

TRINITY BIBLE COLLEGE & GRADUATE SCHOOL

Population Decline in Rural America:
A Case for Continued Church Planting and Ministry Investment

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Abstract

This study researched the feasibility of church planting and ministry investment in rural areas in light of depopulation and its corresponding economic and social impact. Some church planters concluded that small town ministry offered little investment return and that efforts should focus on urban and suburban areas.

Population decline in rural America impacted communities beyond fewer people living there. With a declining population, communities experienced economic downturns, increased substance abuse and addictions, higher crime rates and mental illness, and fewer amenities and restricted access to essential services. These realities cried out for spiritual solutions. However, in the circumstances begging for healthy churches, churches have closed or declined into irrelevance.

In America, the evangelical church demonstrated indifference toward rural ministry, which created a challenging environment to recruit pastoral leaders and financial investors. This study pointed to evidence of opportunity and success models in small towns, making a case for human and financial resource investment.

Statistical analysis, literature analysis, personal interviews, and two case studies demonstrated the potential success and supported this position. While the literature analysis will be broad and general, the statistical analysis and case studies will focus on rural Assemblies of God in Kansas.

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INTRODUCTION:

IMPACT OF DECLINE IN RURAL AMERICA ON THE CHURCH

Defining Rural

Understanding the ministry opportunities in rural America requires one to acquire knowledge of rural life. The complexity of defining rural communities seems paradoxical to rural living's perceived simplicity (See Appendix 1). This study clarifies the definition and the reality of rural living while adding context to the church's impact.

This paper employs the definition offered by pastor and author Glenn Damon. He explained, “We define rural as communities and towns with a population base less than 10,000 people, that are not in close proximity to an urban core, that exhibit characteristics of rural culture, and that are often (but not exclusively) economically and emotionally connected to the land upon which they live.”¹ Understanding any culture necessitates probing deeper than a mere definition, including the perceptions of those from other cultures.

Perceptions of Rural America

Americans tend to view rural through a nostalgic lens and thoughts of neat homes surrounded by white picket fences, tiny church houses with fresh white paint, and tall steeples. They imagine little boys playing baseball in a vacant lot and little girls playing on the swing hanging from the big oak tree. The scenario continues with momma baking pies while preparing supper, everyone anticipating daddy coming home from work so they can sit down to a family

¹ Glenn Daman, *The Forgotten Church* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2018), 35.

meal. Many families experience a different rural context dominated by single parenthood, unsupervised children, and absentee fathers. Each person finds their reality within this diverse continuum.

Depictions of a past era often fail to match reality. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark aptly captured this truth; “Nostalgia is the enemy of history. No educated person any longer believes that the ancients were correct about a fall from a Golden Age. Yet, we frequently accept equally inaccurate tales about more recent ‘good old days’—tales that corrupt our understanding of the past and mislead us about the present.”² The proverbial stroll down memory lane seldom merges with reality road.

For those who hold dear memories of rural culture, nostalgia becomes the enemy of reality, but for those for whom rural has never been a way of life, other factors cloud their perception of rural. Daman stated, “For many, popular culture and media shape their perception of rural America.”³ Perception varies depending on the influence of television programs or music choices. Sheriff Andy and Deputy Barney’s images sitting in front of Floyd’s barbershop in peaceful Mayberry belies the reality of a rural community riddled with Meth addiction, broken families, latchkey kids, and poverty.

The past three decades of increasing societal ills punctuate a century-long decline in rural America. Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg suggested, “A Wall Street Journal analysis shows that since the 1990s, sparsely populated counties have replaced large cities as America’s most troubled areas by key measures of socioeconomic well-being—a decline that’s accelerating.”⁴ To

² Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 25.

³ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 39.

⁴ Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg, “Rural America is the New ‘Inner City,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rural-america-is-the-new-inner-city-1495817008>.

describe rural in this way may seem extreme, but Adamy and Overberg are not alone in their assessment. Daman stated, “What the evangelical church failed to recognize was that, even as they turned their attention to the inner cities, rural America was rapidly becoming the new ghetto, with high poverty, drug use among young people, and crime all becoming systemic problems.”⁵ These statements may indicate another false perception of rural. Millions of 'salt of the earth' people claim rural America as home, and they enjoy a quality of life without equal in urban America.⁶ Yet, rural areas face serious issues, even rising to crisis levels.

⁵ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 93-94.

⁶ Paul Ernest Drost, *Church Planting and Revitalization*, *MARM class*, Foley MN, Oct. 2018.

CHAPTER ONE:
RURAL KANSAS HISTORY AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The twentieth century changed the human landscape of rural America. One hundred years of urbanization drove this change and led to widespread rural depopulation; fueled by historic economic and ecological disasters and farming mechanization. The population loss created a domino effect that undermined rural areas' economic health and opened doors to substance abuse and isolation. The church, once a strength of small towns, declined in attendance and influence, leading to spiritual deficiency

Understanding how these issues impact contemporary rural life requires a one-hundred-year history review. The economic decline and depopulation formed an ongoing cycle of cause and effect in rural America.⁷ Economic issues impacted core agriculture and extraction industries, leading to population loss; fewer people to buy goods resulted in a negative impact on retail, food, and service businesses.

Urbanization of America Affects Rural Communities' Population

Many have documented the urbanization of America, including the Khan Academy. They observed,

Only two percent of Americans live on farms or ranches today, but in 1790 ninety percent of the population did... Urbanization in the United States increased gradually in the early 1800s and then accelerated in the years after the Civil War. By 1890, twenty-eight percent of Americans lived in urban areas, and by 1920 more Americans lived in towns and cities than in rural areas.⁸

⁷ To examine cause and effect requires asking the age-old question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Of course, God created the chicken and designed them to lay eggs; but beyond the beginning, one could argue there would be no more chickens without eggs. Like the chicken and the egg, economic decline and depopulation formed an ongoing cycle of cause and effect in rural America.

⁸ John Louis Recchiuti, "America Moves to the City," The Khan Academy, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/the-gilded-age/gilded-age/a/america-moves-to-the-city>.

This overview illuminates a greater understanding of the dynamics of rural depopulation.

America's founders planted the economic roots in agriculture. Early American presidents, including George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Monroe, made their livelihood in agriculture, returning to the farm after serving in high office. Jefferson became recognized as one of America's early agronomists.⁹ However, as the nation industrialized, population concentrations shifted following opportunities.

Many believe American rural areas will continue to lose people, with current population studies failing to show evidence of the trend reversing; however, events of 2020 have fueled a brisk debate relating to urban—rural population shifts.¹⁰ Jim Nowlan, a journalist for the Peoria Journal Star, observed, “All creatures great and small tend to move away from threats and to opportunity. Based on limited research, interviews with students of rural America, and anecdotal illustrations, I conclude that the urban protests will not have much effect on movement to rural areas, but that the increased amount of remote work engendered by the pandemic might do so.”¹¹ Time will settle this debate, but the current reality of rural communities remains unsettling.

Several factors continue to raise concerns about further rural depopulation. Tim Slack and Leif Jensen found, “Dominant demographic trends in the rural U.S. over recent decades include depopulation (driven by population aging and youth out-migration), increasing ethno-

⁹ Bayer Crop Science website, “U.S. Presidents Who Were Also Farmers,” <https://www.cropscience.bayer.us/news/blog/2016/february/02152016-us-presidents-who-were-also-farmers>.

¹⁰ Richard Florida, “This is not the end of the Cities,” Bloomberg City Lab, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-06-19/cities-will-survive-pandemics-and-protests>. Author, Richard Florida predicted, “Let’s not get too carried away. While the justifiable fear of a once-in-a-century pandemic may lend such dystopian predictions greater resonance... When the pandemic and all its related crises finally ebb and we are on the road to recovery a couple of years from now, we will look back and see that the roster of the world’s leading cities is unchanged.” While Florida aligns with conventional wisdom, that rural areas will continue to see declining population, there are other opinions.

¹¹ Jim Nowlan, “Will pandemic and protests spur rural relocation?” Journal Star, <https://www.pjstar.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2020/06/29/nowlan-will-pandemic-and-protests-spur-rural-relocation/42762185/>.

racial diversity (especially as linked to Hispanic population growth), and in-migration to select areas associated with metropolitan adjacency (i.e., exurban growth), retirement destinations, and natural amenities.”¹² Correlating population decline with economic impact provides a platform for understanding the human toll. Putting a human face on these statistics requires stepping into the rural experiences.

Historical Impact of Great Depression and Economic Instability

Daman chronicled four economic factors, which contributed to the twentieth-century depopulation of rural America. The Great Depression hit the nation with a vengeance, and wealth vanished in every sector. The farmer could not escape the devaluation of the crops he produced. Daman explained, “In 1919, wheat sold for \$2.14 per bushel. In 1929, the prices had fallen by half as production increased and demand fell for all agricultural products. Three years later, the price dropped to \$.38 per bushel. Between 1929 and 1932, the gross farm income declined by sixty percent.”¹³ The Great Depression, coupled with an ensuing drought, led to the dust bowl and crippled the rural economy. Daman noted, “From 1930 to 1935, 28,280 farms were forced into bankruptcy.”¹⁴ Although we use numbers to measure these events’ economic impact, numbers alone cannot measure human tragedy. According to some historians, the dust bowl led to 7,000 deaths from dust pneumonia and suicide, and 2.5 million people migrated from their homes.¹⁵ This tragedy’s geographical scope extended beyond the dust bowl region, but the

¹² Tim Slack and Leif Jensen, “The Changing Demography of Rural and Small Town America,” *Population Research and Policy Review* (2020) 39:775–783 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-020-09608-5>, 776.

¹³ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 58. Daman speaking from a life immersed in rural culture.

¹⁴ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 59. Similar occurrences happened in the 1970-80’s with thousands of farmers again forced into bankruptcy, this time due to banking and government policies.

¹⁵ Dan Gordon, “When Deadly Dirt Devastated the Southern Plains,” *The Denver Post* (May 12, 2011), <https://www.denverpost.com/2011/05/12/when-deadly-dirt-devastated-the-southern-plains>.

contributing factors of poverty, disease, and depression spread across the nation. Scars represent wounds that have healed, but the scars remain as reminders. The Great Depression and the dust bowl wounded rural America leaving deep scars that forever serve as a reminder of immeasurable human misery.

Two additional factors from this period influenced the migration from rural to urban. Government programs designed to stabilize agricultural prices after markets crashed often resulted in unintended consequences. The Agricultural Adjustment Act promised to “Pay farmers to reduce the number of acres in production. While it provided some stabilization in the crop prices, it had the unintended consequence of driving the sharecroppers and the tenant farms off the land.” The inevitable workforce reduction resulted in further migration and the continuation of a downturn in the economy. African American farmers experienced a disproportionate displacement from the land, which provided their livelihood. Gerald D. Jaynes explained,

The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 offered farmers money to produce less cotton in order to raise prices. Many white landowners kept the money and allowed the land previously worked by African American sharecroppers to remain empty. Landowners also often invested the money in mechanization, reducing the need for labor and leaving more farming families, black and white, underemployed and in poverty.¹⁶

Successful farming accounted for the final source of rural depopulation in the early twentieth century. Agricultural mechanization generated productivity never seen and paved the way for coming technology. Advanced technology reduced the farm workforce, which led to population decline and a negative impact on rural communities (see Appendix 2)

¹⁶ Gerald D. Jaynes, “Debt Slavery,” Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/debt-slavery#ref1223086>.

Declining Rural Social, Moral, and Spiritual Fabric

A century of depopulation and inconsistent economic outcomes provided the cause that affected deep social, moral, and spiritual issues in rural America. Fantasized by some, vilified or marginalized by others, rural communities face real challenges that only recently drew national attention. Even residents of small towns denied rural reality, convincing themselves that a drug culture could not exist in their town.¹⁷ The haven that once typified their rural America now experienced the fierce winds of social storms.

Increased Narcotic Addiction

The unveiling of real life in small towns shocked a public's senses that grew up watching simplicity portrayed in *Mayberry* or the Cleaver family. Church planter, Donnie Griggs, wrote concerning the rural American youth; "Eighth graders in rural America are 104 percent likelier than those in urban centers to use amphetamines, including methamphetamines, and 50 percent likelier to use cocaine...Eighth-graders in rural areas also are 83 percent likelier to use crack cocaine, and 34 percent likelier to smoke marijuana than eighth-graders in urban centers."¹⁸ The naïve choose to see this as youthful experimentation, repudiating small towns' critical state in America. A survey The American Farm Bureau Federation sponsored indicated, "Three in four farmers and farm workers (74 percent) are or have been directly impacted by opioid abuse, either by knowing someone, having a family member addicted, having taken an illegal opioid, or

¹⁷ Child abuse and molestation happened in the big cities, not the house next door. They spoke with false persuasion about Mr. Brown's sudden death, not wanting to entertain the possibility of suicide.

¹⁸ Donnie Griggs, *Small Town Jesus* (Damascus, Maryland: EverTruth, 2016), 63-64.

having dealt with addiction themselves.”¹⁹ Whether viewed through a moral or health care lens, prescription painkillers' abuse reached epidemic levels between 1999 and 2016.²⁰ Leaders should not be surprised that urban problems found the way to rural communities.

Rural isolation creates an appeal to drug traffickers and users alike. Four factors make rural an appealing target: first, the prohibition era's moonshiners located their stills in isolated areas to avoid detection. Remote abandoned farmhouses dot the landscape of rural America and provide concealment for the manufacturing and distribution of illegal drugs. Second, physical and emotional isolation breeds discontentment, hopelessness, and depression—all fertile soil for a drug culture to thrive. Geographical isolation contributes to limited access to treatment and care facilities.²¹ Even with accessible services, the independent nature of rural people hinders them from accepting the help available.

The nature of labor performed in rural communities creates the third factor. National Public Radio writer, Luke Runyon, observed, “The specific types of jobs more prevalent in rural areas—like manufacturing, farming, and mining—tend to have higher injury rates. That can lead

¹⁹ “Rural Opioid Epidemic,” Morning Consult Survey, Sponsored by American Farm Bureau Federation, <https://www.fb.org/issues/other/rural-opioid-epidemic>.

²⁰ Shannon M. Monnat and Khary K. Rigg, “The Opioid Crisis in Rural and Small Town America,” Carsey Research National Issue Brief, (# 135 Summer, 2018), University of New Hampshire Carsey School of Public Policy, <https://scholars.unh.edu/carsey/343>. Shannon M. Monnat and Khary K. Rigg’s research observed, “Although overall rates are higher in urban than in rural counties, rates increased more in rural than in urban counties across all regions over the last two decades (Figure 2). Between 1999 and 2016, the rate increased by 158 percent in large central metro counties, 507 percent in large fringe metro counties, 429 percent in medium/small metro counties, and 740 percent in nonmetro counties. The largest increases occurred in the rural Midwest (1,600 percent) and rural Northeast (1,141 percent).”

²¹ Rural Health Information Hub, “Substance Use and Misuse in Rural Areas,” <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/substance-use>. According to Rural Health Information Hub, “States with proportionally large rural populations (compared to urban populations) have greater shortages of mental health providers and fewer facilities to provide treatment services. Although family doctors, psychologists, social workers, and pastors may be available in rural areas to deliver basic substance use services or social support, facilities available in rural areas that provide comprehensive substance use treatment services are limited.”

to more pain, and possibly, to more painkillers.”²² The ability to treat occupation-related injuries includes prescription medications, but physical therapy provides an alternative. However, as Runyon further states, “For more than a decade, opioids have been a key part of a rural doctor's pain management for patients, Westfall says. When there's a lack of treatment options in a rural area, alternatives like physical therapy are out of the question, and drugs are an excellent option.”²³ Unsuspecting people who seek treatment for legitimate pain and suffering become addicted to painkillers prescribed with good intentions.

The fourth contributor, many small towns find themselves without a local police department due to limited budgets.²⁴ Faye Elkins, Sr. Technical Writer, for the Community Police Dispatch reported 70% serve in communities under 10,000 with the same problems as their metropolitan counterparts.²⁵ These communities depend on county sheriffs or state police to safeguard their citizens. Many rural counties cover hundreds of square miles of areas. These limitations create an environment for drug traffickers to allude authorities.

²² Luke Runyon, “Why Is The Opioid Epidemic Hitting Rural America Especially Hard?” National Public Radio Illinois (January 4, 2017), <https://www.nprillinois.org/post/why-opioid-epidemic-hitting-rural-america-especially-hard#stream/0>.

²³ Luke Runyon, “Why Is The Opioid Epidemic Hitting Rural America Especially Hard?” Note: Jack Westfall is a family physician and researcher at the University of Colorado and with the High Plains Research Network.

²⁴ We salute the brave men and women dedicated to keeping peace and protecting citizens' lives, whether in urban centers or rural communities. However, they face increasing odds fighting the rural drug epidemic.

²⁵ Faye Elkins, “Concerns from Rural Law Enforcement: What We Heard from the Field,” Community Policing Dispatch, (September 2019 Volume 12 Issue 8), https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/09-2019/rural_le.html. When many Americans think of police departments, they envision big agencies with large numbers of detectives, forensic specialists, and SWAT teams at the ready. But about half of our law enforcement departments have fewer than 10 officers, according to a 2015 report from the, and approximately 70 percent of them serve communities of fewer than 10,000.

These small, usually rural, communities have the same problems that their counterparts in metropolitan areas have, including substance abuse, violent crime, and homelessness. But small towns have small tax bases, which results in less funding for personnel, training, equipment, technology, and other resources that local, state, and tribal law enforcement need to prevent crime and maintain public safety.

Rural people pretend these are new issues in their communities.²⁶ However, before the nation acknowledged the opioid crisis and Methamphetamine labs became common, a cruel drug addiction gripped rural America. Reported growth in alcohol use among adolescents raises concern. Laura de Haan and Tina Boljevac surveyed middle school students, teachers, and parents on adolescent alcohol use. One finding holds particular interest to the church, “Rural adolescents face fewer curricular choices, structured school activities, fewer job prospects, and geographic isolation. These factors may be why risk behaviors among adolescents living in rural areas are accelerating concurrently and, in many cases, faster than national levels. One important risk behavior is alcohol use.”²⁷ Combatting the isolation rural teenagers feel requires new methods of engagement and social interaction.²⁸ Parents represent the first line of defense against bad behavior in their children’s lives. Survey findings alerted parents, encouraging engagement in the who, what, where, and when of their children’s lives. It demonstrated the potential harm created when parents dismiss or excuse their children’s high-risk behavior.

Drug and alcohol addiction only begin to define moral decay in rural America.²⁹ This research's scope does not provide space to discuss crime, divorce and family dysfunction,

²⁶ Rural culture has long treated alcohol addiction with social acceptance. They laughed at Otis, the Mayberry town drunk, checking himself into the jail to sleep off alcohol addiction.

²⁷ Laura de Haan and Tina Boljevac, “Alcohol Use among Rural Middle School Students: Adolescents, Parents, Teachers, and Community Leaders’ Perceptions,” *Journal of School Health* 79, no 2 (February 2009): 59.

²⁸ Laura de Haan and Tina Boljevac, “Alcohol Use among Rural Middle School Students: Adolescents, Parents, Teachers, and Community Leaders’ Perceptions,” 70. Additional findings alert parents to their essential role, Because early-onset is strongly related to later problems, this frequency and intensity of use in rural populations are troubling. The most common sources for obtaining alcohol were parents and friends, indicating that adolescents were not using commercial outlets but rather were procuring alcohol (whether with permission or not) from community residences. This suggests that efforts to reduce access to alcohol among early adolescents should focus on educating parents that their own homes are the most likely source for adolescents' access to alcohol.

Parents can be effective in reducing adolescent alcohol use in not only controlling access to alcohol but also providing a supportive relationship with their children, one that includes clear disciplinary standards.

²⁹ Many conservative Christians have argued about the role of the community in raising children. When Hillary Clinton quoted the African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child,” she received push-back from many in the church. One can argue that God tasked parents with child-rearing, not villages. However, current cultural

pornography, and myriad other issues. Even the local setting of this research witnesses cause and effect; drug and alcohol addictions often represent the root that produces the fruit of social and family dysfunction. While the church slept, the enemy sowed tares among the wheat in rural America (Matt. 13:24-30).

Isolation and Marginalization

The phrase, rural isolation sounds oxymoronic if speaking geographically; however, emotional isolation exacts a heavier human toll. If drug and alcohol contaminated the soul of rural America, isolation stifled her spirit. Rural residents expect physical isolation, but social, political, and spiritual isolation drains one's energy. Ruralites accept that specialized medicine may require a long drive, that shopping in a mall means a day trip, and fine dining means good food in a simple setting.

Main Street's drive with all the empty buildings creates nostalgia about the past and sadness concerning the present. Small town people lost the social life they once enjoyed in neighborhood gatherings.³⁰ These past icons stood for more than entertainment and leisure; they meant connection with the world. Previously, rural people enjoyed the same Saturday night pleasures as their urban counterparts.

The isolated feel belittled, as the brunt of the standup comedian's jokes. Griggs defined a word used to describe rural people,

Podunk became America's favorite humorous way of describing people who lived in small towns...backwoods hicks who had lost touch with the progress of the world. Eventually, this became such a popular way of thinking about small-town America that the word found a place in

conditions demand partnerships to break current trends. The church needs to assume her place at the table to contribute to the conversation.

³⁰ The closed movie theater, bowling alley, and skating rink bring painful reminders of lost enjoyable community engagement.

our dictionaries. ‘Podunk’ noun: a small, unimportant, and isolated town—Merriam-Webster Dictionary.³¹

No group tolerates mocking humor better than rural, but even they reach a tipping point where the comedy becomes hurtful. The man, woman, or teen living in small-town USA needs to know they matter, and the tiny dot on the map they call home matters; they are not Podunk—small, unimportant, and isolated.

Every four years, the voices of rural citizens count—but they don't feel heard. A large majority of rural people vote for the conservative values they embrace. A Pew Research Center team compiled a study highlighting differences in rural, suburban, and urban populations. Pew research findings reveal growing political gaps, “Americans in urban and rural communities have widely different views when it comes to social and political issues. From feelings about President Donald Trump to views on immigration and same-sex marriage, there are wide gaps between urban and rural adults.”³² These differences remain most evident in the moral issues of abortion, same-sex marriage, and transgender rights. Immigration, taxes, and government spending also reveal a divide.

Unheard voices often become either silent or louder; without validation or discussion, opinions become more entrenched in the marginalized. Rural conservatives see their values cast aside as irrelevant while being forced to accept the values of liberal urbanites. A county by county, color-coded presidential election map demonstrates this widespread trend. The rural conservative, living in a sea of red, who values the sanctity of life and traditional marriage,

³¹ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 16-17.

³² Kim Parker, Juliana Horowitz, Anna Brown, Richard Fry, D’Vera Cohn and Ruth Igielnik, “What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban, and Rural Communities,” Pew Research Center, (May 22, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/what-unites-and-divides-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/>, 29.

becomes an angry voice when city dwellers require their high school to allow transgender boys on their daughter's volleyball team.

Even liberal leaners recognize the political isolation of rural areas. Lisa Pruitt, Professor of Law at The University of California School of Law, wrote of political bias against rural women, "In the aftermath of the 2016 election, however, rural women have gone from being overlooked to being ridiculed and disdained. Rural women—like rural and white working-class folks more generally—have become downright toxic in my world, the world of progressive elites, and the realm of lefty chattering classes."³³ Though Pruitt addressed her comments to the 2016 Presidential Election, her statements coincide with rural people's perception of bias, isolation, and insignificance.

Many rural people have experienced a decline in their local church while witnessing large urban ministries thrive, creating further discouragement. They ask deep questions about the viability and significance of their local community church.³⁴ Daman diagnosed the rural church

³³Lisa R. Pruitt, PhD., "The Women Feminism Forgot: Rural and Working-Class White Women in the Era of Trump," *University of Toledo Law Review*, no. 537 (2018): 540. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3197273#. Pruitt, "The Women Feminism Forgot: Rural and Working-Class White Women in the Era of Trump," 551. Pruitt continues her appeal to the elite left to attempt to understand rural conservative anger; "When people are as angry as these populations are—angry and frustrated enough to vote for a candidate as profoundly problematic as Donald Trump—we might do more than roll our eyes back at them. We might ask why they are so angry. We might listen to them with as much empathy as we can muster in hopes of understanding how they—and we—got to this profoundly polarized place and time."

³⁴ In a scenario repeated often in small towns; John P. Rural rose early on Sunday morning and watched the latest mega-church production on television. Lights and special effects enhanced the enthusiastic worship of thousands. The young, charismatic pastor preached a compelling sermon to thousands in attendance, and John experienced simultaneous excitement and deflation. John took time to read an article from his favorite Christian magazine about revival in large high schools in faraway cities; once again, John rejoiced but felt empty. After drinking a final cup of coffee, John drove dutifully to his little country church for the eleven AM service. Looking around the sanctuary, John counted, 26, 27, 28; good crowd for a change, even the young couple came, Joe and Betty, only married 25 years.

John enjoyed the service, glad to see old friends; the pastor preached an excellent biblical message, yet John couldn't stop thinking about the service on television and the magazine article on the drive home. As he walked out, John noticed the congregation's picture in front of the church, the caption read; Easter Sunday 1959, 250 in attendance. John asked three questions in the short drive home; What happened? Where did everyone go? Does my little church matter anymore? John suffers from spiritual isolation, a feeling of spiritual insignificance, the result of inequitable comparisons.

condition as overlooked and marginalized, which accentuated the decline.³⁵ Two things help rural churches counter spiritual isolation. First, learning to contextualize their success by avoiding comparisons. Unrealistic comparisons invalidate the accomplishments and value of rural churches. Second, do not excuse ineffectiveness because of size. A rural church that maintains focus on God’s mission in their context will impact their town and remain too busy for comparisons.

Spiritual isolation grows out of the spiritually poor condition in rural America. Understanding the spiritual depletion of rural America, along with economic decline, depopulation, moral decay, and isolation, provides an accurate depiction of current reality. The rural church enjoys a rich history, marked by success and failure.³⁶ Church people tout the Christianity of early America; however, Finke and Stark stated, “On the eve of the Revolution, only about seventeen percent of Americans were churched.”³⁷ As the nation moved westward, the frontier seemed infertile soil for religious activity, and the mainline churches of New England largely ignored the west. Finke and Stark offered an unflattering description of the American frontier; “In frontier areas, most people are deficient in attachments, and hence very high rates of deviant behavior exist... As a result, frontiers will be short on churches, and long

³⁵ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 72. “In the Industrial Revolution, the definition of success shifted as well. In an agrarian culture, success is not measured by growth, but sustainability. But in an industrial society, success would be measured by the increase of assets, sales, and production. For the church, success then became measured by the bottom line of attendance, programs, and facilities, where growth indicated success and decline equated to spiritual stagnation. Consequently, the rural church not only faced decline, it became overlooked, and at times, even maligned. With the absence of the church providing a moral foundation in rural communities, it was not long before rural areas were not only declining but also facing significant social problems that needed serious attention.”

³⁶ Nadine Sandoz, “Spiritual Formation For The Call and Mobilization in Rural Communities” Paper for Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, June 2020, 44-45. Rural communities tend to use long-term time structures for goals rather than immediate gratification because of the seasonal and annual time structures of work. They do not expect payment every week or month but on fall crops and selling calves. Even with these long-term time structures they do expect to see growth through the seasons and from generation to generation.

³⁷ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 22.

on crime and vice, simply because they are frontiers.”³⁸ The west caught the Baptist and Methodist's attention, who took an aggressive approach in evangelizing the frontier. In 1776 the Baptist claimed 497 congregations, 15.4 percent of total American churches, the Methodist claimed only 65, two percent of the total. By 1850, Baptist grew to 9,563 congregations, 25.1 percent of the total, while the Methodist grew to 13,303 congregations and 34.9 percent of the total.³⁹ The Baptist and Methodist took a different approach, and they possessed a deep conviction that God calls believers to reach the lost with contextualized methodologies. To move the rural church from its current reality to new renewed life will require the same conviction.

Impact of Rural Decline in Kansas Assemblies of God

The declining population in rural communities impacted the church in several ways—loss of members caused by out-migration affected attendance, finances, and ministry leadership. Many factors contribute to a spiritually deficient rural America. Daman offered one perspective, “Rural America is rapidly becoming a spiritual wasteland, where churches are being closed because they are overlooked and cast aside by the larger church community as a place deemed too insignificant or unworthy of our attention.”⁴⁰ The research conducted for this paper aligns with Daman's opinion. The study narrowed the research to the Assemblies of God Kansas Network (AGK) as a microcosm of the rural American church.

³⁸ Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 35.

³⁹ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, “American Religion in 1776: A Statistical Portrait,” *Sociological Analysis*, Volume 49 (March 1988), 49.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259581152_American_Religion_in_1776_A_Statistical_Portrait.

⁴⁰ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 16.

The AGK granted unfettered access to files concerning closed church on February 10, 2021.⁴¹ The study limited its scope to churches closed between 1970 and 2020. The following referenced church data came from those files. Dr. Terry Yancey, AGK superintendent, provided an in-person interview at his office.⁴² Previous citations established rural depopulation on a national level.⁴³ Internet sources offered a reference for the county location of towns studied, corresponding county seat,⁴⁴ and population density.⁴⁵ The study gleaned information on high school location and enrollment from the Kansas State High School Athletic Association.⁴⁶ This information demonstrated the level of vulnerability in these towns for sustainable churches.

Over 50 years, from 1970-2020, the AGK closed 74 churches, with various reasons for closure. This study did not include urban churches or rural churches, which relaunched under more effective leadership, churches that entered into healthy mergers, and those who dissolved affiliation with the AGK over doctrine or policy, as this remained beyond the scope of this research. The research also removed from the study churches that did not match the rural definition utilized.

⁴¹ Independent Research, “Assemblies of God Kansas Network Churches Closed Records,” AGK Network Office, 3810 N. Walker Ave. Maize, KS. February 10, 2021.

⁴² In-Person Interview, Dr. Terry Yancey, Superintendent Assemblies of God Kansas Network, AGK Network Office, 3810 N. Walker Ave. Maize, KS. February 11, 2021. Subsequent statements attributed to Yancey came from that interview.

⁴³ “All Cities in Kansas,” Citi-Data.com, <https://www.city-data.com/city/Kansas.html>. This research derived 2019 population estimates, and the percentage of population change from citi-data.com.

⁴⁴ “List of Counties in Kansas,” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_counties_in_Kansas.

⁴⁵ “Kansas Population Density County Rank,” USA.com, <http://www.usa.com/rank/kansas-state--population-density--county-rank.htm>.

⁴⁶ “2020-2021 Classifications and Enrollment,” Kansas State High School Athletic Association, LLC, <https://www.kshsaa.org/Public/General/Classifications.cfm>.

AGK Church Closures

The study considered causes for church closings beyond population decline, eliminating twelve subjects that recorded a 2019 population under 500, assuming depopulation became the primary reason for closure; however, recognizing the existence of healthy churches in communities under 500. Alan Roxburgh challenged, “We need to revisit the stories of what got us to this place of unraveling, to see the future God is shaping.”⁴⁷ Looking backward for clarity empowers the church to move forward with conviction.

Studies Based on Population

This research applied a five-fold set of criteria to the remaining 21 towns, looking for the church’s objective cause to close. The requirements included the 2019 population, percentage of population change since 2000, the county's population density, the presence of a public high school in the town, and the enrollment of the high school—then divided the remaining 21 towns into three population-based groupings. Group one (figure 1.5) reported a population greater than 500 but less than 1,000. Group two (figure 1.6) reported a population greater than one thousand but less than two thousand. Group three (figure 1.7) reported a population of over 2,000. The 21 remaining communities provided an opportunity for successful review based on study results, with some marginal benchmarks to understand why these churches closed, considering reasons other than depopulation alone.

Fig. 1.5 Group One⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World* (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 2.

⁴⁸ As noted on page 17.

Name of Town	2019 Population	Population Change since 2000	Proximity to a High School	County	High School Enrollment	Population Density of County
Burden	526	-6.7	In Town (1A)	Cowley	96	32.0
Bucklin	715	N/A	In Town (1A)	Ford	80	31.5
Leon	733	+13.6	In Town (2A)	Butler	155	45.6
Ashland	755	-20	In town (1A)	Clark	54	2.2
Sharon Springs	760	-9	In Town (1A)	Wallace	69	1.7
Mankato	816	-16.4	In Town (1A)	Jewell	78	3.3
Dighton	902	28.5	In Town (1A)	Lane	62	2.3
Troy	960	8.9	In Town (1A)	Doniphan	87	19.8

Fig 1.6 Group Two

Name of Town	2019 Population	Population Change Since 2000	Proximity to a High School	County	High School Enrollment	Population Density of County
Chetopa	1018	-20.5	In Town (1A)	Labette	53	32.5
Washington	1060	-13.2	In Town (2A)	Washington	107	6.4
Saint John	1176	-10.8	In Town (1A)	Stafford	91	5.5
Saint Francis	1292	-13.7	In Town (1A)	Cheyenne	69	2.6
Elkhart	1758	-21.3	In Town (2A)	Morton	112	4.3
Wakeeney	1764	-8.3	In Town (2A)	Trego	107	3.3
Plainville	1804	-11.1	In Town (2A)	Rooks	121	5.8

Fig 1.6 Group Three

Name of Town	2019 Population	Population Change Since 2000	Proximity to a High School	County	High School Enrollment	Population Density of the County
Seneca	2075	-2.2	In Town (3A)	Nemaha	211	14.1
Neodesha	2262	-20.6	In Town (3A)	Wilson	184	16
Hoisington	2470	-17	In Town (3A)	Barton	219	30.6
Osage City	2809	-7.4	In Town (3A)	Osage	212	22.5
Clay Center	3983	-12.7	In Town (4A)	Clay	332	2.9
Abilene	6201	-5.2	In Town (4A)	Dickinson	474	23.1

Formulating an understanding of church health provides a better context for church closings and the development of church planting and revitalization strategies. Daman argued that rural and urban churches measure their value to the community in different ways. “The rural church focuses primarily upon developing and maintaining community and relationship, while the urban church is driven more by casting vision and carrying it out through various forms of mission.”⁴⁹ Daman defined a healthy rural church through its integral role in the community, which often provides services and social connections not associated with an urban church. Yancey stated a healthy church first knows how to get along; they genuinely love one another, they laugh and cry together.⁵⁰ Second, healthy churches exist for people who are not yet in God's kingdom. Third, they develop strategies with measurable results; they measure what matters and what they can control. Fourth, they think critically aided by honest self-assessment. Both sources offered valuable understanding that can help in our analysis.

Theories for Closures

Leaders must not dismiss the closing of these churches without asking “why.” We stipulated a group of churches closed due to population decline, which made church function unsustainable. Yancey commented on that group, “Everything has a life cycle, even churches.”⁵¹ Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird described church life cycles in terms more acceptable in urban than rural, “To many of us, the idea of churches forming, flourishing, and then going away, all

⁴⁹ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 36-37.

⁵⁰ Yancey, In-Person Interview.

⁵¹ Yancey, In-Person Interview.

somewhat quickly, seems to be a bad thing...In the near future they'll come, they'll go, and we'll all be aware that God used them.”⁵² Rural churches need to resist and embrace these statements.

The AGK research discovered, when urban churches closed, they more often merge or became absorbed into another church; in either case, options remained for those displaced. When rural churches closed, they just disbanded with no viable local options. The research found several factors that provided perspective about preventing premature life cycles and euthanizing small churches in small towns.

Systematic Dysfunction

Several causes of church closings merit discussion, but five stand out. Churches decline or fail to ever get traction because of systemic dysfunction in the church. Systemic dysfunction manifests itself in multiple ways beyond the scope of this paper. The value placed on long-standing traditions and personal preferences become elevated. It results in members being unwilling to embrace new methods, music, or décor that attract new and younger members. When a church becomes issues focus instead of Christ-focused, spiritual paralysis renders them ineffective.⁵³

Systemic dysfunction can have a face, an individual or family who have ruled through manipulation and intimidation for generations. This issue with deep spiritual roots presents the most significant challenge for pastoral leaders to remove. Correspondence in several closed church folders painted a picture of an embattled church. Fighting in churches indicates “me

⁵² Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches* (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2010), 191.

⁵³ Instead of being anti-abortion, teach on the sanctity of life; instead of being anti-LGBTQ, emphasize the superiority of God's design for human sexuality; instead of ridiculing the addict, offer the hope of freedom found in Christ.

focus”—personal preferences about things that have little, if anything, to do with the mission of God.

When a church adopts the characteristics of a private club, it ceases to have a kingdom impact. A healthy church engages the culture and conveys the love and hope of Jesus into the businesses, schools, neighborhoods, and families. Yancey referred to community engagement as “arrows pointing out, not arrows pointing in.”⁵⁴ Unhealthy churches often sincerely love each other and enjoy their church services, but they have stopped serving and no longer have a community presence.

Ineffective Leadership

The pastoral leadership’s importance became apparent in this research when comparing the rise and fall of attendance in our sample churches with a pastor tenures timeline. Yancey observed that ineffective leadership contributed to churches closing during his tenure.⁵⁵ Pastors shaped the churches’ passions, purposes, and visions; over time, a church becomes its pastor’s essence. In examining church failures, three types of ineffective pastoral leaders surfaced; the toxic pastor, the performance pastor, and the rental pastor.

Toxic Pastor

Toxic pastors infect congregations with the poison that defines them. They arrived on the scene to ‘run’ the church, and if “you do not like my way, you can choose the highway.” They often look for confrontation, viewed as a spiritual gift.⁵⁶ Toxic pastors blame others rather than

⁵⁴ Yancey, In-Person Interview. Unhealthy churches develop a ‘last one out turn the lights off’ mind-set.

⁵⁵ Yancey, In-Person Interview.

⁵⁶ Luke 6:26, Holy Bible (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2013). All Scripture references are from the NKJV unless otherwise specified. They love to quote, “Woe to you when all men speak well of you” as evidence of their spirituality (Luke 6:26).

accepting responsibility. Yancey described this type of pastor's impact on the congregation, "Toxic pastors infect churches with their toxicity until they are sick unto death."⁵⁷ The dysfunctional personal life often evident in marriage, children, and finances overflows into the church and community. Toxic leaders struggle to change due to a lack of self-assessment.

Performance Pastor

Unlike the toxic pastor, everyone loves the performance pastor. He loves living in the spotlight and craves adoration. Performance pastors produce quick results but often with shallow roots. He perceives ministry as a hobby; he loves doing church but can do it anywhere as long as he has a platform. He often extrapolates the 200 in attendance at a big event into an annual average. Later, members reminisce when the church 'ran 200,' making him a 'hard act' to follow. Performance pastors resemble the perpetual bachelor who loves to date and have a romantic life but won't commit to marriage. The performance pastor never proposes marriage; he remains free to flee at the first sign of conflict.

Rental Pastor

Rental pastors draw a paycheck for dutifully performing their ministerial responsibilities. They often work hard, study intently, and preach doctrinally sound messages. Jesus drew a comparison between a shepherd and a hireling.⁵⁸ The rental pastor occupies a mercenary ministry role, hired for a task, but without loyalties beyond the job.⁵⁹ Daman described the dilemma in finding influential rural pastors, "With the focus on urban ministries, rural churches were only able to attract those who lacked theological training, and the few who did come to rural churches

⁵⁷ Yancey, In-Person Interview.

⁵⁸ John 10:11-14. The shepherd who owns the sheep will lay down his life for the sheep, but the hireling, with no ownership, flees at the onset of trouble.

⁵⁹ The rental pastor regards preaching as a standalone calling. For them, preaching good sermons on Sunday fulfill their job description.

often lacked an understanding of rural society. Consequently, the rural church served as a place to either start one's ministry or roost as one coasted into retirement."⁶⁰ Both scenarios appeared in this research, young rental pastors taking the job until they receive a better offer making them short-term pastors. *The pastoral revolving door takes a heavy toll on rural churches.* Rural church members, devalued when young pastors come and go, question, "How long will this one stay?" The aging rental pastor who accepts a job to supplement social security may stay long-term, but with the aim of personal survival rather than missional engagement with the community. Both hinder the church from reaching those Jesus calls them to reach.

Scripture couples preaching with care for the flock and reaching the lost.⁶¹ Paul admonished the leaders in Ephesus, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His blood."⁶² Ineffective pastors failed to take responsibility, and in response, churches stop embracing pastors as one of them.

Denominational Structures

Two other factors cited by Yancey overlap one another.⁶³ First, the Assemblies of God's denominational structure hinders, the second, lack of aggressive intervention by network leaders in church decline. The AGK leadership drafted a policy for "compassionate church closure," requiring remedial steps for at-risk churches and leaders to prevent closures. However, the Assemblies of God's position on church autonomy stopped intervention until churches reached

⁶⁰ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 71.

⁶¹ Matt. 10:7-8 and 2 Tim. 4:1-5.

⁶² Acts 20:28.

⁶³ Yancey, In-Person Interview.

critical status. The research demonstrated that with earlier intervention, many of the 21 churches studied would operate today in a state of health. An urgent need exists for a national conversation to consider options for early intervention for at-risk churches in the Assemblies of God.

Rural America needs healthy churches. Griggs spoke of the trickle-down philosophy, the idea that by focusing on the cities, the gospel will trickle down to small towns; “Everyone deserves a chance to have a great church in his or her town, large or small.”⁶⁴ The dust bowl bullseye included five southwest Kansas counties. The land deemed unredeemable once again produces bountiful wheat crops, grazing for cattle and towns to raise families. This physical picture can become the reality of the churches in this area.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 78.

⁶⁵ Isaiah 32:15.

CHAPTER TWO:

THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR RURAL CHURCH PLANTING AND REVITALIZATION

Rural America bears the characteristics of a mission field the church would aspire to reach if these conditions occupied Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Viewed collectively as a nation, rural America boasts 33.7 million,⁶⁶ ranking it the 42nd largest globally.⁶⁷ Rural America represents an important but often overlooked mission field.

Planting churches in urban and suburban areas has proven an effective strategy to reach the spiritual harvest, but efforts in rural have lagged. Stetzer and Bird claimed, “The single most effective method for fulfilling the Great Commission that Jesus gave us is to plant new churches! Two thousand years of Christian history have proven that new churches grow faster and reach more people than established churches.”⁶⁸ Rural church planting must contend with three hindrances.

Hindrances to Rural Church Planting

Inaccurate information, negative perceptions, and a business model mind-set cause slow embracing of rural ministry. First, American Christians remain uninformed of the need in rural communities. Griggs exposed a false perception, “Another massive assumption has been made that the work of evangelism, especially in small towns, is finished.”⁶⁹ Small towns deal with the

⁶⁶ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 56.

⁶⁷ “Total Population by Country,” World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries>.

⁶⁸ Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches*, xi.

⁶⁹ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 60.

same problems that drove the church to the inner city to combat social, physical, and spiritual issues.

Second, promoting a negative perception of rural discourages young leaders from investing their lives. Martin Giese, president of Oak Hills Christian College, commented on this hindrance; “The American church has consistently celebrated the success of innovative ministries in large population centers while often overlooking or even denigrating innovative, successful ministries in smaller places. Too often, rural ministry is regarded as a context to which we are ‘consigned’ rather than called.”⁷⁰ Gifted men and women enjoy great success and extended tenures in small towns; their stories dismiss the false perception that rural offer few opportunities.

Third, church planters follow a business model, which discourages rural investment. An NAE article suggested consolidation as an answer to declining populations as used in many school districts.⁷¹ This proposal disregarded the character of rural people and demonstrated a lack of understanding of rural culture. People in small towns drive distances for medical care, restaurant choices, and entertainment, but cherish schools and churches, which reflect their culture and values. Before reaching a final verdict, the theological basis for rural church planting deserves consideration.

⁷⁰ Martin Giese, “The Thriving Rural Church,” *Evangelicals Magazine*, (Fall 2017), <https://www.nae.net/thriving-rural-church/>.

⁷¹ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 145. Daman shared an excerpt from an NAE article that illustrated this mind-set. It is not an entirely undesirable condition that thousands of our open country and village churches have been closed. There are declining populations in most rural communities. Improved transportation makes it possible for rural people to travel fifteen or more miles to church in less time than it takes many city people to go by bus or automobile to their churches. A general centralization of rural institutions in the larger villages and towns appears to be taking place today. It is only sensible to use the material things God has entrusted to us in the most efficient way. Instead of continuing to support small rural churches with missionary funds and part-time pastors who can provide only the meager services for their people, we will do well whenever it is possible to merge these small churches into larger units which can carry on the work of Christ in a most effective and less costly way.”

Theological Considerations for Rural Church Planting

The theology of church planting appears incontrovertible until rural enters the discussion. Few would debate the need for more urban churches, yet few understand the need for more and healthier rural churches. Daman observed, “For many rural communities, the health and well-being of the community are intimately connected to the health and well-being of the local church so that when the church declines, rural communities often struggle to survive as well.”⁷² Healthy rural churches contribute beyond spiritual matters; they contribute to the social health of a community. Daman implied that the presence of a healthy church in a rural community could contribute to population stabilization.

Debating spiritual matters without considering the theological perspective dismisses the reflection concerning God’s plans and mission. Bob Vajko insisted an inseparable bond exists between church planting and the mission of God, saying, “Or does a more careful exegesis of what evangelism and church planting mean lead to a clearer analysis of the wedding of the mission of God and church planting that is so needed as we continue into the 21st century?”⁷³ The scriptural support for general church planting provides equal theological relevance for planting churches in rural areas.

Theological reflections reveal the nature and character of God, which the scriptures express. Knowing the heart of God fosters a better understanding of the mission of God. Christopher Wright said, “If YHWH alone is the one true living God who made Himself known in Israel and who wills to be known to the ends of the earth, then our mission can contemplate no

⁷² Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 136.

⁷³ Bob Vajko, “Church Planting in the 21st Century,” Occasional Bulletin (Volume 25 No 2), 3. www.emsweb.org.

lesser goal.”⁷⁴ Drost added that God initiated this mission through sending His Son, “The Gospel of John strikingly demonstrates God as a missionary God who initiated reaching His creation by sending His Son in the flesh to live among people so they could see and understand Him.”⁷⁵ We cannot measure mission fulfillment on business models or cultural perception but on God’s desire to be known by all mankind. A theological examination provides four strong examples to support rural church planting.

The Inclusive Scope of the Mission of God.

God chose Israel from the nations to be His special people,⁷⁶ yet at the core of that call lay a promise to bless all the families of the earth.⁷⁷ God expressed His desire, from the beginning, for all mankind to know Him. God's inclusiveness provides a clear mandate to the church to preach the gospel to all the world.⁷⁸ Gordon Fee confirms this urgency, “Here is Paul’s obvious concern. He wants them not to be anxious about him, because his circumstances, rather than being a “*hindrance*” to the gospel, as they might well believe, have in fact led to its *advance*.”⁷⁹ Miller noted, “In Samaria, the church began its transition from a localized Jewish sect in the worldwide omni-cultural missionary institution Jesus intended it to be.”⁸⁰ Richard Hibbert confirmed church planting fostered that expansion, “There seems to be adequate

⁷⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 71.

⁷⁵ Paul Ernest Drost, “Church Planting: A Strategic Method for Increasing Missional Effectiveness in the Assemblies of God,” *Assemblies of God Theological Seminary*, 2015, 47.

⁷⁶ Deuteronomy 7:6.

⁷⁷ Genesis 12:1-3.

⁷⁸ Mark 16:15,.

⁷⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 111.

⁸⁰ Denzil R. Miller, *The Spirit of God in Mission* (Springfield, MO: PneumaLife Publications, 2013). 103.

evidence that the planting of indigenous churches has been a general characteristic of missions since the apostolic age.”⁸¹ The church engages that mandate in multiple facets by sending missionaries to foreign lands, testimony to those near us, reaching out to international students on a university campus, and planting churches in the inner city, small towns, or rural areas.

The New Testament explicitly declares the inclusive nature of God. Consider the inclusive language used in familiar passages; “For God so loved the *world*,” “make disciples of *all the nations*,” and “not willing that *any* should perish but that *all* should come to repentance.”⁸² It seems curious to leave rural out of the mandate or expect to reach rural through indirect means. Yancey’s often repeated statement reminds believers of the mission, “to make Kansas the *easiest* place in the world for people to *experience* the *presence* and *forgiveness* of Jesus.”⁸³ He expressed that with so much of Kansas being rural, accomplishing that aim must include rural.

Universalists pervert God’s inclusive nature by denying the need to hear the gospel and believe. The evangelical church scoffs at that teaching, but perhaps the praxis functions in agreement with it when selecting where to apply the mandate from God. Jeff Clark exposed an imbalanced focus on urban in current literature, “Most books published in recent years concerning ministry in North America have been written from a suburban perspective by pastors of large and prestigious churches.”⁸⁴ Paul balanced the inclusiveness of God with the responsibility to the church when he declared to the Athenians, “Truly, these times of ignorance

⁸¹ Richard Yates Hibbert, “The Place of Church Planting in Mission: Towards a Theological Framework,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, January 2009, 321.

⁸² John 3:16, Matthew 28:19, and 2 Peter 3:9. Italics added for emphasis

⁸³ Yancey, In-Person Interview. Italicized for emphasis.

⁸⁴ Jeff Clark, “Rural Theology: Biblical Case for Rural Ministry and Rural Church Planting.” *Rural Matters Institute*, 2. <https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/rural-theology-biblical-case-for-rural-church-planting-ministry/>, accessed, March 7, 2021.

God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent.”⁸⁵ All men everywhere include rural.

Lessons from the Life and Ministry of Jesus

This section examines ways Jesus valued rural people: the influences that shaped His life, His life's activity, and the lives He shaped by His influence; reviewing Jesus' birth, childhood, ministry, and His call to the disciples demonstrates Jesus' view of rural people.

Rural Birth and Childhood

The early forces of Jesus' life bore distinct rural characteristics. The world knows what happened in Bethlehem, but Micah prophesied the event identifying the town as;

Little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me
The One to be Ruler in Israel,
Whose going forth are from of old,
From everlasting.⁸⁶

Jesus did not live long in Bethlehem due to Herod's threat on His life, yet His birth in a small town stable speaks of rural value.

Scholars can only guess the age of Jesus when His family returned from Egypt to Nazareth, but it has wide acceptance as His boyhood home. Growing up in a small town in a tradesman's house gives evidence of Jesus' rural roots. General Dwight Eisenhower returned to his childhood home, the small town of Abilene, Kansas, to be honored just a year after the D-Day invasion, "I come here, first, to thank you, to say the proudest thing I can claim is that I am

⁸⁵ Acts 17:30.

⁸⁶ Micah 5:2.

from Abilene.”⁸⁷ Nazareth, not mentioned in the Old Testament, gained recognition through association as the boyhood home of Jesus.

Located off the trade routes connecting larger cities, Nazareth claimed little importance.

Adam Hamilton said,

Nazareth is much more widely known today than it ever was in Jesus’ day. It is not among the sixty-three villages of Galilee mentioned in the Hebrew Talmud or the forty-five mentioned by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, who knew the area well. This was an insignificant little town. Its population is estimated to have been between one hundred and four hundred people.⁸⁸

Yet, Jesus identified with this small town, and by that, with all considered outcasts because of where they lived, including modern rural America.

Fellow citizens looked down on Nazareth. Nathaniel expressed a low opinion of Nazareth when responding to Phillip’s invitation to meet Jesus; “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”⁸⁹ Nazareth committed no high crimes or misdemeanors; people regarded it insignificant, perhaps due to its small size and isolated location.

Jesus Ministry Years

Not only did Jesus hail from a small rural town, much of His ministry included a rural focus. Griggs emphasized Jesus continuing rural context, “But 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

⁸⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Homecoming Speech, National Parks Service, accessed date March 1, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/ddem/learn/historyculture/ddeminscriptions.htm>.

⁸⁸ Adam Hamilton, “Why Nazareth?” *Ministry Matters*, accessed date, March 1, 2021, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/1469/why-nazareth>.

⁸⁹ John 1:46. We assume Nathaniel scoffed at the suggestion that the Messiah could come from such a little place. Imagine introducing Jesus to Americans as “Jesus the Appalachian” or “Jesus of Pine Ridge Reservation.”

everywhere.”⁹⁰ Jesus rejected the pull of popularity and elite status. Mark recorded, “When they found Him, they said to Him, ‘Everyone is looking for You.’ But He said to them, ‘Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also because for this purpose I have come forth.’”⁹¹ His popularity placed Him in demand in the most important cities, but He refused to bypass the overlooked places.

Many critical moments in Jesus’ ministry occurred in rural or countryside settings. He preached the Sermon on the Mount, fed the multitude, delivered the demoniac, raised Lazarus and the widow’s son to life in the countryside or small towns and villages.⁹² He declared, “I am the living water,” “I am the resurrection and the life,” and “I am the bread of life” in rural settings.⁹³ Griggs noted, “Jesus only had three years of earthly ministry before the cross. That’s not a long time. In that incredibly short time span, Jesus chose to spend at least some of His precious time ministering into small towns.”⁹⁴ Clark contended, “Jesus spent the preponderance of His ministry bypassing the large urban areas that were the center of religion and focused on the rural areas of Israel.”⁹⁵ Jesus did not avoid cities because he preferred rural people, which would be out of character for the world’s Savior. Jesus avoided Jerusalem for His safety until His time had come, not because He loved the souls of Jerusalemites or other historic great cities in Israel any less.⁹⁶ Jesus demonstrated care for people in urban and rural settings, and He gave His all whether to one by a well, twelve along the seashore, or thousands on a hillside.

⁹⁰ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 44.

⁹¹ Mark 1:37-38.

⁹² Matthew 5-7, John 6, Mark 5, John 11, and Luke 7.

⁹³ John 4, John 11, and John 6.

⁹⁴ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 48.

⁹⁵ Clark, “Rural Theology: Biblical Case for Rural Ministry and Rural Church Planting.” 13.

⁹⁶ John 7:6.

The Call and Ministry of the Disciples

Jesus preached in small towns and villages, and He also commissioned His disciples to do so. He instructed the twelve before sending them, “Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there till you go out.”⁹⁷ Other translations use the words towns and villages.⁹⁸ Griggs commented on word translations, saying, “Luke uses two Greek words in these passages, ‘polis’ which meant a city or town, and ‘komas’ which meant villages. What are the differences in these two destinations? A city was a town of greater or lesser size, with walls. A village was a country town, usually without walls.”⁹⁹ This commentary provides context for the places Jesus and His disciples ministered.

Jesus also sent His disciples into rural areas to minister. Clark confirmed, “On twenty-six occasions, Jesus ministered or sent the disciples into villages to minister. His focus on village ministry was greater than on any other people group in the four Gospels.”¹⁰⁰ Jesus also called many of His disciples from rural areas, including fishermen from tiny fishing villages. Jesus illustrated church planting to four future disciples at their calling.¹⁰¹ He provided Peter, who had fished all night without success, a miracle catch of fish; with Peter’s boat sinking from the load, they summoned their partners to help. In rural areas and urban centers, launching more boats, planting more churches, meeting the needs, and “from now on, you will catch men” apply today!

⁹⁷ Matthew 10:11.

⁹⁸ Matthew 10:11, New International Version (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984).

⁹⁹ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 47.

¹⁰⁰ Clark, *Rural Theology: “Biblical Case for Rural Ministry and Rural Church Planting.”* 14.

¹⁰¹ Luke 5:1-11.

Patterns in Acts

Applying patterns in Acts to contemporary church planting requires a basic understanding of the author's intent. Luke stated his purpose in the first two verses. "The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up after He, through the Holy Spirit, had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen."¹⁰² Luke drew three points in his opening statement. First, Jesus began a pattern of teaching and ministry; second, He did not complete that pattern of teaching and ministry; and third, He entrusted the church with continuing that pattern through the power of the Spirit.

Acts inferred believers, empowered by the same Holy Spirit as Jesus, declare and demonstrate the same message and miracles as Jesus, with no geographical limitation and no expiration date.¹⁰³ Acts presented a historical account of the first-generation church, which provided a pattern for all future generations. Denzil Miller explained this dual-purpose, saying;

The events of Pentecost...are both programmatic and paradigmatic. To be programmatic, a narrative must point forward to the unfolding events of the narrative. Thus, when we say that the events of Pentecost are programmatic, we mean that those events establish a significant pattern that will be repeated throughout the work. To be paradigmatic, an episode must have normative features which apply to all of Gods' people at all times and in all cultures. Therefore, when we speak of the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost as being paradigmatic, we mean that we can expect the Holy Spirit to be poured out today in the same way, and with the same general outcomes, as on the Day of Pentecost, as Jesus first indicated in Acts 1:8.¹⁰⁴

Ray Anderson agreed and emphasized the need for the Holy Spirit's power,

While the disciples and early believers were followers of Jesus and witnesses to His resurrection, they were powerless until the Spirit came on them at Pentecost. Incarnation without baptism in

¹⁰² Acts 1:1-2.

¹⁰³ Acts 1:8 and 2:38-39.

¹⁰⁴ Denzil R. Miller, *Empowered for Global Mission* (Springfield, MO: PneumaLife Publications, 2013),

the Spirit would leave Jesus powerless, even though He was the Son of God. Resurrection without Pentecost would leave believers powerless even though through faith they had become children of God.¹⁰⁵

The Holy Spirit's empowerment, evident in the Acts church, leads to exponential growth in people and geographical spread.

The Holy Spirit's initial outpouring occurred in Jerusalem, where the church's early recorded activity remained confined. Persecution against believers hastened the spread of the gospel to other regions; "those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the gospel."¹⁰⁶ This passage implied they preached in cities, small towns, villages, and the countryside. Acts 8:25 stated that they "preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans."¹⁰⁷ Prompted by the Holy Spirit, the Acts church, during its formative period, followed the pattern of Jesus preaching in the next towns and villages.

Luke never recorded church planting activity before the Pauline period; however, he provided strong evidence of earlier churches planted. After Saul of Tarsus' salvation, Luke reported, "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied."¹⁰⁸ Three regions outside of Jerusalem boasted churches in their towns and villages, proof that the church had already become active in church planting.

Most focus on church planting in Acts evolves into Paul's passion for the cities. One cannot deny the specific mention of cities in Paul's journeys, but his ministry's rural impact remains evident. Two references mention activity in rural areas, "and the word of the Lord was

¹⁰⁵ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 43.

¹⁰⁶ Acts 8:4.

¹⁰⁷ Acts 8:25.

¹⁰⁸ Acts 9:31.

being spread throughout *all the region*¹⁰⁹ and “and to the *surrounding region*. And they were preaching the gospel there.”¹¹⁰ Paul’s church planting activity reached its Zenith at Ephesus; for two years, he taught in the School of Tyrannus, which resulted in “all who dwelt in Asia heard the word.”¹¹¹ Paul’s Ephesus influence led to the planting of churches in vital Asian cities. One can assume that Paul’s influence produced many unnamed churches in small towns and villages, making it possible for its expanse in Asia.

A well-known story from the life of Jesus provides missional insight into the current church. Jesus engaged a woman in conversation based on a shared need for water to quench thirst; the conversation led to the revelation of Jesus as the living water.¹¹² The woman returned to her nearby village to invite the people to see Jesus. As the villagers approached, Jesus said to his disciples, “lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest.”¹¹³ This event unfolded at a water-well outside a rural Samaritan village; there remains a harvest in rural America if the church can lift her eyes and look at the white fields.

The harvest of souls in rural areas necessitates planting healthy churches, which depends on workers obeying the rural call. Anderson expressed the vital role of local churches in a postmodern age, “We offer a living community—the church. The distrust of reason means that truth must be experienced to be believed, and it is in the church that the truth of the gospel is to

¹⁰⁹ Acts 13:49. Italics added for emphasis.

¹¹⁰ Acts 14:6-7. Italics added for emphasis.

¹¹¹ Acts 19:10. See Revelation 2-3 churches to discover some of the places that they probably planted.

¹¹² Vickie Alexander, *Africa Oasis Project Website*, <https://www.africaoasisproject.com/about>. Mark and Vickie Alexander serve as Assemblies of God World missionaries to Africa working with Africa Oasis Water Project, a ministry that provides safe drinking water sources to villages in western and central Africa. Concerning the work they do in Africa, Vickie said, “Christians, those following tribal religions, and those of other religious groups all need clean water. We believe that clean water will change their today, and Jesus, the Water of Life, will change their eternity. We are committed to this type of holistic approach to sharing the compassion of Christ.”

¹¹³ John 4:35.

be lived out.”¹¹⁴ Hibbert added, “The church is, then, not only an instrument of God’s purposes, but an end in itself, and even the central goal of what God in Christ is doing in the world. The church is at the heart of God’s purposes and Christ’s saving work, and is therefore also at the heart of the mission of God.”¹¹⁵ However, the pace of rural church planting remains limited by the lack of leaders responding to the call.

When confronted with a harvest that exceeded the labor force, He admonished His disciples to pray that the Lord of the harvest would *send* more laborers.¹¹⁶ Nadine Sandoz detailed the challenge of closing churches in America that changes the culture of the community.¹¹⁷ Without the investment of human resources obediently responding to God’s call to rural, the current decline and church closing trend will continue. However, hopeful signs of momentum change are occurring.

¹¹⁴ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 20.

¹¹⁵ Hibbert, “The Place of Church Planting: Towards a Theological Framework,” 324.

¹¹⁶ Matthew 9:37-38; Luke 10:2.

¹¹⁷ Nadine Sandoz, “Theology of the Call: Paper from Acts 26:16-20, (paper for Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, Springfield, MO) 2. “The need for leaders entering pastoral ministry has increased over the past several decades. The decreasing number of young pastors contributed to delays in rural churches filling pastoral vacancies, furthering church decline. Director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Scott Thumma stated that in the next 20 years half or more of the congregations in the United States may close. Glenn Daman described the crisis, “Rural America is rapidly becoming a spiritual wasteland where churches are being closed because they are overlooked and cast aside by the larger church community as a place deemed too insignificant or unworthy of our attention.” Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist ordained ministers decreased, while increasing the number of retired or inactive ministers, creating a ministry leadership dearth. During the previous thirty years the Assemblies of God USA (AG) followed a similar trend: the number of young ministers declined, the credentialed ministers’ average age increased, students in theological training decreased, and a rural church pastoral shortage spread across the nation. Steve Schaible, AG South Dakota District Superintendent, observed the challenge in his district, “Half of the pastors may retire in the next three to five years.” When churches decline or close the community gospel witness decreases.”

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS FOR CHANGE

The research provided evidence of rural America changes that create a challenging environment for the church to thrive and fulfill the biblical mandate of evangelizing rural areas. God created humanity with an ability unique to creation, the ability to adapt. People live in climates and conditions unsuitable for human survival. Still, through the gift of adaptability, they design homes, climate control systems, and clothing suitable for climate extremes. God commanded, “fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air; and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”¹¹⁸ When mankind stops adapting, they limit their domain.

The story of Lake Taneycomo in southern Missouri provided lessons for the church in adapting to change.¹¹⁹ Conservationist willingness to adapt preserved the lake's purpose; instead of catching bass and catfish, anglers now catch trophy trout. The waters of rural America will no longer support unfruitful methodologies for developing strong churches, but a willingness to adapt promises new life to rural ministry.

¹¹⁸ Genesis 1:28, Holy Bible.

¹¹⁹ Mike Kruse, “The Saga of Lake Taneycomo,” *Missouri Conservationist Magazine* (April 2001), Missouri Department of Conservation, <https://mdc.mo.gov/conmag/2001/04/saga-lake-taneycomo>. Mike Kruse detail that history: “For the first 38 years of Lake Taneycomo's existence, native sport fish of the White River basin sustained a popular fishery that helped create one of Missouri's first tourist areas on the shores of Rockaway Beach. A new chapter began in 1958 when Table Rock Dam was built immediately upstream. Until then, Taneycomo was basically just a wide spot in the slow, meandering White River. After Table Rock Dam was built, Lake Taneycomo was fed by water that came from 160 feet below the surface of Table Rock Lake. The water was cold year-round and was unsuitable for most of the White River's warm-water fish. Their populations declined, as did the popular fishery they supported.

A rainbow often follows a storm, offering hope and promise for the future. In this case, hope came in the form of rainbow trout! Native to the streams of the west coast, rainbow trout were well suited to the chilly waters that now filled Lake Taneycomo.

Rural Church Revitalization

Church planting draws ministry investors' attention; contrariwise, few wish to discuss revitalization; however, church revitalization plays an essential role in restoring spiritual vitality to rural communities. Stetzer and Dodson appealed to the need for church revitalization, "According to *Leadership Journal*, 340,000 churches are in need of revitalization."¹²⁰ Without reversing this trend many, already underserved, American small towns will lose their spiritual lifeline as churches close. Appendix three contains further discussion of church revitalization.

Case Studies

Those who pursue rural ministry face a dizzying array of complexities and challenges that cause some to question the wisdom of investing in rural ventures. While declining population, growing family and social dysfunction, and changing demographics seem daunting, there is great kingdom reward in rural church planting and revitalization for those willing to take the risk. Ryan and Rachel Webster and Randy and Lisa Parr took the chance, and their stories of success will inspire others.

Larned Assembly of God

Ryan Webster, at age 30, became lead pastor at Larned Assembly of God after three and a half years as the youth pastor in his home church. Wester, with his wife Rachel, assumed his role in 2003; the church launched in 1937. The church had 30 people, low finances, and an indifferent if not negative reputation in the community. Larned, a small rural town, boasts a 2019

¹²⁰ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 18.

population of 3671, down 13.1 percent since 2000, and is located over 100 miles from the nearest city, over 50,000.¹²¹

Webster listed three early challenges. First, the church's inward focus offered little engagement in the community beyond fundraisers, with more emphasis on taking than giving. Second, as a congregationally led church rather than pastor-led, every decision required "getting permission." Third, a congregational focus rather than community focus delayed his desire to pastor the community. He implemented one lesson early; to devote 80 percent of his time to the emerging church and 20 percent to the established church.

A key turning point came when, in the absence of another pastor, the family of a prominent man in town asked him to officiate the funeral. Webster said this event opened the door to become a community pastor versus a congregational pastor. Another critical but challenging point came when half the congregation left the church over six months, leaving him primarily new families. He spoke of experiencing a fearful and conflicted time due to his love for the people leaving. But this departure, which he described as an enema, removed hindrances of the vision moving forward.

Under Webster's leading, the church's attendance has reached 200, mission giving has increased from \$5,000 annually to \$100,000, and every year the church pays for 100 kids from the community to attend church camps. Webster noted one sign of a healthy church as the number of multi-generational families attending the church, evidence of reaching all age groups. Ryan said he would tell anyone considering church revitalization, "Don't—unless you are

¹²¹ City Data, Accessed date, March 1, 2021 <http://www.city-data.com>.

willing to commit to at least seven years.” The Websters prove that rural church revitalization is possible with the right approach, determination, and faith in God.¹²²

The Generations Church

The Assemblies of God had a church in Ness City, Kansas, since 1934, but the church declined to four members and closed in October 2018. The 2019 population of Ness City also fell to 1303, down 15.1 percent since 2000, located 150 miles northwest of Wichita, the nearest city over 50,000.¹²³ On September 19, 2019, Randy and Lisa Parr launched The Generations Church in a remodeled downtown storefront.¹²⁴ The Generations Church bore a new church plant's marks, though technically a relaunch, inheriting four faithful ladies, a pulpit, two pews, and forty metal chairs from the old church. After two years of Bible College, the Parrs served as missionary associates in Mexico for six years and eight years at Central Kansas Dream Center, where Lisa became the assistant director.

Though the church launched in September, their active presence in the community began in January, holding in-home Bible studies, participating in community events, making ‘muffin drops’ to local businesses, and recruiting and training a launch team. Parrs attended a Church Multiplication Network (CMN) launch conference, researched Ness City demographics and culture, and learned church systems at Yancey's urging.

They assembled a team of 18, seven core members, and eleven from a partnering church 60 miles east before launch day. The church obtained traction quickly even though they

¹²² Ryan Webster, Telephone interview by author, March 1, 2021.

¹²³ [City Data](#).

¹²⁴ Before responding to the call to ministry in 2004, Parrs owned a successful general contractors business, and both stayed actively involved in a home church.

encountered community suspicion. Even amidst the distrust they have achieved ‘geographic saturation’ with team members securing strategic jobs in county government, schools, and professional offices, other team members have started businesses. Along with team visibility, they have multiple small groups meeting at various community locations.

Sunday morning attendance reached over 60, but that just begins to tell the story. The team has become instrumental in launching a Fellowship of Christian Athletes chapter at the local high school; youth ministry started recently with 12-15 students participating weekly. Wednesday night, small group attendance often tops Sunday morning. The church reaches well over 100 each week through its various ministries. The Parrs attribute much of their success to their home church's strategic partnerships, the AGK Network, CMN, and the team's synergy.

Urging others to consider rural church planting, the Parrs stated several reasons for young couples’ rural ministry appeal. The small town provides an excellent environment to raise a family, quality schools with smaller class sizes, business, and bi-vocational opportunities. In small towns, pastors can have more significant influence and opportunities to become known to the community. They emphasized access to city officials, school officials, and business leaders not available in large cities. Their final word was, “people in rural towns need Jesus.”¹²⁵ The Parrs pray their story will inspire another generation to consider rural church planting.

Relevant Ministry in a Changing Rural Culture

The first building block for ministry in rural America is to embrace the rural culture. Understanding rural culture requires living the rural culture; while studies may induce rural generalizations, they only begin to bring local cultures into focus. The diversity in rural America

¹²⁵ Rand and Lisa Parr, Telephone interview by author, March 3, 2021.

requires more localized understanding; as highlighted by Olugbenga Ajilore and Zoe Willingham, “Rural America is not homogenous and should not be discussed or treated as such. In order to properly address the issues facing rural communities across the country, advocates and policymakers must understand the diverse nature of rural communities and the various systemic challenges they face.”¹²⁶ All ministry occurs within a cultural context, and a leader’s adaptability will affect their success. Sherwood Lingenfelter said, “All Christian leaders, regardless of their cultural background, carry their personal histories and cultural biases with them wherever they serve.”¹²⁷ A pastor without a personal rural context can expect conflict if they disdain the culture of the people they serve. David Livermore wrote about the battle of cultural differences, “The most common problems in ministry across different cultural contexts are not technical or administrative. The biggest challenges lie in miscommunication, misunderstanding, personality conflicts, poor leadership, and bad teamwork. Cultural intelligence is demonstrated through our social interactions in cross-cultural relationships.”¹²⁸ The trust developed through cultural understanding establishes a foundation for a long, fruitful ministry. Rural ministers should consider four broad foundational principles to build more effectively.

Principle 1: Forget Where You Are From and Remember Where You Are!

Often the people who live in small towns have lived there all their lives; they give hometown its meaning. Pew research conducted two studies that show context to who lives in

¹²⁶ Olugbenga Ajilore and Zoe Willingham, “Redefining Rural America,” *Center for American Progress*, July 17, 2019, accessed March 8, 2021.
<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2019/07/17/471877/redefining-rural-america/>.

¹²⁷ Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

¹²⁸ David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 240.

rural towns. A 2008 survey on American mobility revealed that 48 percent of rural residents have never lived outside their hometown, compared to 35 percent urban. Only 26 percent of rural residents indicated plans to move away in the next five years, compared to 45 percent of urban residents.¹²⁹ A second study conducted in 2018 showed that 63 percent of rural residents have lived in the community for eleven or more years, compared to 45 percent of urban dwellers. Only 25 percent residing in rural would move if given a chance, but 37 percent of urbanites said they would move.¹³⁰ The town's core has lived their life in that community; their occupation and community remain essential.

Leaders must take time to know the local community and adapt to the culture. Church planters may find it helpful to live and build relationships in a rural community before launching. Livermore said, "Most of us are more comfortable with people like ourselves. But seeking out and loving people of differences is a far greater challenge. Therefore, learning how to reach across the chasm of cultural difference with love and respect is becoming an essential competency for today's ministry leader."¹³¹ Treat locals as the expert and assume the student's role; ask the farmer about his crops, the teacher about their class, and the tradesman about his trade. By learning, a pastor can communicate and preach in terms relevant to the community.

The pastor who adapts will find it easier to engage and lead a community, and the congregation will find it easier to embrace and follow that pastor. Adapting requires but also

¹²⁹ Paul Taylor, Rich Morin, D'Vera Cohn, and Wendy Wang, "Who Moves? Who Stays? Where's Home?" *Pew Research Center*, 6, 23. <https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2011/04/American-Mobility-Report-updated-12-29-08.pdf>.

¹³⁰ Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Anna Brown, Richard Fry, D'Vera Cohn, and Ruth Igielnik, "What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban, and Rural Communities," *Pew Research Center*, 7. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/05/22/what-unites-and-divides-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/>.

¹³¹ Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence*, 11.

demonstrates commitment. Dress like the people dress without giving the appearance of being in costume. Drink coffee with the locals at Joe's Café without lamenting the absence of a Starbucks. Griggs noted, "A lot of your influence comes down to you being a good or bad local."¹³² Cheer for the local sports teams, shop at local stores and eat at local restaurants. Saint Patrick served the people of Ireland for 28 years; Thomas Cahill observed, "Patrick has become an Irishman."¹³³ Achieving the status of becoming one of them positions the pastor to lead into a better future.

Principle 2: Embrace the Call to Rural!

The call of God may come in many ways, sometimes dramatic like Moses' burning bush, but more often, it comes as a quiet but unmistakable nudging of the Holy Spirit. Reggie McNeal provided a useful definition for the call of God, "The call we are discussing as a heart-shaping subplot in the leader's story is the specialized and specific setting aside by God to some special lifelong task in His kingdom."¹³⁴ A career choice does not equate the call of God; it begins with relinquishing the controls of our life.¹³⁵ God's call manifests supernaturally and therefore seems foolish to a secular mind, a view even infiltrating the church. To reduce God's call to a professional choice or career path equals neutering of the Holy Spirit, removing His force and effectiveness from the church. Gary Tyra emphasized a Pentecostal expression of God's call,

Finally, because of their embrace of the idea that they have been divinely and uniquely commissioned to proclaim the full gospel to lost and hurting people around the world, Pentecostal-charismatic believers have tended to manifest a remarkable willingness to do

¹³² Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 143-144.

¹³³ George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 55.

¹³⁴ Reggie McNeal, *Work of Heart* (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2011), 78.

¹³⁵ Bill Hull, *Choose the Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 50. Bill Hull, speaking of a more generalized call said, "Self-denial's only righteous role is to eliminate any obstacle that blocks our saying yes to God."

this very thing despite the cost and inconvenience such ministry involvement has brought their way.¹³⁶

Does the lack of laborers called into rural ministry indicate the God is not calling, that somehow God has written off rural? John Mott provided a definitive answer,

It is inconceivable that God Himself has neglected to do His part in actually calling enough men [and women] to accomplish His will—and surely it is His will that the Church of Christ be ably led. Do not overlook or minimize God’s part in calling... Only God can effectually call men [and women] into the service. It is the sovereign work of His Spirit to separate men [and women] unto the work thereunto He has called them. ...thus multiply the number of channels through which the Lord of the harvest actually communicates His wishes, His impulses, His calls to the souls of men [and women].¹³⁷

Healthy churches create an environment for God to call and provides an opportunity for response to the call. Once a person receives the call, the local church and the broader church play a vital role in the formation of the call. An atmosphere that holds all callings in high esteem liberates those called to pursue any direction God leads.

Human emotions may affect the response to a divine call. Consider those who heard God's missionary calling during a moving mission's service or the youth called into youth ministry because a youth pastor made a profound impact on their life. Influential people began to raise awareness of the inner city in the 1980s; suddenly, young people felt a call to plant churches and minister to the inner city's hurting. The Assemblies of God presented appeals for the inner city at national denominational meetings, urban initiatives launched, and with the emphasis, the number called to the inner city increased. The emotional appeal influenced the sense of God's call to the inner city.

¹³⁶ Gary Tyra, *The Holy Spirit in Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 2011.

¹³⁷ John Mott *The Future Leadership of the Church* Student (New York, NY: Department of Young Men's Christian Association 1908) 187-188.

Similarly, a negative perception of rural ministry may adversely influence those called to commit their lives to plant small-town churches. Clark described the demoralization directed toward the rural pastor,

Sadly, these rural pastors are summarily dismissed as people with small vision who are unwilling to take the risks necessary to lead their churches to experience dynamic growth. Many times, I have heard that ‘small churches are small for a reason.’ The implication in this quote is that small churches are small because of small minded pastors and small-minded church members. I have even heard them labeled as lazy, and all they have to do to grow their churches numerically is just work harder. Usually, these criticisms come from pastors in suburban areas where they are surrounded by thousands of people to invite to their churches.¹³⁸

Rural pastors do not receive a pass for ineffective ministry but measure effectiveness in a rural context. Griggs drew a difference in expectations for rural and urban outcomes. “Smaller context, by their very definition, are small and therefore do not benefit from the large contingency of people that might identify immediately with your vision for ministry... To reach the people of a small town, much work must be done to ensure people rightly understand who you are and what you are doing.”¹³⁹ The patience required for a rural harvest makes a calling essential; without the longevity that comes from a strong call, the implementation of a successful strategy will fall short.

Principle 3: Introduce Strategic Methodology

Some rural churches may have closed needlessly due to a lack of appropriate strategy; they simply reloaded the pulpit without a revitalization plan. Merriam-Webster defines strategy as “an adaptation or complex of adaptations (as of behavior, metabolism, or structure) that serves

¹³⁸ Jeff Clark, “Rural Theology: Biblical Case for Rural Church Planting & Ministry,” *Rural Matters Institute*, 2-3. <https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Rural-Theology.pdf>.

¹³⁹ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 113.

or appears to serve an important function in achieving evolutionary success.”¹⁴⁰ Predictive change occurs through enacting culturally relevant strategies and given time, produces positive outcomes. The word evolve implies organic change over time; making the right changes the wrong way remains counterproductive. In the hope of rebuilding from the rubble, a wrecking ball approach to change rarely works in a rural setting.

The church fears change, but this study indicates without it, a church will die, leaving another small town without spiritual influence. Fear often becomes rooted in sincere concern of violating biblical values, reducing the church to mere guardians of truth rather than fishers of men. Griggs warned the church about extreme stances on change, “Some church planters, in an effort to engage culture, have changed the wrong things, the close handed issues. Things like inerrancy of scripture, for example are closed handed. We don’t get the right to change those things...But a lot of things can change. And fewer things are closed-handed than we think.”¹⁴¹ Property rights determine what can be changed; we can only change what we own. Biblical truth and the mission belong to God, but He relinquished ownership of methodology to the church.

Strategies achieve evolutionary success by impacting the community culture. Even in tiny towns, churches carve a niche for themselves, leaving them blind to cultural reality. Helping congregants see the community's true nature through education and engagement often serves as a pastor's first strategic move. Anderson said, “We can also say that there are forms of ministry that purport to proclaim revealed truths of God and to indoctrinate disciples in those truths, but if they do not touch broken and alienated human lives with liberating and healing power, they are

¹⁴⁰ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/strategy?src=search-dict-box>. Evolution may provide an accurate portrayal of the needed change in dying churches

¹⁴¹ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 111.

not of God.” As the church encounters people in their current point of need, it increases the possibility of leading them to a changing relationship with Christ.

Principle 4: Recognize and Embrace Changing Demographics

Though it varies from town to town, the demography of rural America continues to change. Small towns in proximity to larger cities became bedroom communities with an influx of young families, evidenced through disproportionate school size to population. Leon, KS (figure 1.5) has a population of 733, but 155 high school students and a county population density of 45.6 per square mile; compared to Plainville, KS (figure 1.6), which has a population of 1804, but only 121 high school students in a population density of 5.8 per square mile. These figures demonstrate anecdotal evidence of a higher per capita number of young families in Leon than in Plainville and alter ministry strategy.

Several rural towns supported by labor-driven industries became a minority, majority population. According to Holly Barcus and Laura Simmons, “the growth of non-white populations, both immigrant and native-born, is changing or restructuring the ethnic composition of the Great Plains.”¹⁴² The three cities that comprise southwest Kansas’ beef triangle, Garden City, Dodge City, and Liberal, have become majority-minority cities with white populations of only 38 percent, 31.9 percent, and 27.4 percent.¹⁴³ This shift in demographics creates challenges of language barriers and cultural distinctions for historically all-white churches, but attendant ministry opportunities deserve consideration.

¹⁴² Holly R. Barcus and Laura Simmons, “Ethnic Restructuring in Rural America: Migration and the Changing Faces of Rural Communities in the Great Plains,” *The Professional Geographer*, 65 (1), 130. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239803442_Ethnic_Restructuring_in_Rural_America_Migration_and_the_Changing_Faces_of_Rural_Communities_in_the_Great_Plains.

¹⁴³ <http://www.city-data.com>.

Ness City and Larned represent the tip of the rural iceberg. About 76% of the approximately 19,500 incorporated places in the U.S. had fewer than 5,000 people. Of those, almost 42% had fewer than 500 people.¹⁴⁴ Thousands of small towns remain underserved with the gospel; there is an urgency for turning the spiritual tide in rural America, but the financial and human resources needed will require changing hearts and minds about rural ministry value. In the final chapter, we will examine components that need to change, strengthening the case for rural church planting and ministry investment even in the face of decline.

¹⁴⁴ Amel Toukabri and Lauren Medina, “America: A Nation of Small Towns,” *The United States Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/05/america-a-nation-of-small-towns.html#:~:text=About%2076%25%20of%20the%20approximately,as%20of%20July%201%2C%202019>.

CHAPTER FOUR: RURAL MINISTRY INVESTMENT

This research demonstrated a need for rural church planting and ministry investment and a theological foundation. It also validated that better models produced effective results, but the data alone fails to entice significant numbers to invest their lives or finances in a rural venture. Dick Brogden spoke of data resistance as it pertains to unreached people groups, “The role of data in determining missionary call has not always been warmly welcomed by Pentecostals.”¹⁴⁵ People rally to a cause; four components may stimulate interest in the cause of rural ministry.

Component 1: Changing Attitudes

Cultural attitudes influence perceptions of value. Cultural attitudes towards African slaves devalued them and led to the infamous 1857 Dred Scott case in the U.S. Supreme Court, which determined, “The fifth amendment protected slave owner rights because enslaved workers were their legal property.”¹⁴⁶ Similarly, cultural attitudes toward rural life devalue rural communities, their churches, and the pastors who serve them. Bryan Jarret acknowledged this value gap, “We've always viewed the rural place and the rural people as second class, and yet it just doesn't make sense to me.”¹⁴⁷ West agreed, “God made no mistake placing minister in rural

¹⁴⁵ Dick Brogden, “Planting Churches among Unreached Peoples: How Do We Partner in Actively Reaching These UPG's?” in *Global Pentecostal Missions in Africa*, ed. By Denzil R. Miller and Enson Lwesya, 11-12. Brogden said, “We cannot pretend what we do not know. Some resistance by Pentecostals to the role of data in determining missionary call and placement is not laudable. Some of it is defensive. Some of our resistance to data is actually resistance to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit in this hour is forcefully bringing to our attention the reality that there are thousands of distinct people groups in the world who have not adequate access to the gospel.”

¹⁴⁶ History.com Editors, “Dred Scott Case,” *History*, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/dred-scott-case>, accessed March 9, 2021.

¹⁴⁷ Ed Stetzer, “One-on-One with Bryan Jarrett on Resourcing Rural America,” *The Exchange*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2019/november/one-on-one-with-bryan-jarrett-on-resourcing-rural->

areas. These outposts of the Gospel are no less significant than the large suburban pastorates. God loves all people everywhere, and He calls people to minister in His name in the remotest areas of the earth.”¹⁴⁸ Many observers acknowledge a negative attitude toward rural, but change indicators are surfacing.

First, some colleges and universities recognized the need for specialized training, offering degrees and certificate programs in rural ministry. Trinity Bible College, the first school to develop an advanced degree dedicated to rural ministry, launched a new wave in education. Wheaton College, in partnership with Rural Matters Institute, provides an M.A. Ministry Leadership degree. Stetzer said of the program, “Rural ministry has reached an age of professionalization and complexity that warrants advanced study and preparation. Those who complete this program will provide thought-leadership and practical expertise for rural church ministry.”¹⁴⁹ Others offer a rural focus in undergraduate or certificate level programs, including Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, Wartburg Theological Seminary, and Oak Hills Christian College. As more institutions recognize the need to equip future leaders with special skills for rural ministry's unique nature, it elevates rural areas as a valid mission field.

[america-p.html](#). Accessed March 9, 2021. Jarrett continued, “Those are my family, so I'm able to think about it in personal terms. Ironically, we don't see it that way when we're thinking about those who live in rural parts of Africa.

So we have men and women who are smart enough to be lawyers and doctors and choose to be missionaries. They go to serve the tribal populations in Africa and come back and tell their stories and we treat them like heroes. It's almost as if we elevate the soul of the rural African higher than we do the rancher in Wyoming and/or the farmer in rural Arkansas.

But a soul is a soul and that's my tribe. I owe a lot to that town and to those people. We've not looked at rural as a mission field. We haven't seen it through missiological lenses. We've looked at it as a training ground, not a mission field.”

¹⁴⁸ West, “Rural Theology,” 20.

¹⁴⁹ Ed Stetzer, “RMI Grad School Cohort Video from Wheaton College,” <https://www.wheaton.edu/academics/school-of-mission-ministry-and-leadership/partnerships/rural-matters-institute/>. Accessed March 9, 2021.

Second, secular America's view about rural is changing, translating to more excellent ministry attractiveness for church planters and investors. One internet source said, "While in the past it was commonplace to associate rural living with farming and persons on the lower rungs of the income ladder, over the last 50 years this stereotype has become less prevalent."¹⁵⁰ The 2020 pandemic and social upheaval accelerated the rural attraction; as noted by Kristin Tate, "A combination of the coronavirus pandemic, economic uncertainty, and social unrest is prompting waves of Americans to move from large cities and permanently relocate to more sparsely populated areas."¹⁵¹ The events of 2020 may have spurred the appeal already created by other factors.

Many people have found the idea of rural living appealing but economically unsustainable. However, advancements in technology have led to changes in Americans' work and shop, making rural living an achievable idea. Ben Winchester said that young professionals are moving to rural towns across America, which began in the 1970s.¹⁵² Small towns offer a more relaxed and wholesome lifestyle which, appeals to young professionals raising children.

¹⁵⁰ Homestratosphere.com, "6 Reasons Rural Living is on the Rise in the United States," <https://www.homestratosphere.com/rural-living/>. Accessed, March 10, 2021.

¹⁵¹ Kristin Tate, "Americans Leave Large Cities for Suburban Areas and Rural Towns," *The Hill*, <https://thehill.com/opinion/finance/505944-americans-leave-large-cities-for-suburban-areas-and-rural-towns?rl=1>.

¹⁵² Anoush Darabi, "Rural America Rising: Why Professionals are Moving to the Countryside," *Apolitical*, https://apolitical.co/en/solution_article/rural-america-rising-why-professionals-are-moving-to-the-countryside. Winchester's reporting, University of Minnesota's Ben Winchester has discovered that, while young high school graduates do leave small towns for big cities, others, in their thirties, forties and fifties are making a return.

But from working on census data Winchester made a surprising discovery. He found that in his own home state of Minnesota, while the younger cohort were leaving small rural towns, people in their thirties, forties and fifties were returning. He looked into the numbers, and discovered that, from the 1970s onwards, almost every Minnesota County has been gaining newcomers aged 30-49.

Surveying Minnesota realtors and the new arrivals themselves, Winchester found that large numbers of these immigrants were professionals, who were moving to smaller towns to improve their quality of life. Thanks to some excellent broadband coverage across the region, people can work from home even if their head office lies far off elsewhere. And, as more people move, the towns bleed into each other, building a network of different occupations and levels of expertise. The new arrivals bring money and children to the area.

It's not isolated to Minnesota. Winchester's analysis of census data for the whole nation shows that young professionals are moving to rural towns across the US.

These are encouraging trends, but the long-term impact on rural and the effects on more remote areas are difficult to predict. The impact of these trends on rural church planting and revitalization will largely depend on the church's response. Ignoring these trends will lead to missed opportunities.

Celebration elevates value; celebration communicates honor, leading to a positive attitude about the person or thing celebrated. Learning to scale church accomplishments and impact may bring rural pastors and churches recognition alongside their urban counterparts. Celebrating small-town success at denominational meetings and Christian publications and media may elevate the value of rural and inspire a call to rural ministry. Rural areas and their representative churches get mentioned in conversation and at least have a seat at the table, but room for attitudinal improvement remains.

Component 2: Strong Voices

Movements began with the voice of a single person calling for change, and another joined that single voice until a chorus of voices elevated a cause, and that cause led to a movement. Patrick Henry's avowed, "I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death," challenged the colonies to stand against a formidable foe for the sake of liberty.¹⁵³ Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg called a nation to unity and changed how Americans view the country and constitution.¹⁵⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King's, "I Have a Dream,"

¹⁵³ Catie Daniel, "Ten Speeches That Changed America: Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death," *Understanding Politics Starts Right Here*, <https://thebipartisanpost.com/all-articles/ten-speeches-that-changed-america-give-me-liberty-or-give-me-death>.

¹⁵⁴ Garry Willis, "The Words That Remade America: The Significance of the Gettysburg Address," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/02/the-words-that-remade-america/308801/>.

speech energized the civil rights movement and continues to inspire those who seek social justice.¹⁵⁵ Strong voices heighten human emotions and open minds.

Rural America already has those who champion their cause; pastors, authors, and denominational leaders whose passion is to see rural areas reached with the Gospel. Speaking of his work with Rural Matters, Bryan Jarrett said, “It’s truly become a national conversation, bringing rural ministry to the forefront,” Jarrett said. “We’ve been able to elevate the conversation to one of rural missiology, broadly written for the whole Church, not just my own denomination and brand — and this conversation about reaching rural churches and pastors is touching far more people than I ever imagined.”¹⁵⁶ Until ministry in small-town America receives validation from the larger church body, the rural church’s human and financial resources will remain in short supply.

Small town pastors and churches need voices that challenge, empower, and inspire, not voices that portray victims. When King delivered his speech, he reached a pivotal moment when he laid his prepared remarks aside; “Dr. King was about halfway through his prepared speech when Mahalia Jackson — who earlier that day had delivered a stirring rendition of the spiritual “I Been ’Buked and I Been Scorned” — shouted out to him from the speakers’ stand: “Tell ’em about the ‘Dream,’ Martin, tell ’em about the ‘Dream’!”¹⁵⁷ At that, the focus shifted to a dream of possibilities, rural America needs voices that will cause dreams of the possibilities. Dwight and Nadine Sandoz, tell them about your dream to “identify, equip, and deploy 10,000 leaders

¹⁵⁵ Michiko Kakutani, “The Lasting Power of Dr. King’s Dream Speech,” *The New York Times*, (August 27, 2013), <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/us/the-lasting-power-of-dr-kings-dream-speech.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Robert E. Mims, “Rural Ministry Matters,” *AG News*, <https://news.ag.org/news/rural-ministry-matters>.

¹⁵⁷ Michiko Kakutani, “The Lasting Power of Dr. King’s Dream Speech,”

for the rural church.”¹⁵⁸ Terry Yancey, tell them about your dream to “have an Assembly of God Church in every town in Kansas with a high school.” Dreams coupled with training and effective strategy can prove rural America to become a rich mission field ripe for harvest.

Component 3: Rural Specific Training

The impact of strong voices will launch new laborers into the rural harvest, some coming from rural context and others drawn from the cities to the rural mission field. The celebration of rural success will inspire still others of the possibilities in rural. However, to send missionaries into a mission field, ill-equipped invites failure and deprives others of the inspiration they need to shape their call. Milward Mwamvuni said, “Deploying missionaries without proper training is like engaging a carpenter without the necessary tools.”¹⁵⁹ Arto Hamalainen linked training to success.¹⁶⁰ World missionaries find contextualized training essential to their success.

Pastors benefit from generalized training in leadership and pastoral principles but are discovering the advantage of field-specific training. Parr cited the beneficial impact of the CMN launch training but acknowledged its urban focus. Griggs warned of failure to contextualize, “In small towns, it is imperative that we do not import an unadjusted ministry methodology from an

¹⁵⁸ Dwight and Nadine Sandoz, “Mission Statement,” Rural Advancement website, <https://ruraladvancement.com/about/>.

¹⁵⁹ Milward Mwamvuni, “Missionary Care: The African Church’s Challenge in Its Missions Enterprise,” *Power for Mission the African Assemblies of God Mobilizing to Reach the Unreached*, ed. By Denzil Miller and Enson M. Lwesya, World Missions Congress, Limura, Kenya, February 24-March 2, 2013.

¹⁶⁰ Arto Hamalainen, “Four Pillars for Successful Missions,” *Power for Mission the African Assemblies of God Mobilizing to Reach the Unreached*, ed. By Denzil Miller and Enson M. Lwesya, World Missions Congress, Limura, Kenya, February 24-March 2, 201, Hamalainen said, “Pentecostalism is characterized by the urgency of missionary work. The success of missionary work and the return of Jesus Christ are closely linked in the Pentecostal consciousness. Without doubt, this is a strength of the movement. However, at times, this same mind-set can become a weakness. Some mission’s candidates, along with their senders, become so eager to get on with the work that they view training as an unnecessary delay in their getting to the field. A principal in a Brazilian mission school once told me that many in his country see training as a waste of time; however, 80% of those who go to the field without training come back home within two years.”

urban context into a small-town context.”¹⁶¹ Clark detailed the frustration of rural pastors reading current ministry materials and attending urban-led conferences.¹⁶² Rural pastors find field training opportunities becoming more accessible as rural partners, denomination offices, and Christian educational institutions offer more options. Rural-specific training equips leaders for success and validates rural ministry as a viable mission field.

Component 4: Partnerships

Healthy partnerships create synergy, multiplying the potential of a rural church plant or revitalization. The church planting models of the twentieth century do not translate well into the twenty-first century; the lone ranger approach accomplishes little and leads to burnout. Stetzer and Bird emphasized, “Partnerships are a key value in church planting, and they occur in a variety of different ways.”¹⁶³ Three types of partners are needed to produce significant results.

Strategic Partners

Strategic partnerships add expertise and training in developing strategies appropriate for the field of ministry; they share a passion for rural church but without a vested interest in

¹⁶¹ Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, 107.

¹⁶² Clark, *Rural Theology*, Clark said, Most books published in recent years concerning ministry in North America have been written from a suburban perspective by pastors of large and prestigious churches. J.D. Greer, Timothy Keller, and John Piper have been held up as models of success. The ability to numerically grow churches into the thousands in the suburbs appears to be the sole model of success for church growth in the United States. Do not misunderstand me, these men are truly great ministers and their writings have changed the ecclesiology of North America. However, the teachings of these men often do not resonate with pastors and church planters serving in rural areas and in small churches. Rural pastors confess a great love and respect for these men, but often they feel a general disconnect between what they learn while attending conferences led by pastors of large, “successful” churches and the realities of their small, rural situations. Generally, the phrase heard from many rural pastors when leaving these conferences is, “What I just learned won’t work where I serve.” The great ideas from the great men do not translate into action when the idea is introduced to the lay leadership team made up of two housewives, two farmers, and a mechanic.”

¹⁶³ Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches*, 74.

individual efforts. Strategic partners bring resources into the process that local entities cannot access. Water Tower Leadership Network and Rural Compassion provide examples of the growing number of rural strategic partners.¹⁶⁴ Rural Compassion trains and resources local pastors to reach their communities through compassion ministry, acts of kindness, and personal connection with city, school, and civic leaders.¹⁶⁵

Working Partners

Working partners, utilizing different forms as parent churches, provide resources, structure, and strength to rural church plants. Working partners consider the daughter church an extension of themselves and carry a vested interest in the church plant's success. Yancey stated that successful church planters take ownership, saying, "I might send a check to help feed hungry children, but if my grandchildren are going hungry, I will move heaven and earth to make sure they are fed."¹⁶⁶ This sentiment expresses the heart of working partnerships.

Healthy local churches assume the role of working partners with good results. While serving in the national office, Rick Lorimer learned of the rural churches' condition and the leadership vacuum in many rural towns. When he returned to pastoral ministry, he determined to

¹⁶⁴ Bryan Jarrett, Water Tower Leadership Network website, <https://lonesomedovetexas.com/pastors/>. Jarrett said, "God has also given us a desire to minister to under-resourced and the overlooked pastors of small town churches in rural America. In 2012, we founded a ministry called the Water Tower Leadership Network. Through this network, we have had the privilege to mentor and train rural pastors from the heartland of America. We resource these ministers, invest in their families, come alongside their churches and train them for the challenges of rural ministry." Water Tower focuses on pastors of existing rural churches. Bryan Jarrett founded the ministry with "a desire to minister to under-resources and the overlooked pastors of small-town churches in rural America."

¹⁶⁵ Steve Donaldson, Rural Compassion website, <http://www.ruralcompassion.org/>. Rural compassion offers training and resourcing in a localized context through onsite training events. Rural Compassion director, Steve Donaldson said, "We work with the main stakeholders to coach, mentor, and train them on how to bring their communities to a place where children and families can really flourish."

¹⁶⁶ Yancey, In-Person Interview.

make a difference in rural communities. He led Christ's Place Church in Lincoln, NE, in developing a three-tier approach for rural church multiplication.¹⁶⁷ Urban partnerships represent just one of many models, but smaller rural churches engage in church planting and multi-site strategies. Denny Curran led River of Life Church in their first plant, with only 60 in the parent church.¹⁶⁸ Mike Akers concurs, "Church planting and multisite is not just for urban settings, rich churches or large churches."¹⁶⁹ Parent churches contribute critical elements for successful plants, including finances, volunteers, systems, and proven church health models.

Investment Partners

Significant endeavors in any field depend on capital investors. Large-scale church planting matches people and churches called to plant with investors willing to underwrite facilities, staffing, and other needed resources. Parr said from a financial perspective; rural church plants require less capital due to lower property costs and business and bi-vocational

¹⁶⁷ Influence Magazine May 20, 2016, "A Rural Commitment, Lorimer said, "We have put together a development strategy for rural church multiplication that involves three tiers of respective expectations and relational guidelines. Internally, we call the first tier our Friends Network. There is no fee to be involved, and it gives rural churches access to all our ministry resources for weekend ministry and church operations. Within this informal network, we have formal leadership cohorts and coaching taking place.

Our second tier relates to affiliate campuses. At this tier, the level of support is greatly increased because affiliate churches willingly come under the authority and leadership of Christ's Place Church. The Assemblies of God calls these campuses Parent Affiliated Churches (PAC). Our affiliates enjoy all the benefits of being a part of a larger church. We are presently adopting our second church, and it happens to be in a rural setting.

Most of our rural churches don't need a big church to rescue them. However, they do appreciate our respect, friendship and support in their vision and mission.

Our third tier of commitment to rural communities is Fresh Starts. In the next five years, we plan to plant at least two new churches in rural areas that presently do not have an Assemblies of God church."

¹⁶⁸ Influence Magazine, "A Passion for Planting," (May 2016), <https://influencemagazine.com/Practice/A-Passion-for-Planting>.

¹⁶⁹ Influence Magazine, "Sowing Seed in Rural Communities," (October 2016), <https://influencemagazine.com/en/Practice/Sowing-Seeds-in-Rural-Communities>. Akers concurs, "I'm part of a small group of Washington pastors who are encouraging rural churches and smaller churches to multiply in new, creative ways. Thirty people who love Jesus and meet to move the mission of God forward *is* a church."

opportunities in some rural communities. Investment partners played a crucial role in The Generations Church in Ness City.¹⁷⁰ Investors willing to repeat this model may multiply the church planting potential in rural areas with limited job markets.

Partnerships between large Christian-owned corporations and church planters have the possibility of revolutionizing rural church planting. The coronavirus pandemic accelerated the trend of employees working remotely, one company even offering a bonus to employees willing to relocate to smaller cities with a lower living cost.¹⁷¹ Utilizing remote job opportunities to support rural church plants may provide profitability for the corporations, an economic boost to small towns, and job opportunities for bi-vocational church planters or members of a launch team.

Church planting in America shows signs of momentum but still lags behind population growth. Stetzer and Bird spoke of the encouraging trend, “An important shift happened in recent years. After decades of net decline, more U.S. churches are being started each year (approximately 4,000) than are being closed each year (approximately 3,500).”¹⁷² Daniel Yang indicated, “We are terribly far behind what is needed to be on track with population growth.”¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ A businessman from Parr’s home church opened a branch office in Ness City, facilitating the move, from Great Bend to Ness City, of two core team members. The venture proved profitable for the businessman, strengthened the church’s core, and provided economic investment in the community.

¹⁷¹ Anders Melin, “Stripe Workers who Relocate Get \$20,000 Bonus and a Pay Cut,” *Bloomberg Technology* (September 2020), <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-15/stripe-employees-who-relocate-to-get-20-000-bonus-and-a-pay-cut>. Melin continued, “For many Americans, the Covid-19 crisis has upended the cost-benefit balance of living in expensive metropolitan areas, which for months have been devoid of their usual flair. With corporate campuses and office buildings still closed or only partially staffed, many companies have given workers more leeway than ever to decide where and how they want to work. That’s led scores of white-collar workers to move closer to loved ones or to more sparsely populated areas with less punishing living costs.”

¹⁷² Stetzer and Bird, *Viral Churches*, 1.

¹⁷³ Daniel Yang, “You Should be Thinking About 2050: North American Church Planting Capacity for the Next Generation,” *Send Institute*,” <https://www.sendinstitute.org/future-church-planting-capacity/>. Yang commented, “In 2010, the Hartford Institute released a study which calculated the number of religious congregations in the United States to be about 350,000. Among them, Christian congregations of any kind numbered 338,000. The U.S. population at the time was slightly over 309 million, making the church to population ratio roughly one church for every one thousand people (1:1000).

For church planting to reach critical mass requires a multi-faceted approach, including a concurrent revitalization movement, especially in rural areas.

Returning sick churches to a status of health may require a structural change at denominational levels. Wang's math provides guidance, 4000 (churches opened)-3700 (churches closed) =300 (net gain). The most efficient way to achieve a product of 1900 is increasing the minuend while reducing the subtrahend. The complexities of the problem demand critical thinking on both sides of the equation. Denominations that create mechanisms to address planting and revitalization position themselves for a more robust net gain in healthy churches. In agricultural terms, success is not defined by the number of barns per acre cultivated but by the crop yield. A Fifth Avenue Christian report claimed a 'halo effect' skewed the number of Americans participating in religious activity.¹⁷⁴ Even healthier churches failed to address the lack of spiritual harvest. Church planting requires a new Holy Spirit empowerment, less focus on denominational brand, and more significant cooperative efforts centered on widely held core

Since then, the U.S. population has grown by 19 million people to what is now a total population of 328 million. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that by the year 2050, by factoring in low immigration rates and normative birth rates, the population will grow to be at least 400 million. So in order to maintain the 1:1000 church to population ratio within this forty-year span, we will need a net gain of 76,000 new churches or on average a net gain of 1,900 churches per year.

In 2014, LifeWay Research calculated what has become the best gauge of what is the United State's annual average net gain of churches, estimating that 4000 churches were opened that year while 3700 closed, yielding a net gain of 300 churches. If we use these numbers as a guide for what is on average the annual net gain of churches today, we are terribly far behind what is needed to be on track with population growth."

¹⁷⁴ Fifth Avenue Church, (June 2016), <https://www.fifthavenuechristian.org/u-s-church-statistics-over-the-last-century/>. The report stated, "The Pew Research Center released a study called "America's Changing Religious Landscape" shows a growing number of "religiously unaffiliated" which corresponds with the decline of those identifying as Christian. Religious unaffiliated includes individuals who identify themselves as atheists, agnostics and those who claim to be spiritual but not religious. In terms of actual numbers, in 2007 78% of respondents identified themselves as Christian but today that number is down to 71% of Americans that identify as Christian.

However another study conducted by Dr. Richard J. Krejcir paints an even grimmer picture. He found that church attendance was even lower than the Pew Study had previously stated, there was a disconnect between what people reported and what they actually did. This phenomenon is referred to as "the Halo Effect". Many polls indicate that 40-50% of Americans regularly attend a church service, but when he compared that data to denominational reports, university research data and census reports the actual number was 18%. He defined regular attendance as at least twice per month and over a 7 year period showed a very steady decline, you can look at the numbers below. If these trends continue you may see church attendance drop to 2-4% by 2050."

themes. Jesus created an object lesson in the natural world; the Giant Sequoia illustrates a vital principle relevant to this study.

Unified Strength

The church, which Jesus purchased with His blood, built walls Jesus never intended. The church finds herself divided by denomination, race, ethnicity, economics, and locale. Daman appealed for unity, “The church was never meant to be a collection of independently franchised congregations working in isolation from—and, tragically, often in competition with—one another. It was meant to be both a local and universal community where each congregation recognized the responsibility to assist and strengthen others.”¹⁷⁵ Daman’s words serve as an urgent warning for the American church to seek unity around God’s mission.¹⁷⁶

Jesus did not divide His church into rural and urban camps but assigned her to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. This study asks whether rural has a place in the grove; does the expansion of Christ's kingdom include rural?

¹⁷⁵ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 17.

¹⁷⁶ Billy Wilson, “Together We Can: The Power of Networking and the Great Commission,” *Together in One Mission*, ed. by Arto Hamalainen and Grant McClung (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 2012), 109. Standing at the base of a Giant Sequoia engenders a feeling of awe. Their height, towering nearly 300 feet, and girth, approaching 40 feet, make them one of the world’s largest living things. Apart from their beauty and impressive size, these trees illustrate the strength of unity. Billy Wilson describes that picture of unity as the interlocking network of roots of sequoias that withstands the winds. These giants of the woods have very shallow root systems, only penetrating the soil to approximately 4 or 5 feet deep. This seems impossible, because we all know trees need deep roots to withstand drought and wind. But sequoias are most unique. Their secret is that they grow only in groves, and their root systems, though not deep, extend widely from the tree—sometimes equal to 150 feet. With other fellow grove-dwelling sequoias doing the same, their roots begin to intertwine, forming an underground, interlocking network. When the winds blow, and the storms come, the sequoias literally hold one another up, enabling these trees to be the tallest in the world.

CONCLUSION

Rural America presents multiple challenges to church planters and ministry investors; none preclude strategic engagement. The thesis research in literature reviewed, statistical analysis of closed churches, and case studies of revitalized churches affirmed the argument for rural ministry investment, even in areas with declining populations. Four primary objectives provide an opportunity for discussion.

Objective 1: An Accurate Portrayal of Rural Culture

The research presented a picture of rural America, dispelling myths, idyllic fantasies, and unfair biases. Proceeding under the philosophy that proper assessment empowers decision-makers and investors, negative misrepresentations lead to missed opportunities, and over-selling leads to disappointment and future investment cessation.

Defining rural posed the most significant challenge to this study; the use of rural in a statement creates immediate complexities. Rural range from geographically remote regions to bedroom communities in proximity to large cities; it includes areas with heavy agriculture dependence, timber industry-based economies, and economies built on mining and extraction. Some areas defined as rural offer light manufacturing, technology-focused sectors, and service-based economies. The study chose areas with traditional agriculture driven economies, representative of the Great Plains, as its focal point.

Historical population trends provided a contextual backdrop for the studied areas' current status, with attention given to the Great Depression, the dust bowl era, and the introduction of mechanized and high-tech farming. The research identified the resulting depopulation as the driving force for the economic, social, and religious decline.

Statistics revealed population decline throughout the area studied, with rare exceptions. Factors that negated or minimized decline included towns located within a 30-minute commute to a larger city, located on interstate highways, and located in heavy beef production and processing. The extent of the decline in remote counties, many over 20% since 2000, surprised and saddened this researcher.

Some researchers referenced the growing rural population, but little evidence of growth surfaced in this study, even though the coronavirus pandemic and social upheaval of 2020 prompted speculation of urban to rural migration. Rural areas with more amenities may experience gains due to these issues. Still, the significant impact on rural populations remains premature, anecdotal, and shows little promise of reversing trends in remote rural areas.

Downward population trends created a perfect storm of economic and emotional depression, opening the door for increased drug and alcohol addictions. Isolation and lack of access to treatment and mental health services further exasperated these issues. Research indicated an atmosphere primed for churches to wield influence, but churches declined and closed in a time of great need, leaving a spiritual deficiency in many rural areas.

Objective 2: Analyze the Health of Rural Churches

The study confirmed a high need for healthy churches but low supply. The research discovered examples of vibrant churches in small towns but found them as the exception. Churches chosen for the study met four criteria; affiliation with the AGK Network, closed between 1970 and 2020, located in a town with a population between 500 and 10,000, and they maintained a local high school. The 21 churches provided an opportunity to consider causes for church closings.

Each study subject exhibited historical seasons of numerical health, and while depopulation appeared to contribute to failure, most displayed symptoms of decline before population issues reached critical mass. The study then considered alternative causes for churches closing. We admit these observations may contain subjectivity but believe they comprise sound reasoning about church closures. To quantify these causes required local church records, correspondence, and eyewitness accounts not available to this study.

The research evaluated annual attendance patterns related to pastoral changes; some churches provided more complete records than others. One church experienced a sudden significant decline in attendance, indicating a dramatic event such as a church split. Two patterns showed internal systemic dysfunction. First, a pattern of frequent pastoral changes indicated difficult conditions for leadership, while one short-term pastor may indicate a poor fit, repeated brief tenures pointed to unhealthy conditions. Second, churches displaying a repeated pattern of increasing and decreasing attendance with a persistent downward trend inevitably ended in the church closing.

Two patterns indicated symptoms of ineffective pastoral leadership contributed to the church closing. First, a pattern of long-term anemic attendance followed by a significant and sustained attendance increase in conjunction with new pastoral leadership indicates a church's ability to respond to strong leadership. Second, a reverse pattern of healthy historic attendance followed by sudden or sustained decline under new pastoral leadership may indicate a weak or ineffective leader. This research commenced with a favorable bias towards longevity, but three of the churches studied closed under pastors serving more than ten years.

Patterns do not lead to absolutes but serve as indicators. Strong leaders sometimes fail to overcome church dysfunction, and healthy churches sometimes fall victim to poor leadership.

Most leaders of this denomination view church autonomy as a great strength, a position I share. However, researching church closures revealed the need for early intervention mechanisms not provided in the current governance.

Objective 3: Establishing a Theological Basis for Rural Church Planting

This research saw establishing a biblical foundation for church planting as unnecessary and defending rural church planting as redundant, yet every activity of the church requires a scriptural anchor. This study's conclusions aligned with many previous studies and recognized the strategic value of church planting in the overall mission of God.

The literature reviewed held a favorable opinion of theological grounds for planting churches, with a greater divide surfacing when including rural discussion. Most who opposed rural ministry assumed Paul's missionary model demanded attention to cities for maximum impact. However, a deeper study of the gospels, Acts, and even Paul's ministry provided a strong foundation for rural inclusion. To exclude rural equates a disregard for Christ's mandate to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Objective 4: Effective Models

This study accepted a challenge to discover if effective church planting and revitalization can occur in rural settings. The strategy commonly utilized in declining churches, not exclusively rural, amounted to replacing the person occupying the pastor's office while employing failed methodology. This research discovered many celebrated stories of success in rural areas. Each success shared common community engagement values, missional ministry, and less traditional services while maintaining the gospel's integrity.

Two AGK Network churches presented as case studies met the same criteria assigned to the 21 closed churches studied. Both communities located in remote areas displayed the history of population decline. One a revitalization and the other a replant; these two subjects are thriving in environments dominated by failed efforts. These examples show achievable success and provide models to accomplish success. The most surprising element discovered was how quickly small towns respond to fresh ministry models, not to imply the absence of challenges and times of disappointment, but rural America remains ripe for harvest.

Further Study Needed

This study only began to address the needs, expose the weaknesses, celebrate the victories, and discover the potential for rural church planting and revitalization. The topic calls for more research in the development of rural-specific training, exposing potential laborers to rural ministry's value, and potential to see rural America as a mission field on par with rural in other parts of the world.

Denominational structures that limit timely intervention and foster church decline require study and mechanisms to empower leaders to insert correction and instruction before a church reaches a critical stage. More attention needs to be given to developing partnerships, multi-sites, and planting networks with rural targets. Christian corporations partnering with rural church planters, providing remote job opportunities for bi-vocational church planters or team members deserves exploration.

Recommendations

Some object to designating rural America as an unreached people group, and by definition, they are correct. However, rural America represents a nation of people underserved with the gospel. God places no greater or lesser value on rural than urban. Imagine a child growing up in a small town, attending church every Sunday, graduating from high school without ever hearing about salvation, repentance, the infilling of the Holy Spirit, or the imminent return of Christ. That scenario describes many rural communities, void of any evangelical or Spirit-empowered witness.

The pro-life movement often argues the loss of human potential. The life taken by abortion might have been the one to discover a cure for a deadly disease or the next innovative technology inventor. Similarly, consider the potentially lost souls when the gospel message is missing in rural communities. Following Jesus' example, the church must preach in the next towns and villages because He sent us for this purpose.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Mark 1:38

APPENDIX ONE: DEFINING RURAL

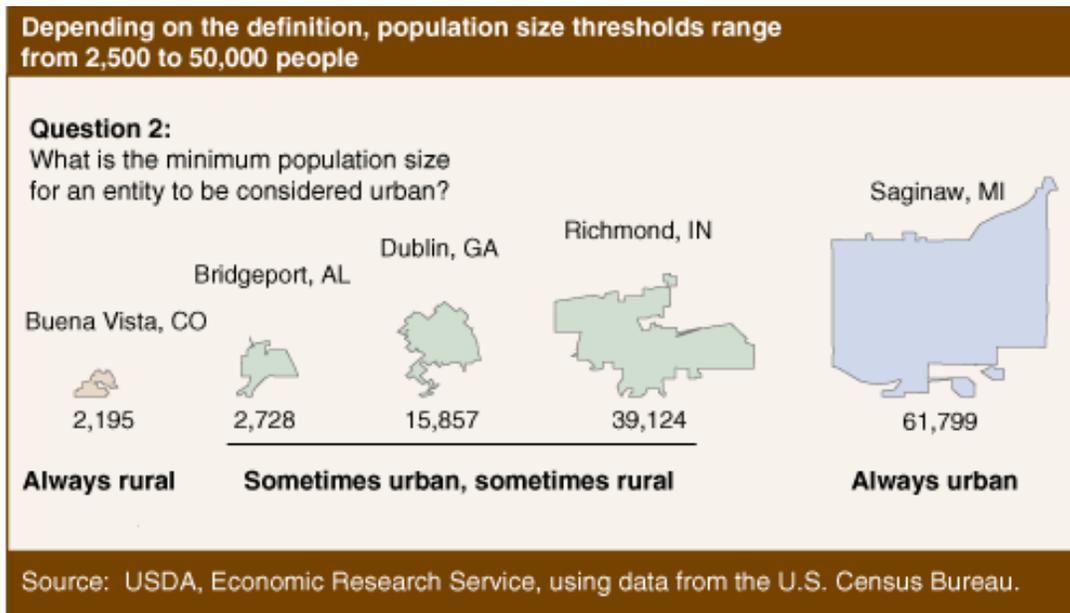
Learning begins with defining the subject, which in the case of rural proves challenging.

John Cromartie and Shawn Bucholtz stated the challenge,

The term “rural” conjures widely shared images of farms, ranches, villages, small towns, and open spaces. Yet, when it comes to distinguishing rural from urban places, researchers and policymakers employ a dizzying array of definitions. The use of multiple definitions reflects the reality that rural and urban are multidimensional concepts, making clear-cut distinctions between the two difficult. Is population density the defining concern, or is it geographic isolation?¹⁷⁸

The resulting confusion creates uncertainty in the church in designating rural ministry. While a wide array of definitions may prove essential to an agency's purpose, an unintended consequence results in masking some communities' rurality (figure 1.1).¹⁷⁹

Figure 1.1



¹⁷⁸ John Cromartie and Shawn Bucholtz, “Defining the ‘Rural’ in Rural America,” *Amber Waves* (June 1, 2008). <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2008/june/defining-the-rural-in-rural-america/>.

¹⁷⁹ Cromartie and Bucholtz, “Defining the ‘Rural’ in Rural America.”

The goal of understanding rural will influence the definition employed.

The United States Department of Agriculture acknowledged that diversity of definition creates a challenge to researches and offered good counsel. They suggest,

The choice of a rural definition should be based on the purpose of the application, whether that application is for research, policy analysis, or program implementation... The key is to use a rural-urban definition that best fits the needs of a specific activity, recognizing that any simple dichotomy hides a complex rural-urban continuum, often with very gentle gradations from one level to the next.¹⁸⁰

Less official definitions for rural provide greater context for church planting and ministry investment.

¹⁸⁰ Economic Research Service: U.S. Department of Agriculture, "What is Rural?"
<https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural.aspx>

APPENDIX TWO: EXPANDING MECHANIZED FARMING AND INCREASED PRODUCTIVITY LOWERED POPULATION

Farm life changed with the continued evolution of the machinery used by farmers. What would farmers of 100 years ago think if they saw a 60-foot combine header or a 500-horsepower tractor, let alone the computerized GPS-driven equipment of today? ¹⁸¹. The early mechanization of farm equipment pales in comparison, yet those early advancements forever changed American agriculture. ¹⁸² These inventions launched modern farming that expanded innovation and developments of equipment and farming techniques.

The modernization of farming acted like a double-edged sword, a reality that continued into the 21st century. Increasing productivity and efficiency reduced the size of the labor force. Daman summarized this dilemma,

Farms no longer needed droves of laborers, and the children raised on the farm would no longer be able to make their living on the farm. Further, as farms became more mechanized, those unable to afford the new technology would no longer be able to compete economically, which in turn force them to sell. At the same time, the demand for agricultural workers decreased while the need for workers in the urban industries increased. Thus, the migration came from both a rural push as well as an urban pull. ¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ “Eli Whitney’s Patent for the Cotton Gin,” The National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/cotton-gin-patent#:~:text=Epilogue,that%20the%20parts%20were%20interchangeable>. Agricultural historians credit Eli Whitney with introducing mechanized farm equipment with his 1793 cotton gin, but the early twentieth inventions revolutionized the farming industry

¹⁸² Sam Moore, “Let’s Talk Rusty Iron: The Inventions That Stand Out in the History of Farming and Farm Machinery,” Farm Collector (August 2008), <https://www.farmcollector.com/equipment/ten-agricultural-inventions-in-farming-history>. International Harvester introduced the Farmall, the first general-purpose gasoline tractor, in 1924. In 1932, Allis-Chalmers offered the first rubber tires on tractors. In 1934, Hiram Moore built the first successful combine.

¹⁸³ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 59. One will now find this machinery in museums or rusting in a shelterbelt near an abandoned farmhouse.

The win-lose cycles continue; innovation brings higher productivity with fewer laborers. Farmers who struggled to keep up—sold their land, and another family left the farm. Since 1950 the average farm size in Kansas grew from 374 acres to 781 acres.¹⁸⁴ Larger farm size represents fewer families; more productive equipment means few farmworkers, all contributing further to urban migration. Since 1950 the number of family farm workers declined from 7.6 million to 2.06 million, and hired workers declined from 2.33 million to 1.13 million, an overall reduction of 6.2 million in the nation's farm workforce.¹⁸⁵ While some have written about rural America's diversifying economy, towns defined as rural by this paper still depend heavily on agriculture for their economic strength, which Kansas statistics illustrate.

The rural credentials of Kansas make it a good thumbnail sketch of America. Kansas ranks as the tenth most rural state by population density,¹⁸⁶ leaders in wheat production,¹⁸⁷ rank third for highest beef production,¹⁸⁸ and seventh for total agriculture receipts.¹⁸⁹ This research compared the five most rural Kansas Counties, based on population density (figure 1.3), with the five most urban counties by examining the economic impact of agriculture relative to each group (see figure 1.4). The graphs highlight the total workforce percentages derived from agriculture

¹⁸⁴ “Kansas Farm Statistics, 1920-2019, Selected Years,” University of Kansas, <https://ipsr.ku.edu/ksdata/ksah/ag/16ag4.pdf>.

¹⁸⁵ Marcelo Castillo and Skyler Simnitt, “Farm Labor,” United States Department of Agriculture (April 22, 2020) <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/farm-economy/farm-labor/#size>.

¹⁸⁶ States 101 website, “U.S. States: Population, Land Area, and Population Density,” <https://www.states101.com/populations>.

¹⁸⁷ World Atlas, “U.S. States That Produce the Most Wheat,” <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/leading-wheat-producing-states-in-the-united-states.html>.

¹⁸⁸ Rob Cook, “Top 10 States with the Most Cattle,” (February 17, 2021), <https://www.beef2live.com/story-top-10-states-cattle-0-110713#:~:text=Texas%20has%20the%20most%20cattle,States%20followed%20by%20Nebraska%20%26%20Kansas.&text=The%20Most%20Cattle>.

¹⁸⁹ Rob Cook, “Ranking of the States With the Highest Agriculture Receipts,” <https://beef2live.com/story-states-produce-food-value-0-107252#:~:text=California%20had%20the%20highest%20agricultural,%2C%20Nebraska%2C%20Texas%20and%20Minnesota.&text=Highest%20Agricultural%20Receipts>.

and agricultural receipts' rate comparable to the county's real Regional Domestic Product (RDP). A clear picture emerged from these numbers; if Johnson County loses agriculture jobs, there remain viable options for non-agriculture jobs, but relocation or long commutes seem the most probable options in Greeley County. A farmer or farmhand defines AG-related employment to an urbanite. However, those who live in rural recognize the local café waitress, the bank teller, the car salesman, etc., all hold agricultural-related jobs.

Figure 1.3¹⁹⁰ ¹⁹¹

County	Population Density Per Square Mile	% of Total Workforce	% of Regional Domestic Product (RDP)
Greeley	1.6	32.46	39.89
Wallace	1.7	46.62	51.56
Clark	2.2	31.65	40.08
Lane	2.3	53.96	58.52
Hodgeman	2.3	36.24	40.68
Average	2.02	40.19	46.15

Figure 1.4

County	Population Density Per Square Mile	% of Total Workforce	% of Regional Domestic Product (RDP)_
Johnson	1,167	3.55	3.78
Wyandotte	1,029	4.79	4.58
Sedgwick	499.2	3.41	3.05
Shawnee	321.4	7.70	8.44
Douglas	239.6	2.96	2.57
Average	651.24	4.48	4.48

Economic recovery and population stability in rural America depend on agricultural innovation to open markets, create local jobs, and provide families and young people with an incentive to build a rural future. Suggestions abound, including producing more labor-intensive organic certified grain and more meatpacking plants and slaughterhouses. In the absence of legitimate

¹⁹⁰ “List of Counties in Kansas,” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,

¹⁹¹ “Economic Contribution of Agriculture and Agriculture Related Sectors to the Kansas Economy,” Kansas Department of Agriculture, <https://agriculture.ks.gov/about-kda/kansas-agriculture>.

economic solutions, hundreds of isolated rural communities face extinction in the next few decades if longstanding circumstances do not change.

APPENDIX THREE: RURAL CHURCH REVITALIZATION

Church planting draws the attention of ministry investors; contrariwise, few wish to discuss revitalization. However, church revitalization plays an essential role in restoring spiritual vitality to rural communities. Stetzer and Dodson appealed to the need for church revitalization, “According to *Leadership Journal*, 340,000 churches are in need of revitalization.”¹⁹² Many, already underserved, American small towns will lose their spiritual lifeline as churches close without reversing this trend.

Bringing a dying church into a healthy trajectory requires a strategy and leaders committed to change. Aubrey Malphurs admonished soliciting partnerships for plateaued and declining churches.¹⁹³ Revitalization improves health in the nation’s spiritual climate and reduces the number of church closings.¹⁹⁴ Yancey referenced 32 counties in Kansas as ‘dark counties,’ meaning counties without an Assembly of God church. The study identified closed churches in 14 of these counties with viable population bases, the presence of a local high school, and evidence of historical church strength, leading to the conclusion that these churches would still be a presence if they adopted timely effective revitalization strategies. The need for revitalization in a church precedes numerical decline. Implementing regular assessment processes with measurable goals by churches could prevent future church closing. Numerical

¹⁹² Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 18.

¹⁹³ Dr. Aubrey Malphurs, “The State of the American Church: Plateaued or Declining,” *The Malphurs Group*, <https://malphursgroup.com/state-of-the-american-church-plateaued-declining/>. “With proper care, plateaued and declining churches can become healthy and improve the state of the American church. Oftentimes pastors find they need outside leadership coaching or a strategy consultant to come on-site to guide the church in the shifts needed in order to achieve vision clarity, a strategic plan, and a leadership pipeline.”

¹⁹⁴ In a similar manner to people adopting better eating and exercise programs to prevent physical disease; preventing unnecessary church closings depends on the church practicing better habits.

measurements demonstrate the fruit produced through effective, relevant ministry or lack thereof. The research found factors that may prevent future premature church closings.

Defining Rural Church Decline

Numbers alone cannot measure a rural church's value to its community or a closed church's impact. Stetzer and Bird highlighted urban and rural small church value in their house church definition, "Participants in house churches typically worship, pray, learn, and care for one another on an intensely personal level."¹⁹⁵ The importance of church growth must not overshadow other core purposes for the church. Daman defined a church as "a community of believers who encourage and support one another and deeply care about outreach into the community."¹⁹⁶ The rural culture places a high value on pastoral care and intimate connection from their church.

Numerical measurement can prove misleading when defining decline in a rural church. A church of 50 in a small town of 1,000 and declining may not belong in the 340,000 churches needing revitalization, even with stagnant attendance. Church health issues provide a more accurate measure of decline over attendance patterns alone. Yancey said, "Churches should set goals for what they can control instead of outcomes."¹⁹⁷ Church leaders can set goals for

¹⁹⁵ Stetzer and Bird, *Vital Churches*, 118. "Many small town and county churches resemble a house church function in a traditional church setting. In reality, the term house church or home church is a generic reference to a small informal assembly of Christians, usually Protestant evangelicals who intentionally gather in a home or similar convenient location other than a church building. Participants in house churches typically worship, pray, learn, and care for one another on an intensely personal level."

¹⁹⁶ Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 49.

Sandoz defined church with a Pentecostal focus as, "A worshipping, fellowship, discipling redemptive community under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, doing the mission of God in the power of the Holy Spirit."

¹⁹⁷ Yancey, In-Person Interview.

community engagements, events designed to increase visitor flow, or life skills classes offered to reach the unchurched. Churches cannot predict outcomes but can predict the outcome of doing nothing. Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.”¹⁹⁸ The farmer knows you can’t produce a harvest if you don’t plant, and even when you sow, you can’t guarantee the size of the yield. This paper defines decline as the church turning its focus inward, prioritizing its preferences over evangelism, losing connection with the next generation, and disengaging from the community, which serves as a more substantial definition for a declining church in a rural context.

Defining Revitalization

Merriam-Webster defined revitalize as “to bring back to a former condition or vigor.”¹⁹⁹ To operate by that definition leads to a false revitalization, comparable to resuscitating a dying man but leaving his terminal condition untreated. Anderson described revitalization, “Spiritual repentance is demanded of the church when it is found opposing the mission of God for the sake of preserving its institutional and traditional forms. The church repents when it brings out new wineskins of worship and weaves new patterns of communal life out of the “unshrunk” cloth of the next generation.”²⁰⁰ Revitalization occurs when the power of Pentecost aligns with the purpose of Pentecost within the life of a church; when the mission of God emanates through the church into the community.

The revitalization process in any context starts with an honest assessment, including facilities, music, ministries, and approachability. Small churches died from dishonest thinking,

¹⁹⁸ 1 Corinthians 3:6.

¹⁹⁹ Merriam-Webster online dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/revitalize>.

²⁰⁰ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 182).

“We may lack quantity, but at least we have quality.” Assessing facilities may require fresh eyes; enlist trusted people in the community or new attenders to share their observations, and teenagers and young adults to evaluate the music. Judging ministries requires probing questions about original intent and current purpose. An honest assessment of approachability can prove painful. Review the community’s perception of the church’s open or closed doors. It remains beyond this paper’s scope to suggest detailed strategies, yet a church willing to adapt can find an abundance of resources, successful models, and people ready to help. A willing church can experience new life, but a church that exists for itself will cease to exist.

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