

Big Challenges for Small-Town Congregations

R. Lee Hagan

Abstract: There are significant challenges facing rural communities and congregations today. However, there has been little consideration of the great mission opportunities that exist in rural and small-town settings. This article will identify some of the challenges that exist, but also point out the opportunities for community engagement by our congregations. Rather than simply ignoring our rural congregations or writing them off altogether, this article seeks to affirm the congregations by reminding them of the gifts with which God has blessed them and encourage them in God's mission to their particular communities.

The film, *The Final Season*, tells the true story of a small-town school in rural Iowa that wins the state baseball championship in its final season before being consolidated into a new school in a neighboring town. The bittersweet story is eerily familiar for the countless small towns across the country that have witnessed the closing of their schools, businesses, farm co-operatives, and even churches. Not just another "Cinderella story" of a sports team that triumphs against all odds, it strikes a familiar chord in towns where consolidation has become a painful way of life. It focuses on the emotional connection of an entire town with its school and the grief that they face as the school is closed. While the team wins the championship, there is no happy ending. Ultimately, the movie serves as a commentary on the changes affecting rural communities, including their churches.

Not All Small Towns Are The Same

An estimated half to two-thirds of the congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are located in rural and small-town settings, from the villages of New England to the border towns of the Southwest to the Alaska wilderness, though it would be presumptuous to make too many comparisons between small towns in Iowa and Oregon or New York and Mississippi. This study identifies some of the challenges facing small towns and points out particular issues that affect rural congregations. While the issues delineated are general in nature and are not applicable to all communities and congregations, the intent is to provide insights into

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the resources of small-town congregations and suggest opportunities for community outreach.

What constitutes rural? Some people would presume an agricultural setting. But the answer is more complicated. The number of people actually farming today is less than 5% of the U.S. population. Iowa State University professors Cornelia and Jan Flora touch on the challenges of defining rural America:

Which is the *real* rural America—ski slopes of California, mines of West Virginia, farms in Iowa, or exurban resort and manufacturing communities in Georgia? Family farms and small farming communities dominate popular images of rural areas, in part because politicians, lobbyists, and the media cultivate those icons, supporting the myth that agricultural policy is rural policy. In fact, rural areas embrace ski slopes, mines, manufacturing, farms, retirement communities, Native American reservations, bedroom communities, and much, much more. In the twenty-first century, rural communities differ more from each other than they do, on average, from urban areas. The diversity found among rural communities extends to the problems felt as each responds to the social and economic change under way.¹

Recognizing the diversity in rural America regarding geography, population, and community resources is vital. For the congregations of the LCMS to be able to respond to the needs and challenges of rural and small-town communities, leaders should first recognize that there is no single solution that fits every setting. “There is no simple way to define what makes a place *rural*. Part of this is due to changing economics and demographics. At the beginning of the 21st century, the term *rural* is very different from what rural was in the year 1900.”² Pastors must be aware of the particular needs of their respective communities, and district and national leaders must guard against offering uniform solutions without doing the hard work of determining what is unique to each setting.

Big Challenges for Small Towns

1. Poverty

While poverty in rural communities is nothing new, the rural poor today are different from those in previous generations.³ Both traditional traits and developing factors of small-town communities are causes of poverty. Because the cost of living is dramatically lower than in the cities and suburbs, small towns have become havens to which the disconnected and the forgotten of society flee. While public transportation may be lacking, jobs are often within walking distance. Many lower income families, retreating from the dangerous environment of inner cities, arrive with little education and money, and no job; yet they often find it easier to secure housing and employment in the rural setting.

On the other hand, small towns are often less equipped to provide the support needed for lower income families because, traditionally, such responsibility fell to the extended family. However, lower income families in small towns generally lack a traditional family support system, or the family they do have may not be able to take on the responsibility of supporting others. “Rural poverty is especially persistent and intractable when the people left behind live in places that have been left behind. . . . Poverty is a factor of limited income, but is also fundamentally connected to limited access to social resources like health-care, education, housing and political power.”⁴ Such lack of resources in rural communities can be found across the country and contributes to the “vicious cycle” of poverty that mirrors urban and inner-city settings. Other observers note that “the economic downturn that the whole country has been experiencing since 2008 has been with rural communities for quite some time; it is little wonder that the social fabric of rural America has become tattered. Macro structures that impact food costs, the environment and rural communities’ economics have wrested control from local communities.”⁵

One of the most significant aspects of the challenge of rural poverty is that it clashes with the dominant values of work and self-reliance commonly found among the traditional rural population and thus contributes to the lack of support systems for lower income families in small towns and rural areas.

Rural communities are noted for their ability to respond to extraordinary tragedies that lead to temporary poverty, such as fires, tornadoes, or floods. But rural communities are much less able to respond to conditions of chronic poverty. . . . Rural residents tend to feel that proper attitudes lead to hard work, and hard work should lead to material success. . . . The dominant view is that rewarding such moral failings by providing “handouts” to those out of work or with low incomes should be avoided.⁶

2. Transient Population

Often, the people moving into small towns are not only from larger cities. Many people in small towns move frequently from one town to another, depending upon work opportunities, relationships, custody arrangements, and many other factors. Thus, it is difficult for them to establish lasting relationships. Renters moving out overnight is a common occurrence as circumstances change. An underlying factor is the absence of marriage in the equation. Divorce, children born out of wedlock, and cohabiting relationships that break apart are contributing factors in both the transient nature of small-town residents today and the level of poverty.

Another factor contributing to the transiency of population in small towns today includes an increase of “couch surfers,” homeless individuals who reside with family and friends. It is estimated that between 1–2% of the national population is “couch homeless.”⁷ Hoback and Anderson’s study suggests that the percentage of “couch

homeless” in the more rural areas of Southern and Western Michigan is equal to that of inner city Detroit.⁸

Another significant factor in agricultural settings is the transient nature of the population related to planting and harvest seasons. Migrant workers are considered essential to the workforce in many such settings, but the migration of workers means that they often are unaware of resources, such as health care and other social agencies.

3. Distance to services

While urban and rural settings face similar challenges regarding health care and education, the distance to access such services is a stark contrast between the two. Whereas people living in urban settings may rely completely on public transportation, transportation and distances to health care, education, and consumer businesses are constant challenges in rural areas. “The cost of transportation and the lack of public transportation often force families to depend on old and unreliable automobiles that get poor gas mileage. Not only is getting to work difficult, but it is also challenging and costly to get to places to purchase groceries and other necessities at a reasonable price.”⁹ The challenges also apply to governmental and non-governmental agencies that provide important support for families. Access to the various needed services is virtually denied because many rural residents do not have the necessary means to travel such distances. “Public transportation, always deficient in rural areas, has become virtually nonexistent in many communities.”¹⁰

Health care is of particular concern for lower income families in rural areas. Consolidation has hampered struggling small-town families, “Both schools and hospitals have faced consolidation and closure, while local governments have faced decreasing state and federal support at the very time that their responsibilities have increased as a result of devolution.”¹¹ Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall describe the challenges related to health care in rural settings: Cost and transportation are among the particular difficulties facing the health care providers. Notably absent from rural settings are mental health services and dentistry.¹² They write, “In almost every text that deals with rural health care, whether from the perspective of physicians and doctors, hospitals, nurses, governmental agencies, or mental health practitioners, consistently notes the difficulties for rural communities to provide broad health care services.”¹³ The challenges of distance and lack of public transportation have led to a lack of health care and food, as well as to legal and other community services.

4. Lack of Opportunities

We often hear about the “graying of the church,” but the reality is that rural and small-town settings are also becoming increasingly older in terms of population. Smaller family size is one significant contributing factor to these changing

demographics. Causes such as birth control and less “need” for hands on the farms have led to significantly smaller families in rural America today. Another factor affecting rural demographics is the lack of opportunities for young people. Students who excel academically are faced with the dilemma of limited options in rural settings and often migrate to larger suburban and urban environments, described by many as the “brain drain” that rural America faces when the best and the brightest leave for better options in urban settings. Ironically, “rural communities (and congregations) tend to invest most heavily not in their future leaders, but in those who will leave the rural community.”¹⁴

Few take an honest look at the reality of life in small towns today. Older generations want to address today’s challenges with solutions of the past, without recognizing how communities and culture have changed. Brown and Schaft observe, “Clearly today’s rural economy differs greatly from the past, and from the romanticized vision of rural areas as being dominated by agriculture. . . . It is a mistake to conflate rural and agricultural in today’s society.”¹⁵

5. Breakdown of Family

Rural areas are not immune from the breakdown of the family that plagues America across all social and geographical classifications. “The family, once a mainstay of the rural community, is experiencing the same kind of disintegration that is taking place in urban areas. For instance, the number of single-mother families in non-metropolitan communities has been increasing at a faster rate than metropolitan areas.”¹⁶

Divorce has been on the rise in rural settings: “Forty years ago, divorced people were more concentrated in cities and suburbs. But geographic distinctions have all but vanished, and now, for the first time, rural Americans are just as likely to be divorced as city dwellers, according to an analysis of census data by The New York Times.”¹⁷ Another obvious change has been the increase in children living with cohabiting couples. From 2000 to 2009, the percentage of children living in cohabiting households has nearly doubled;¹⁸ and rural children in cohabiting households are more likely to be living in poverty than in urban settings.¹⁹

Big Challenges for Congregations

The insights below come from discussions with rural ministry leaders. These are three practical concerns that are readily voiced from by those serving in rural America.

1. Finances

One of the most significant challenges facing rural and small-town congregations is the cost of health care. While there are creative solutions and models for addressing this issue, we must acknowledge that the rising cost of health

care makes it difficult for many congregations to afford a full-time (single vocation) pastor, serving only one congregation. Several district presidents and district executives echoed this concern. District officials urge congregations with less than 80 on the low end and 150 on the high end to strongly consider whether they can afford a full-time pastor going forward.

Dual parishes are also struggling to afford a full-time pastor's salary and benefits. By providing a parsonage, rural parishes have been able to afford more easily the pastor's salary. However, guidelines for seminary graduates today call for combined packages of salary and benefits often above \$60,000. This will be a challenge for many congregations because the health care projections call for constant increases into the foreseeable future.

Related is the issue of the educational debt of our seminary graduates. In 2012, I conducted a rural ministry module at one of our seminaries. Discussions revealed that fourth-year men often have reservations about receiving a placement in a rural setting strictly over the issue of student loans. Conversations with classmates serving in the field had sounded this alarm for them. They were open to serving in rural settings, but genuinely concerned about the potential financial pressures awaiting them.

These financial pressures are having a ripple effect across the Synod. Many rural and small-town congregations are not able to provide adequate salaries for their pastors. Going years without receiving even a cost-of-living adjustment, much less a raise, is not out of the ordinary for pastors in rural settings. Student loan repayment also increases the pressure on pastors, as they must deal with creditor calls in addition to member calls. The strain takes its toll on the pastor's family as well. These pressures have caused some pastors to leave the ministry and others to accept calls to serve in new settings, strictly for financial reasons. The church certainly has theological challenges in the post-Christian world, but it would be naïve to fail to recognize how such financial challenges are affecting congregations and pastors.

2. Absence of Children and Families

Sunday School is becoming a thing of the past in many rural settings. Congregations simply do not have enough children to sustain a weekly Sunday School. Lutherans have become so reliant on Lutheran day schools and Sunday Schools to "handle" the Christian education of children that congregations do not know how to respond once they close their school or discontinue weekly Sunday School. Children always seemed to come back for confirmation in past years, but that is no longer the case. Some congregations may be hesitant to consider other means by which they could provide Christian education for their younger members and members' children. Parents are often not equipped to carry out their godly calling of teaching the faith in the home. Sadly, the only way some notice the change

is that the size of the confirmation class is increasingly smaller or “Confirmation Sunday” occurs only every few years.

3. Lack of Resources

Many small-town congregations are simply “tapped out.” Not enough people are willing to serve to fill out the slate of officers. Positions of leadership are often handed around among a few faithful members, and that can lead to burn-out and frustration. Repair and maintenance needs mount up because of a lack of funds to make the necessary improvements. People with relevant skills are lacking to deal with such matters as websites, health care plans, cemetery regulations, and background checks for staff or volunteers working with children.

Rural and small-town congregations are often older established congregations with older buildings. The ongoing need for capital improvements is daunting for congregations. In the past, volunteers have been able to take care of many of the physical needs of the facilities. However, century-old buildings can have a variety of structural needs that require significant expense for already struggling congregations.

Opportunities for Small-Town Congregations

While big challenges face small towns and the congregations in their midst, great opportunities for mission work abound. The concept of mission work in “Small Town America” may have seemed almost absurd thirty years ago. However, the challenges outlined above bring to light new opportunities for reaching the lost not as apparent in previous generations in small towns. Unchurched people in rural settings have always been with us, but congregations now realize that Christians find themselves in the minority even in rural and small-town settings.

1. Immigration

States along the Mexican border have been dealing with immigration issues for decades. The growing Latin American population has spread beyond the Southwest to small towns across the country. However, the non-Hispanic immigrant population has also been on the rise in small-town settings. African and Asian immigrant communities have appeared in states such as Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas. In 2012 in Storm Lake, Iowa, Caucasians total less than 50% of the population (48.3).²⁰ The Latin American population comprises 37.1% and Asians total 8.9%.²¹ The 2012 LCMS Rural and Small-Town Mission Conference held in Storm Lake, Iowa, included a roundtable of ministry leaders who discussed how the Iowa District West office and area congregations have worked to engage the Hispanic, Asian, and African immigrant populations. This small town in Western Iowa now includes a Buddhist temple as part of its religious landscape.

Immigrants in our country struggle because of language barriers and an inability to satisfy such basic human needs as clothing, food, or child care. Meeting such needs can provide opportunities for engaging immigrant populations in our own backyard. Offering English classes, distributing food and clothing, and providing children's activities (bear in mind that the children often speak English) are just a few of the simple ways that congregations can reach out to their neighbors.

While immigration presents many opportunities for outreach, the topic is often a difficult one to discuss because of the political issues involved. Concern about illegal immigrants can lead to hesitancy on the part of congregations to reach out to ethnic populations.

2. Congregations Working Together

Congregations of all sizes have ample opportunities to work together to care for members and to engage the unchurched population in their respective communities. As sole pastorates become more difficult to maintain with shrinking rural congregations and increasing costs to support full-time pastors, it is a good time for congregations to consider how they can work together for the sake of the Kingdom. Large congregations can explore entering into partnerships with small congregations that cannot support a full-time pastor. New models (beyond just dual parishes) are being developed to be able to care for the growing number of small congregations and to pool resources for efforts to engage communities. Dialogue between pastors and lay leaders of congregations is necessary to consider the needs of their respective flocks and to explore mission opportunities.

Such cooperation is not without challenges related, for example, to potential conflicts over history, facilities, and finances. However, when congregations are committed to reaching out into their communities, they are also willing to consider the possibility of collaborating with other congregations for the sake of God's mission.

It is good for congregations to consider their unity based upon Christ and their common confessional commitment. It is from the font and the table that their unity is established through Christ. Efforts to build congregational partnerships require patience and also intentional teaching regarding identity and unity in Christ.

3. Congregations Working with Community Organizations

As Lutheran immigrants began to spread across the country in the middle of the nineteenth century, they did more than plant congregations and establish schools. The early years of the Missouri Synod saw the founding of homes for orphans and the aged, hospitals, and various social ministry organizations. Lutherans were leaders in striving to address the needs of people in their communities. Congregations today have opportunities to partner with organizations that Lutherans helped establish to

demonstrate their care for the sake of the Kingdom and our communities. Lutheran social ministry organizations can be effective partners as the church seeks to provide for the particular human care needs of each community. Some congregations have found great support from these organizations. They are often more acquainted with legal issues and government regulations that might otherwise prevent congregations from considering potential human care projects. Congregations today are venturing out into such areas as housing, health care, food and clothing banks, and counseling services through cooperation with other Lutheran organizations.

Potential partners for congregations in addressing community needs include banks, hospitals, and local businesses that might cooperate with congregations in ventures such as support groups, English classes, legal aid workshops, and financial education classes. Such community-oriented programs are never carried out in place of the ministry of Word and Sacraments, but can be done to help congregations to reach those outside of the congregation by demonstrating loving care for the neighbor.

Quo Vademus?

There are both challenges and opportunities for rural and small-town congregations today, but where is the hope? Pastors and congregations are constantly told what they lack rather than being reminded of the gifts that they have received from God. Pastors of small-town congregations are made to feel unsuccessful or inadequate in serving in such small settings. Congregation members are aware of the limitations of their resources, but they are not left without the Lord's gracious provision.

One of the significant differences between rural settings and suburban settings is that in the rural congregation members often have deep congregational roots. In many cases, the younger and middle-aged families that live in these communities have chosen to do so. They have considered the opportunities that larger communities offer (and in some cases they have even lived in them), but they have made the conscious decision to return to a small town. A "Century Farm" sign, for example, is a symbol of a family's commitment to the land and their community. These families are tremendous resources because they understand the history and remain committed to its future.

A second asset of smaller congregations is that often they are more responsive to emergent needs. There is no need for a committee to be formed or a resolution to be passed when circumstances arise. In fact, smaller congregations are often more aware of problems faced by people in their communities than congregations in larger communities. Smaller congregations often function like families so that they are capable of responding quickly to specific needs.

Today, rural and small-town congregations see the challenges ahead. They do not shrink from these challenges because even the smallest congregations are blessed with the Means of Grace. Their confidence is in Christ who continues to give life through the preaching of the Word and administration of the Sacraments. Christ's Church is sent to proclaim the Gospel to all the world, even small towns that were once thought to be predominantly Christian.

There is indeed hope for small-town congregations in their work to engage those outside the faith. The late Swedish theologian, Bo Giertz, wrote of the church's contemporary task of proclaiming the Gospel:

The message is continually confronted with new circumstances and changing times. If the church only possessed a mechanically memorized gospel and would she only be able to reproduce and repeat the past, she would soon be dead. But she is not a lecturer of ancient wisdom. In the Spirit's power, she proclaims from the fullness of Christ. The very life of Christ pulsates in her veins. In each new generation new people are received into this mysterious fellowship. And they are children of their time, filled with its questions and need. But they are also children of the Church, filled with the life of the Spirit and the power of the Word. Therefore they are able to present the old message as the innermost possession of their own being. And in the language of their own time, they will answer the questions of their own generation. Thus the church can handle ever new situations with an ever regenerated and refreshing gospel. Yet it always remains the same gospel.²²

It is the Lord's Church to which we have been called, and we participate in His mission. Therefore, we do not despair or lose hope. We make use of those gifts with which God has blessed us as we go about His Kingdom work today. Klaus Detlev Schulz writes hopeful words for all congregations, "Affirming the Holy Spirit as the subject of mission from the cross frees Lutheran mission from seeking ambitious goals of expansion. Rather, the Church concentrates on one major activity: the proclamation of the Gospel, from which the Church as community emerges and lives."²³ However, this emphasis on the Holy Spirit's work through the Word that is found in Lutheran missiology is not an excuse for quietism or retreat from engagement with the world. As we consider the challenges facing the world today, we are reminded that each Christian is called to be God's instrument in His mission. Schulz further writes of this aspect of the Christian's vocation:

The most important role for all Christians is participation in the mission of God and the Church. There may be divergent views on defining exactly what the missionary obligation entails. However, the underlying premise should be that the Church's mission engages all Christians, not just a few. . . . Christians contribute to furthering God's kingdom through their witness, which speaks to their cultural situation yet flows from Word and Sacrament

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into their lives and their Christian vocation. The arena of mission is precisely where Christians are placed at home in the family, at work, and in their daily activities. This is a fundamental Lutheran doctrine.²⁴

So where do we go from here? It is impossible to turn a blind eye to these challenges and pretend that they do not exist. We need to be informed about the challenges facing our communities and consider ways to respond with the gifts that God has provided. There are many opportunities for mission work and amid a population that is more than half unchurched across rural America. God's mission to the world flows from the font, pulpit, and table as the gifts of God are shared with God's people. The Church is those who are called out by God from the world, but then are sent back into the world to proclaim His Word where God has placed them. Such is the mission of every congregation, whether centered in the urban core or found among the suburban sprawl or among the small towns. Big challenges face small-town congregations today. The people of God have been called by God as part of His mission for a time such as this.

Endnotes

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³ Barney Wells, Martin Giese, and Ron Klasen, *Leading Through Change: Shepherding the Town and Country Church in a New Era* (St. Charles: ChurchSmart, 2005). "In recent years a new kind of rural poor has burst onto the scene. These folks are very different from the traditional poor of rural communities and many of them are new to rural places entirely," 45.

⁴ David L. Brown and Kai A. Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience & Transformation* (Maiden: Polity, 2012), 190.

⁵ Jeanne Hoeft, L. Shannon Jung, and Joretta Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 125.

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⁷ Alan Hoback and Scott Anderson, "Proposed Method for Estimating Local Population of Precariously Housed," accessed April 11, 2014, <http://nationalhomeless.org/publications/precariouslyhoused/Hobackreport.pdf>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

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¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹¹ Brown and Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century*, 76.

¹² Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, 153.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁵ Brown and Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century*, 150.

¹⁶ Wells, Giese, and Klasen, *Leading Through Change*, 50.

¹⁷ Sabrina Tavernise and Robert Gebeloff, “Once Rare in Rural America, Divorce Is Changing the Face of Its Families,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2011, accessed May 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/us/24divorce.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

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¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ “Storm Lake” City-Data.com, accessed August 30, 2014, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Storm-Lake-Iowa.html>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Bo Giertz, *Christ’s Church: Her Biblical Roots, Her Dramatic History, Her Saving Presence, Her Glorious Future*, tr. Hans Andrae (Eugene: Resource Publications, 2010), 66–67.

²³ Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: The Lutheran Theology of Mission* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 144.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.