjects to give their first reaction as a response to the question without spending much time thinking about it. Within this portion of the questionnaire there emerged some interesting data. People that belonged to the same ministry group or church responded in different ways. The configuration of the sanctuary determined whether or not the service seemed traditional in some cases. The standard rectangular room with pews, a piano-used or not, communion table and pulpit described traditional in their mind. Style of preaching, order of service, having or not having Sunday School or Wednesday evening church, didn't figure in their assessment. If it looked like a traditional church, it must fit the traditional model. Other respondents looked at age, if the pastor appeared younger, we must fit a progressive church model. Older ministers represented traditional ministry regardless of style and practicum.

It must be noted that there is no category in this research that is one hundred percent across the board in results. There are always going to be churches that one would think were traditional and are not, and there are also churches with younger populations that choose to worship in a traditional fashion. From our results ninety six percent of the group reported a family tradition, going back generations, of regular church attendance. Barb Bryant, an elderly member responded, "My family never attended church or even considered attending. It was never a part of our life or schedule. It wasn't until I was married that it even crossed my mind."⁸²

⁸² Barb Bryant, Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project, March 2020.

Looking at the second portion of the traditional versus progressive question, “Would you describe your worship and music as traditional or progressive?”⁸³ This question also brought varied responses and comments. In this response, 39 percent identified their church as traditional in worship and music while 61 percent claimed the worship and music portion of the Sunday morning experience in the local church progressive. Again, there was no criterion given by the interviewer to identify either category, so the respondent relied on perception of their experience to answer the question. Focus magazine describes worship,

Traditional worship will probably be more orderly, more typical of what has always been done, and the music will be church music with an organ or piano and a choir, or in some cases, a praise team. Contemporary worship, on the other hand, will be filled with younger people who have longed to throw off the shackles of rigid, do-it-the-same-way-every-week worship. Music will typically be filled with guitars and drums and will be upbeat, something people can rock to, raise your arms to, and in some cases even dance to.⁸⁴

In some cases, the order of the service, placing worship in nontraditional order, identified as progressive regardless of music style or number of hymns versus choruses. If worship fell in another place, not just after the opening of the service, then it qualified as not traditional. One respondent, Barb Bryant stated, “We sing some choruses and not just hymns, so our worship is progressive.”⁸⁵ Notwithstanding, the larger percentage of choruses used in her church came from before the turn of the century. Coming from her experience, in a small ultra-traditional church, choruses in any form or from any age qualified as progressive in her estimation.

People in some rural contexts felt that when the church they attended began to use computers and projection units, they now moved to progressive in the worship experience. Others equated progressive to the use of guitar, percussion, or anything besides organ and piano

⁸³ Ron Masten, Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project, 2020, Page 2

⁸⁴ Berry Kercheville, “Traditional and Contemporary Worship” (focusmagazine.org, 2013). 1.

⁸⁵ Ron Masten, *Interview Questions Rural Ministry Research Project*, Barb Bryant, 2020, Page 2.

for accompaniment. This response varied in some families where both parties polled showed the individuality of perception in people residing in rural Nebraska by describing their experience at opposite ends of the question.

Identify Areas of Concern and the Challenges in Rural Ministry

The future of ministry in the rural community in the Sandhills of Nebraska remained in question. Without looking at trends and current status of rural communities, schools, businesses, services, and churches, the climate of decline persisted. Rural America fights each day for existence and relevance in the world today. From an article in the *Fremont Tribune*, “A new report from The Center for Public Affairs Research confirms that many of Nebraska’s towns are shrinking and the rural population is aging. Population analysts based at the University of Nebraska at Omaha produced the report. The study found about half of all counties in the state now have higher death rates than birth rates, and in the state’s most rural counties, 21 percent of the population is older than 65.”⁸⁶ As the small towns fight for their life, some do not make it.

Seen all around this country, many ghost communities exist that once had dreams and aspirations of being the cultural and business center in a given area. Robin Jarvis, on the website onlyinyourstate.com says, “Ghost towns dot the landscape in Nebraska like the random spots on a Dalmatian. From the badlands to the lowlands and even just outside some of the bigger cities, through the year’s entire towns have dried up and disappeared from the Cornhusker State.”⁸⁷ Concern begins with survival that the small town will even remain with life and purpose beyond the near future. When survival seems likely, the next apparent issue becomes what to do to

⁸⁶ Jerry Diechert, *Nebraska Small Towns Shrinking* (Fremont Tribune, April 15, 2006, Accessed on May 12, 2020).

⁸⁷ Robin Jarvis, *This Haunting Road Trip Through Nebraska Ghost Towns Is One You Won’t Soon Forget*, (onlyinyourstate.com/Nebraska, 2016)

remain viable into the future, beyond the next few years. Population will constitute the foundation of the equation; without people, the community does not exist. If there resides a group, even a small group of people, having goods and services to sustain them where they live constitutes the next challenge. Thedford's local grocery store owner and operator stated in a personal interview, "We have partnered with two other small retail grocery outlets in nearby villages, so we can build orders large enough for the grocery wholesaler to deliver to our location. The distributor has a minimum number of pallets required to make a drop at any location. Without this partnership, all three stores would likely close because we cannot sustain enough volume to order on our own product in each individual location and meet the minimum requirement."⁸⁸ Having a grocery store close by in a small community remains a big concern and a bigger challenge for Thedford and communities of less than 200 people. The next closest grocery store is 70 miles away in North Platte. At times, churches like grocery stores in small towns may close when ownership changes or someone retires. Both struggled to locate new leadership that will work tirelessly, expecting a small return for their effort while staying on for the sheer love of community. Roth opens his book, *God's Country*, with the simple statement, "I love the rural church."⁸⁹ This is the attitude that embodies the minister in the rural church that will carry relevant ministry into the future.

Concern for rural ministry goes beyond the small local village. There has traditionally not been a strong support for rural ministry in faith-based colleges, seminaries, and bible schools in the past. The perception in ministry circles traditionally identifies rural church ministry as a steppingstone to real ministry or even relevant ministry consisting of the mission's field or city

⁸⁸ Alan Ewolt, Personal Interview, February 2020.

⁸⁹ Roth, *God's Country*, 104.

ministry. Vaters defines the myth saying, “The false impression that our Small Church ministry is less than what God says it is because we compare ourselves with others.”⁹⁰ Glen Daman, Village Ministries author agreed, “... many seminaries offering programs in urban ministries, but a complete absence of schools offering even a class in rural ministries. For those who have never served in a rural church, the rural church usually remains an enigma, a mystery defying understanding.”⁹¹ It became more popular to pioneer a new work, even in a rural context, than to grow or revitalize a current church in the country. In denomination or fellowship gatherings, rural small towns, country churches or non-metro ministries lost value alongside metro or city churches.

Following the thought of rural ministry being less relevant there also existed the perception that the young minister right out of school or the minister near retirement and needing a couple more years to arrive at retirement age was the best candidates for the small rural church. Ministers in the prime years of productivity and experience certainly would choose to work in more productive and relevant locations. Daman observed,

First, they must evaluate the status for rural ministry so it is not seen as simply a place to either start in ministry to gain experience and then move on to a more prestigious ministry, or place to end one’s career after the urban church has moved on to find a younger pastor. Instead, rural ministry needs to be seen as both vital and important within God’s redemptive program. The rural church must not be seen as a dependent child requiring the assistance of the denomination, but as an important member of the family contributing to the health and stability of the universal church.

The rural setting may even qualify as wasting talent and energy in the kingdom and mission. In a conversation with former District Superintendent of Nebraska, Bob Nazarenes, he declared, “small communities deserve high quality, relevant ministry just as much as the larger metro churches-don’t ever forget it. You have the ability to minister and go wherever you desire but I

⁹⁰ Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth*, 1.

⁹¹ Glenn Daman. *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2018) 47.

say go rural.”⁹² Nazarenes, and subsequent district officials in Nebraska, advocated for rural ministry in our district laying the foundation for the current surge in emphasis on rural ministry as a calling and life-long vocation.

Compensation for the position of rural pastor has not increased with the increase in cost of living, but there some important qualities and benefits continued for residing in the rural context while raising children and engaging in contextualized ministry. In the preface of the book, *Small Town Jesus*, Larry Osbourne states, “Over 33 Million people live in small town America. These people matter to God. Yet you’d never know it by reading the books and attending the conferences aimed at church planters. It’s all about the cities. It’s as if small towns and the people who live there don’t exist.”⁹³ There’s a growing groundswell in the faith community to look at and focus on rural ministry as a viable ministry vocation.

In the past, one of the issues addressed considered one pastor serving two or more congregations. Several different denominations in our area of the Sandhills applied this solution, although not used exclusively by only one or two. Catholic churches may have the most prolific application with multiple parishes served by a single priest. In Thedford Bethel AG is the only church in the village where the pastor serves just one congregation. Scheduling times of worship will naturally become an issue as the pastors must preach in multiple churches each Sunday. Weather and other variables complicated this challenge altering the schedule. Pastor Les Parmenter pastors the UCC Churches in Halsey, Thedford, and Seneca. He said in the interview, “We are fortunate to live on the time zone line between Central Time Zone and Mountain Time Zone. We gain an hour traveling the fifteen minutes from Thedford to Seneca, which keeps us

⁹² Bob Nazarenes, Personal Interview, August 2010.

⁹³ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, Location 2. Statista noted that almost 60 million live in rural US. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/985183/size-urban-rural-population-us/>

from going into the afternoon too far.”⁹⁴ Not all pastors with multiple sites have that advantage so they spread service times throughout the day on Sundays. The Catholic Church alleviates this issue by meeting on Saturday evening in some locations. Pastor Lee Wonch described his challenge for Sunday’s schedule, “With Talin Church and Amazing Grace Church located sixty five miles apart we have adjusted by having a morning worship service at Talin and doing the Sunday worship at Amazing Grace in the evening.”⁹⁵ This also created a challenge as the minister attempts to serve both congregations and concurrently work in the private sector.

Challenges and concerns in declining communities affect the churches and businesses.⁹⁶ With the loss of population and resources the local churches suffer from lack of ability to hire and compensate a pastor, more so if the pastor has a family. The lack of support and focus by denominations, Bible Colleges, and seminaries highlighting rural ministry as a lifelong mission and ministry keeps graduates from considering rural as a viable option for long term engagement. Griggs recounts, “Jesus didn’t grow up in a small town and get out as soon as possible. Jesus lived most of his life in a small town and, once His ministry began, wanted to continually go to small towns even after his fame began to spread everywhere.”⁹⁷ God still loves rural, so the challenge the Sandhills churches face today, changed perception and present rural contextualized ministry as a preferred course of sharing the gospel to the future.

⁹⁴ Les Parmenter, *Rural Ministry Research Project*, Personal Interview, March 2020.

⁹⁵ Lee Wonch, *Rural Ministry Research Project*, Personal Interview, March 2020.

⁹⁶ This decline resulted from the loss of young people, those that do not return to their hometown after going to college or tech school.

⁹⁷ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, Location 322.

CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Compiling the thoughts and ideas of this group of pastors, lay leaders, and members into data provided answers and direction giving significance to this research and bringing value to the research. The high level of hope and optimism for the future of rural ministry shown by the pastors that participated surprised the interviewer. Some definite reasons for this positive hope for the future became apparent. One reason voiced by Nadine Sandoz in her description of her role in church ministry. She stated, “My role in the local church, and many other churches I have the opportunity to attend, is to encourage the pastors and leadership, facilitate ministry development and educational experiences, and thereby empower our leaders and especially our young people in ministry.”⁹⁸ The church has a core of leadership people and institutions that have engaged in the future of the rural church with proactive investment and energy highlighting true mission and calling to serve in the small villages and towns away from the metro and cities.

Creative options for additional education and fellowship expand possibilities for rural ministry. Vaters writes, “Small church pastors tend to struggle alone. Many of us can’t afford to go to conferences to learn new ideas and meet with fellow pastors for moral support....The conferences become over-represented by larger churches and under-represented by smaller ones.”⁹⁹ Many rural ministers do not have the finances to go to the big conference, but some have started taking training and fellowship to the rural church to encourage and lift up our less visible workers in the field. Griggs observed, “Small towns have all but been forgotten by many

⁹⁸ Nadine Sandoz, *Rural Ministry Research Project*, Personal Interview, March 2020.

⁹⁹ Vaters, *The Grasshopper Myth*, 163.

people and by many churches.”¹⁰⁰ However, some now actively demonstrate value and importance to small, rural churches in our nation and around the world.

Another discovery coming from the research question, “What do you see as the greatest need in your church,”¹⁰¹ was the need for discipleship and genuine worship. Respondents described these needs in a couple of ways; discipleship included more than a Wednesday evening class on church fundamentals or Sunday School classes on Sunday morning. It acquired and maintained people devoted to worship and outreach ministry as well as serving in the local church. Pastor Ben Eickoff, lead pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Thedford said,

Our challenge in engaging people in attendance, and in serving, is the local school and all the activities that it represents. Sports lead the way, but more and more additional extra-curricular activities demand attention from the kids and parents. Their devotion has shifted from the church house to anything on the schedule at school. This is not limited to time but resources as well.¹⁰²

Previously, pastors and communities reserved all day Sunday and Wednesday evening for church and church related activities, but that doesn’t happen now. The lack of discipleship opportunities contributes to the higher priority of non-church activities. Genuine worship then becomes less important and the two degrade in unison until neither have a priority in the community or in the church.

Lay people in the survey brought this previous question down to the foundation. Gail Johnston, a lay member responded, “We need faithfulness in our congregation, people that will give Christian service and worship the highest priority in their everyday lives. When this is done correctly, we will not have to worry about attracting young families with children, they will naturally want to be a part and include the kids in the life of the local church.”¹⁰³ The future of

¹⁰⁰ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, Location 86.

¹⁰¹ Ron Masten, Rural Ministry Research Project, 2020.

¹⁰² Ben Eickoff, Rural Ministry Research Project, Personal Interview, March 2020.

¹⁰³ Gail Johnston, *Rural Ministry Research Project*, Personal Interview, March 2020.

the church, rural or otherwise, depends on young people and children. Roth asked a simple question, “Are you a church that cares for kids?”¹⁰⁴ Attracting families and kids resulted in the average age of the church dropping and guaranteeing future life.

A natural crisis response involved finding ways to work together to find avenues back to healthy positions. Partnership between churches and ministries, a common theme in response in nearly all the people polled, brought a positive response whether pastors or lay persons. One aspect of partnership identified was competition. Robert Mills, a young father of five children, from three through thirteen years old, suggested,

We must eliminate competition between the bible believing and teaching churches in our town. The only way I see to keep the church strong and moving forward is to work together sharing the authentic gospel message and not concentrate on which church gets the credit. God’s church is more than the name over the door.¹⁰⁵

In the area of partnering with other ministries and church groups, several respondents suggested that a key element in working with another church depended on strong biblical teaching and belief, which resonates with Mill’s statement. People have a great concern for the gospel being the core of our message and have observed too many groups that do not hold to strong Bible based teaching, but resort to entertainment-based gatherings that center on performance, recreation, and good snacks.

Opportunities for New Practices

Identifying challenges and issues in rural ministry can lead to discouragement or it can highlight opportunity. Jack Johnston, a long-term Deacon at Bethel AG Church in Thedford stated, “We need to move away from the traditional and negative practicum of church in rural Nebraska. We have the opportunity now to drop the spirit of exclusivity that has existed in the

¹⁰⁴ Roth, *God’s Country*, 89.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Mills, *Rural Ministry Research Project*, Personal Interview, March 2020.

church and endeavor to work together, partner together, to join in ministry from here and forward.”¹⁰⁶ This leader who serves as an example of those who see opportunity in the problem, believed that the church can utilize the current situation to move to relevant ministry instead of continued decline. This required working together in the kingdom with other ministries and churches. Griggs challenged, “We need our hearts to be convinced that we don’t have everything we need. We need to learn from other workers in the field who can help us do our job better.”¹⁰⁷ The issue blocking progress may stem from the thought that, “we don’t need input from any that are not our own.” This stance will not carry the church into a successful future. Partnership, one of the keys to productive and long-term ministry, can strengthen the rural church.

Opportunity will also look like something that has never been done or tried in the past. This includes, but is not limited to, internet media options that have not been attempted or considered before. All the churches and ministries included in this research, except one has reached out to their congregation and other potential ministry prospects through social media., Pastor Rick Lorimer stated in a meeting with Nebraska pastors, “If you and your church are not engaged with your team in social media ministry, you are missing one of the greatest, most effective, and lowest cost outreach tools available today in any context, rural or metro.”¹⁰⁸ The church, through social media, has accessed a mission field that stretches far beyond the local area, into the city, other states, and around the world. Challenges can become opportunities if the church pursued them. Discipleship that involves great distances will foster another opportunity for partnership. The local church must reach out and engage able workers to make personal contact with those that respond to the missionary message.

¹⁰⁶ Jack Johnston, *Rural Ministry Research Project*, Personal Interview, March 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, Location 1232.

¹⁰⁸ Rick Lorimer, Pastor’s Meeting, May 2020.

Up to this point, collaboration has included primarily those ministries and pastors that reside in the proximity of the rural church. Partnership that challenges the future of rural ministry will also include joining with the metro church. This required tearing down the barriers that have existed for many years between these two church groups. Pastor Jeff Baker of New Life AG, Kearney Nebraska, a large metro church with three ministry locations, stated, Rural church pastors ask me what they can do to help my church in the city, I tell them if they truly want to help us, then ask us how we can help rural facilitate ministry in their village. We are prepared and motivated to provide ministry answers for our rural brothers and sisters. That is what they can do to help us.¹⁰⁹ Communication becomes the key component; communication has always been the key to ministry, business, marriage, collaboration, and other worthwhile pursuits. The church has passed, or missed opportunities because of the lack of communication between pastors and missionaries in circles of influence. Griggs says, “Small is not better than big. Big is not better than small. In fact, a huge tragedy is that we are missing real opportunities to dialogue and learn from one another.”¹¹⁰ Human pride remains a powerful influence in the life of a pastor, metro or rural, and hinders the ability to share ideas, resources, and outreach ministry. This old idea created new opportunities when the church understands the power and strength of good communication.

Applied Information Creating a Climate of Change

The research discovered, and identified some needed changes for rural ministry in the Sandhills, “How can the rural church and pastor create a climate that will lead to change and insure health and growth in the rural context?” Overcoming isolation and a mentality of

¹⁰⁹ Jeff Baker, Personal Interview, February 2020.

¹¹⁰ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, Location 709.

segregation becomes the first step to this climate of change. The church, in the past, has seen the need to rely on another ministry or group as weakness and failure. Creating change often follows laying down the past differences and choosing a new future that identifies collaboration essential to ministry and missions. Marrow declares,

Ministry is meant to happen in the context of relationships because all of us, whether we realize it or not, have a deep need and desire to know and be known by others, we have been made in the image of God, who has eternally existed in community as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are designed to be in relationship and community with others. This is why we should do missions in the context of relationships and biblical community as much as possible.¹¹¹

Collaboration and partnership will begin with relationship. The church must have relationships as the basis of praxis.; outreach, missions, contextualization, evangelism, all require relationships to become successful. Jesus modeled relationship for the church, those called by His name. One Pastor interviewed expressed findings from his own research, “The key to effective ministry in the rural context of Nebraska is: 1. An increased spiritual fervency, 2. Vital partnership, working together in ministry process, 3. Intentional outreach into the community, outside of the church walls.”¹¹² This perspective substantiates the findings in this body of research.

¹¹¹ Marrow, *Small Town Mission*, Location 147.

¹¹² Paul Maunu, *Personal Interview*, April 17, 2020.

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION

The question looms in front of rural leaders, “Is the small, rural, country church alive and well, or is it doomed to fade away as part of the ghost towns that dot the landscape in rural America?” This research project survey demonstrated that the rural churches in the Sandhills of Nebraska and around America still have life; however, there is a sense of urgency in the church to find ministry answers to go forward. In rural ministry context, authenticity became a key to influence and leading change in people's lives and the converse remained true. Rural people immediately recognized inauthentic life and any opportunity to lead them in change will become lost. All the respondents agreed that the key to rural missions and ministry included collaborating with churches to provide vital outreach in the future. This is a somewhat new concept and will need to be approached carefully. In the past there have been some attempts at cooperation that have ended with disappointment and hurt. But we see from comments by Pastor Les Parmenter “The future of ministry here and in other small communities will require collaboration between those churches that believe and teach God’s word and its timeless message.”¹¹³ How this will be accomplished will depend on ingenuity, thinking outside the box, and the power and leading of the Holy Spirit. One thing is for certain, ministry in the future will look different from yesterday. New and fresh ideas along with new partners and associates who have oneness of mind and heart will join together. That unity will embody sharing the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

¹¹³ Les Parmenter, *Personal Interview, March 19, 2020.*

This cooperation in ministry together has its foundation in Biblical theology. The fences must come down that kept churches separated for many years, negating the opportunity to labor together for the common cause of Jesus Christ. As we see in the village of Thedford, of the five churches in this community, three of these came from one original work. Good growth and expansion should not arise from disappointment and ill feelings. This creates a climate of competition at the least, and outright conflict between congregations and groups in the typical small community. Through this process of discovery, some of the past animosity has been addressed and a new declaration of a desire to partner and collaborate in the future surfaced. God will use this open door to accomplish His work of building His church here in the Sandhills of Nebraska.

Most churches realize working together increases strength in cooperation, while isolation may result in ceasing to exist as no one group or congregation can face the challenge of ministry alone. As we have seen in our research, churches in Thomas County and elsewhere have attempted to survive by grouping churches and communities together. These communities share a pastor and accept part time ministry because of the distance. This is better than having no pastor or leader and seeing their church fade into obscurity. God said that He would build His church. The Sandhills churches desire to embody this new revival and awakening, uniting the church, to work together for the future glory of their great God.

In small communities, genuine ministry becomes immediately apparent, so the lack of genuine concern and compassion compels the rural community to appraise the messenger as irrelevant and they will ignore them rather than accepting them as a true missionary. People in the rural context desire authenticity, in ministry and in outreach. Bethel experienced a pastor some years ago that declared he would not be seen in the community on a daily basis. He would

be at home or possibly in the church office but they should not expect to see him or his family up town. This position was seen as a lack of love and commitment while demonstrating insincere ministry in the village. Rural communities are social and the rural pastor must be involved in all aspects of the village to be relevant.

Partnership on purpose, spiritual fervency, and intentional outreach into the community will characterize the church in the future, and the future begins now. The church must recognize that collaboration and partnership will not just evolve on its own. This new paradigm will necessitate a desire that will move the church to engage in a sense of urgency rooted in seeking God to give direction and guidance moving forward. God will lead changes, partnerships, spiritual renewal, and missional evangelism through contextualization and intentional evangelism.

Relevant ministry will not only survive into the future, it will thrive. As small town rural pastors and lay people were interviewed they exhibited optimism and hope. Although there was some trepidation and uncertainty in not knowing what was in store, all were excited about the opportunity to partner and collaborate with other churches. April Maunu, assistant Pastor at Cross Roads AG in Valentine Nebraska said, “We will work differently, there will be forward motion, the gospel will be preached, and we will change our approach to adjust to the current climate and culture.”¹¹⁴ April echoes the sentiment of nearly all who answered the questions. She went on to say that partnership was crucial, raising up leaders was essential, and discipleship was a foundational function of the church.¹¹⁵ The church must seek the direction of the Holy Spirit as

¹¹⁴ April Maunu, *Personal Interview*, April 17, 2020.

¹¹⁵ April Maunu, *Personal Interview*, April 17, 2020.

we move forward in the Acts movement of carrying the gospel message to all people. All efforts will be in vain save those that are sanctioned by the Spirit and that follow God's direction.

Support for this outreach into rural churches will come from the church itself. A large church in a metro area of our state engaged Sandhill church leadership in conversation in January of this year. When asked how the rural church could help his church his response was spirit empowered as he said, "Just let us know how we can help you, we are prepared and excited as well as financed to respond to the need of the rural church. Just let us help."¹¹⁶ This embodies the new spirit of collaboration in ministry that has not existed prior to now. As the rural church seeks God, and as the metropolitan church calls on His name, we become one church, the church that will be used by the Lord to carry the message here at home and around the world.

Finally, one of the keys to future rural ministry is right in front of us. MARM students are blessed to see this mission being acted out before our very eyes. Trinity and the faithful staff have launched us and the nation into the exciting realm of rural ministry that will carry us to the end of all time. We can rejoice in the knowledge that we are in the midst of this mission, guided by the Holy Spirit, that will lead this mighty revival and breathe new life into the backroads of our state, country, and world.

¹¹⁶ Jeff Baker, Personal Interview, 2020-1-15.

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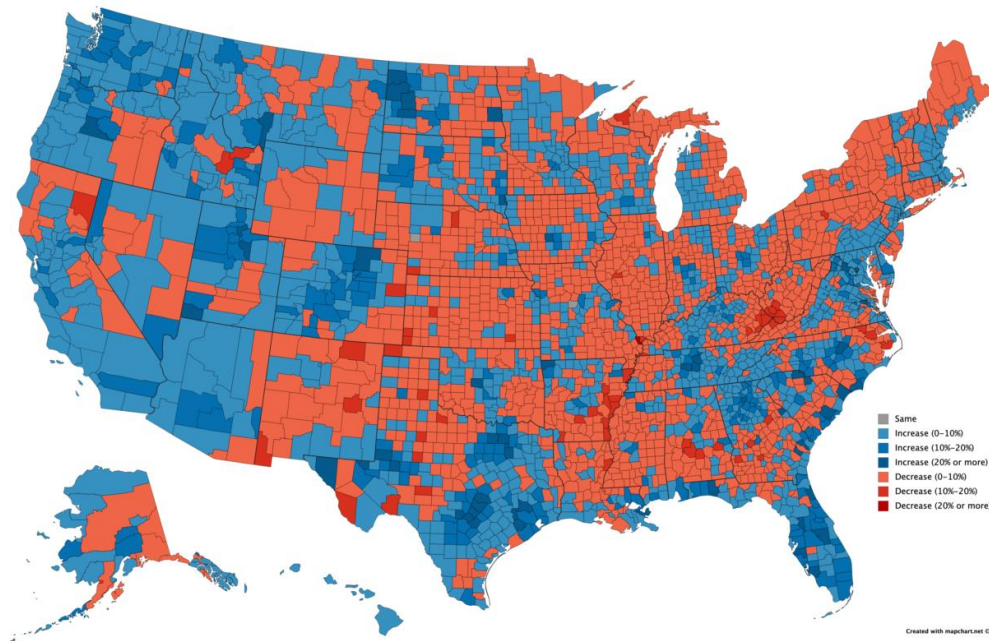
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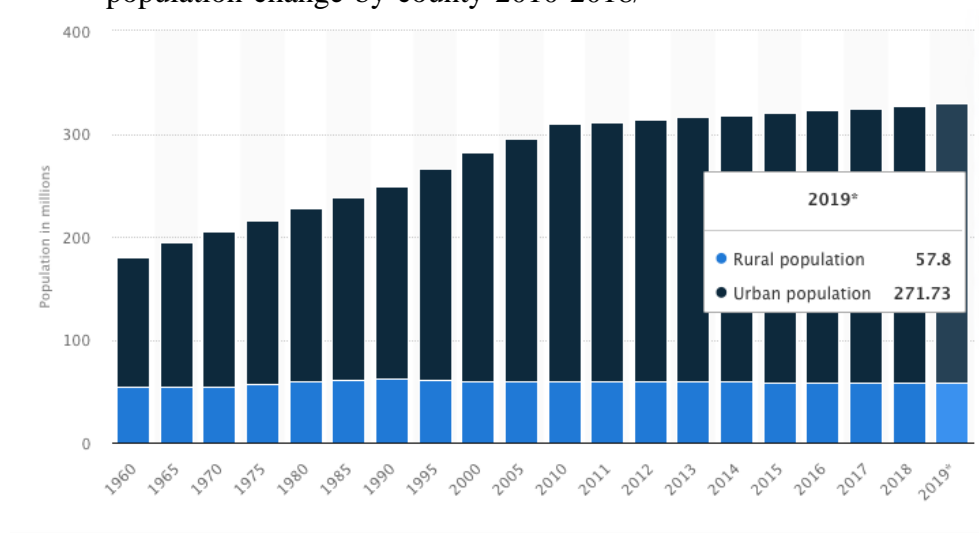
Matt. 28:19-20.
Mark 16:16-17.
Luke 24:46-49.
John 20:21-2.
Acts 1:8.

APPENDIX

2010-2018 Population Rural Incline and Decline¹¹⁷



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