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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews about 25 major studies printed since 1920, and in turn, these refer to some 75 other studies about rural churches, their location, numbers, ministers, denominational arrangements, and supporting population per church on a county level. On the role of rural social science in Theological education, one study reports that the pastor is not only a man of God but a man of knowledge, not only in theological but in all fields of study. On the basis of these studies covering 50 years, the author states that while rural is by definition non-metropolitan, people everywhere since the 1960's have received the same knowledge, entertainment, and news from metro TV. Therefore, the rural community no longer depends upon the church to furnish knowledge in all fields of study, but rural people continue to depend upon the church to provide their theology and man of God. (AUTHOR)

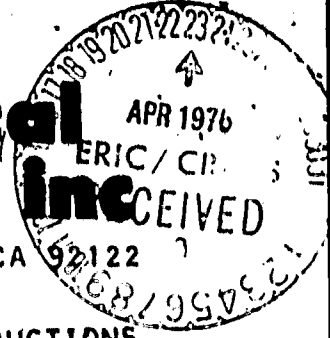
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Some Early and Current Studies of Rural Churches

William H. Dreier

Rural Church Life in the Middle West (Landis, 1922) reports on Clay County, Iowa, and Jennings County, Indiana. The northwest Iowa County had 16 townships, 12 communities, 33 churches, and an average of one church for each 508 people. The last page (Landis, 1922:89) was an advertisement which announced "Unique Studies of Rural America, Town and Country Series, Twelve Volumes, made under the direction of Edmund deS. Brunner, Ph.D. What the Protestant Churches Are Doing and Can Do in Rural American--the Results of Twenty-six Intensive County Surveys." The ad indicated eight volumes were ready and four were forthcoming. During the decade of the 1920's about 1,000 counties were completed in the surveys. (Nelson, 1974:3) Many of these additional studies were completed in the decades following World War I. Among them was "Rural Churches and Community Integration" by Bultena, (1944). The location was a six square mile rural area, about ten miles east of Madison, Wisconsin, with a density of about 35 persons per square mile. It included 18 churches and the people represented 40 different churches (Bultena, 1944: 259). The study concluded the rural church serves to integrate family, occupational, nationality, status groups, and the like, rather than community groups based on localities.

The Negro's Church by Mays & Nicholson (1933) was the first comprehensive contemporary study of the Negro church (Mays, 1933:V). It was based on 609 urban churches located in 12 metropolitan areas of the north and south and included such places as Atlanta, Baltimore, Birmingham, Chicago, Detroit, New Orleans and Philadelphia, plus 185 rural churches in the four counties of Fort Bend, 40 miles southwest of Houston, Texas; Peach, 60 miles southwest of Macon, Georgia; Montgomery, around the city of Montgomery in south central Alabama; and Orangeburg, 60 miles south of Columbia, South Carolina.

The rural churches average membership was approximately 145, compared with 585 for the urban churches. Five of the seventeen chapters in the study deal with specific aspects of rural churches; such as membership, ministry, program, finances and over churching.

The first Negro church in America is reported to have been in a rural area and was founded at Silver Bluff, South Carolina, between the years of 1773-1775. A George Liele who preached there was liberated by his master and it is generally believed he was instrumental in organizing the first Negro Baptist Church in the city of Savannah in about 1779. (Woodson, 1921:41) The first black churches in both rural and urban America thus began about the same time.

A number of early cooperative research studies were made by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and State Experiment Stations following World War I. Some of these were listed by Galpin in his memoirs (1938:50) and a number have been restudied. In the first study in 1920, Wade County, North Carolina, had a population of 75,155 which included the city of Raleigh (population 24,428). (Zimmerman, 1922). The 1950 restudy was made to determine the changes in locality groups in Wade County during the twenty-five years and to determine the changes in service areas, (Mayo and Bobbitt, 1951:7) By 1950 the county had a population of 136,450 and Raleigh had 65,000 or 48 percent as compared with 33 percent in 1920. Only the area beyond the major city of Raleigh was studied, the total square miles amounted to 858 in 19 townships.

The early "town and country" series had the church and particularly the protestant church as its main focus. The Wade County Study, like other early cooperative research studies, aimed at getting at the primary groups or local neighborhoods, and therefore, studied "the organization of the service centers"

which the farm people were at that time using--trade centers, schools, churches, lodges, and other than neighborhood organizations and services. (Mayo, 1951:3) The groups found in Wade County numbered 133 in 1922 and 197 in 1948. Among both the white and Negro groups were some (27 and 17) which were present in 1922 but not in 1948. The groups which did not reappear were compared with those which persisted. Among the 27 missing white groups, 48 percent had schools and 41 percent had churches, among those that persisted 83 percent had schools and 74 had churches. Among the 17 Negro groups missing in 1947, 47 percent had schools and 42 percent had churches, while among those that persisted 77 percent had schools and 60 percent had churches.

Early in the decade of the 1950's Hostetter and Mather (1952:ii) state in the introduction of their paper on Participation in the Rural Church:

In the report, data pertinent to participation in the rural church has been abstracted from a number of studies, mostly not focused upon the rural church, and mostly the results of agricultural experiment station research. The purpose has been to assemble in one convenient paper the major information now available concerning factors associated with participation and non-participation in the rural church for the use of the more serious students of the problem.

The table of contents on this paper lists fourteen items beginning with "Sex" and "Age" and concluding with "Denominational Choice." The bibliography has 73 separate items, with 5 dated in the 1920's; 18 in the 1930's; 36 in the 1940's; 11 in the 1950's; and 3 were undated. Specific reference will be made to some of these studies in later chapters of the research.

One of the most comprehensive studies of one state's rural churches of the post-World War II period was based on 99 randomly selected townships from the 114 counties in Missouri (Hepple, 1957). The base data was collected in 1952 and the seven resulting bulletins were reviewed in Rural Sociology between 1958 and 1970 (Hassinger, 1970:354). Each township averaged over five churches, as a total of 534 local congregations were found

and over half, 343, were located in the open country, 120 in small villages and 71 were in large villages. About one-fourth were of the sect type and three-fourths church type.

During the 1960's one of the most popular and widely read studies of a rural community was about a village in upper New York, this widely read text gave a complete report of the village, its people, politics, schools, and churches (Vidich, 1958). In 1950 the village had a population of 2,601 and four churches. In addition there were seven other churches in the township (Vidich, 1958:232). Only one of the 12 was of the sect type. No distinction is made as to whether the seven churches located outside the village were in the open country or in the five hamlets (Vidich, 1958:16). With a total population of 3,000 it means the area had an average of 250 people per church.

One of the many interesting statements found in this study is made in the chapter "Religion and the Affirmation of the Present."

In consequence, although the churches organize the major portion of the public life of the community, their activities involve only the 300-400 persons who are interested in church activities. This, of course, is only a small portion of the 1,700 adults involved in the life of the community. Nevertheless, the multiplication of the activities of these 400 people, by participation in numerous church programs and social activities, is so great as to give the appearance of dominating the whole of the public life of the entire community. (Vidich, 1958:234)

Church and church membership in Green County, west central Iowa, was studied as part of a larger research on the impact of population change on rural community life. (Kenkel, 1962). The three towns in the county had 19 churches, the small villages 15, and 8 were in the open country. This was an average of one church for each 342 residents. The county includes 16 townships and 14,379 people in 1960 compared with 15,544 in 1940 and 12,716 in 1970. The county was served by four public school districts (State of Iowa, 1973:89).

Churches and changing school districts were studied in Van Buren County

in the southeast corner of Iowa by Dreier (1963). This is a historic county in Iowa, located on the Missouri border and divided by the Des Moines River. It has an area of about twelve townships and in 1963 there were 30 churches in the five small and three larger villages, plus 7 in the open country for a total of 37 compared with 46 churches in 1933 (Dreier, 1963:27). The area had 80 local school districts in 1933 and three in 1963. In 1933 there was a church for every 274 residents of the county as compared with 264 in 1963. The population had decreased from 12,603 to 9,778 in those 30 years. In 1970 the population had further declined to 8,643.

A rural county in southwest Kansas with a 1960 population of 2,990 was restudied in 1967. There was a church for every 230 people and six were located in the large villages, five in the small villages and two in the open country. (Mays, 1968:99). In 1940, this county was identified as a "dust-bowl" disorganized community by Bell, (1942). In 1937 the county had two high schools and six elementary schools and these centers were the same in 1962 but the total enrollment had increased from 485 to 946 students (Mays, 1968:92). The number of school taxing units or districts had decreased from 29 in 1929 to 9 in 1964. By 1970 the small villages had grown from 686 to 1,161, the larger villages from 1,077 to 1,208, and the population of the county was 3,672 or one church per 283 inhabitants.

Also restudied fifteen years later, were the same 99 randomly selected Missouri townships first chosen in 1952. The number of churches had changed from 534 to 511 in 1967 (Hassinger, 1970:358). This represented a 4.3 percent decrease but 69 groups had ceased to exist and 46 new churches had been started. The "church type" groups had lost a net of 29 or 7.9 percent and the "sect type" groups gained 6 or 4.2 percent. Losses were most likely to occur in the open country and villages of under 200 population and additions

were most likely to be in larger rural places of 1,000 to 2,499 (Hassinger, 1972:428).

The local church and the town-country community was examined currently (1969) and historically by Smith and others from the Garrett Theological Seminary (Smith, 1969). The study first pointed out that "rural" was not a synonym for "farm" and then continued with a chapter entitled "From Team Haul to Non-Metropolitan Community" (Smith, 1969:13). The thread of concern for the rural community (church) can be seen as starting with the August 10, 1908, appointment of the Commission on Country Life by President Theodore Roosevelt. This led next to the Committee on Social and Religious Surveys of the National Council of Churches, designed by deS. Brunner (Landis, 1922:89). Then the "Early Co-Operative Research" studies organized by C. J. Galpin from the Division of Farm Population and Rural Life, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, United States Department of Agriculture, which were published between 1921 and 1926 (Mayo, 1950:6). A decade later Carl C. Taylor selected six very different rural communities caught in the depression times of the thirties and these were researched and the studies were published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in the early 1940's (Mays, 1968:137).

While the introduction to the report of the Commission on Country Life said in 1911: "The time has arrived when the church must take a larger leadership, both as an institution and through its pastors, in the social reorganizations of rural life" (Smith, 1969:13), it seems evident from this review of some of the studies and restudies between 1920 and 1970 that the church had become less of an influence in the community in the sense that with each decade the rural population was declining and seemed forced to accept its leadership from institutions and groups outside the church and community (Vidich, 1958:313). Indeed the very church type groups which were represented by

deS. Brunner and Smith were significantly decreasing even in number, while the others or sect type churches, barely represented in the 25 historical works and 22 specific works on the town and country church (Smith 1969:83-85), were increasing (Hassinger, 1970:358).

Near the conclusion of the report on the role of rural social science in Theological education, Smith makes this statement: "One professor pointed out that "The pastor is not only a man of God but a man of knowledge" in the town-country community. Through him the contributions of modern knowledge, not only in theological but in all the fields of study, move into the community." (Smith, 1968:56). The rural community moved into the instant hearing of all knowledge when the Rural Electric Coops brought the radio to the farm and village in the late 30's and 40's. Although rural is classified as non-metropolitan, it received the same metropolitan point of view with the coming of television in the '50's and '60's. The rural community no longer depends upon the church for knowledge in all the fields of study, but the rural people continue to depend upon the church to provide their theology and man of God.

In the first four years of the decade of the '70's the official journal of the Rural Sociological Society has published sixteen issues and about 150 extended and brief articles. Seven articles in the first 14 issues have been concerned with the church in the rural society. Two of the articles reported on the restudy of the churches in 99 randomly selected Missouri townships and have already been mentioned (Hassinger, 1970 and Hassinger, 1972). A brief comment about each of the other five studies and about one recent book will conclude this review. Three articles came from a national study of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. made by Nelson (1970 and 1971) and Nelson and Frost (1971). Substantial rural-urban differences among Presbyterians

(as measured by a 72-item questionnaire and an 8-item Guttman scale for civil rights) in attitudes toward race relations were found, with rural dwellers and especially rural laity, elders in the local church - more conservative (Nelson, 1970:161).

Using a secondary analysis of Gallup-Poll data Nelson and others (1971) expected that there would be an inverse relationship between residence and conservatism, that is, religious orthodoxy. This expectation was confirmed and they conclude, not that rural residents are more religious; rather, they are more conservative in ideology (Nelson and others, 1971:394).

The study of residence, anomie, and receptivity to education was made from interviews of a purposive sample drawn from a total of 18 churches selected by random sample from a listing of Presbyterian churches in a five state Southern Appalachian region (Nelson and Frost, 1971:524). They conclude:

Rural residents of Southern Appalachia, though more likely to attribute success to a good education, actually seem to place less emphasis upon education, as measured by the amount of education desired for a son. Attribution of success to good education can be best viewed as being part of the fatalistic culture of these people. (Nelson and Frost, 1971:531)

Earlier in the study, in speaking of the sample, the writer noted lower-class respondents were under represented and the class bias of the sample was due to the fact that the Presbyterian denomination draws more heavily from the middle and upper classes, in comparison to the majority of denominations in the region (Nelson and Frost, 1971:524).

A brief article on rurality and traditional morality in America is based on a sample of sophomore high school students collected from the same 69 Pennsylvania rural communities, studied in 1947, 1960 and 1970 (Willits and others, 1973:38). A twelve Likert-type item scale, ^{was used} to measure the degree of conservatism or traditionalism of youth toward certain behaviors, ~~was used~~. The number sampled was 2,601, 3,898, and 5,429; and students each year were

compared by place of residence; farm, open country nonfarm, and town. School areas were the same in all three years and in 1947 the towns had a population of 2,500 or less. The study concludes that in absolute terms the amount of variance explained by place of residence is not large. However, a careful re-examination of the data showed that the amount of change was generally greatest for the town grouping and least in the farm category (Willits and others, 1973: 43). The number by residents is not reported and only two of the twelve items have a slight relation to religion. While the mean conservative score was significantly less for town than for farm youth in 1970, on the two items "Irregular Church Attendance" and "Sabbath labor," the difference (decrease in conservative mean score) were even greater when farm scores for 1947 were compared with 1970 on these and most other items (Willits and others, 1973:41).

The seventh article in Rural Sociology deals with the Amish and their survival. Traditional Amish agriculture has been the expression of a core culture where a harmonious balance among God, nature, family, and community was the goal (Stoltzfus, 1973:199). Because of this the Amish are recognized as a special group within the rural society and within the organized church. In this study, conducted among four of the twelve geographical Amish church districts in Illinois, personal interviews, from 2.5 to 4 hours in length, were conducted with a 50 percent random sample of three of the four districts. One of the conclusions was that the Amish alternative to ego-involvement in complex technology and high material consumption is an elaborate ego-involvement in family and community (Stoltzfus, 1973:205).

A recent book written by Banks (1972) from the black Evangelical viewpoint, has very little at all to say about the rural black church. The 55 books listed in the bibliography do not include the title of any studies of rural black churches and indeed does not include any reference to the Mays and Nicholson classic⁽¹⁹³³⁾. In the forty plus years since the ~~1933~~ Mays and

Nicholson study their statement about the Negro rural church has no doubt proven to be true. "But life in the rural South has been completely revolutionized within the last eighteen years, and social and economic changes have profoundly affected the Negro rural church. A good many of the churches, once flourishing, are no longer needed and are economically unable to exist except at a poor dying rate. The need for fewer churches and better ones is just as imperative, possibly more so, for the rural areas as it is for urban centers. If these churches do not consolidate, a large number of them will die of natural causes." ^{(Mays and Nicholson,} (Banks, 1933:276)

In most rural areas the population loss from the farm and the non-farm areas in the last three decades has left church and school buildings empty simply because there are fewer families and children and also fewer pocketbooks to finance programs and teachers. The churches have attempted to respond by joining together in the larger parish or yoked-fellowship. Several years ago in an editorial the Des Moines Sunday Register (6-6-71:23) mentioned such arrangements among seven Roman Catholic parishes in four southern Iowa counties; among some Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Church of Christ congregations in some of these same counties; among seven Lutheran congregations in southern Iowa and northern Missouri; among eight United Methodist Churches in Clay County (northwest Iowa); and among five United Methodist Churches in Jefferson County (west central Iowa).

About 30 months later a story about one of these team ministries appeared in the same paper with the headline "Parish Discontent Over Priest Sharing" (Des Moines Register, February 10, 1974:24). The seven member parish council at St. Bernard Catholic Church in Osceola had resigned saying "you can't run a parish with three chiefs." Their church was sharing three priests with six other Catholic parishes in the four-county area of southern Iowa. This discontent, however, must not have changed the picture because the three member

Roman Catholic team along with the Ministerial Association from Decatur, Ringgold and Wayne Counties, plus others sponsored a one day workshop in "The Whole Community - Its Future?" at the Clarke County Junior High Auditorium, Osceola, on April 21, 1974. In a personal letter to the author, dated July 26, 1974, Father Paul Connelly stated about 60 people had been present for the meeting. He enclosed a church bulletin for July 13-14 and its heading was "Leon Regional Catholic Community," and listed three priests. The bulletin included names and events of the St. Bernard's Church, Leon Parish, Eagleville, Davis City, and Osceola.

Finally the current and changing significance of the church in the rural community and to the rural family may be illustrated by an examination of the history of one rural Iowa family as written and first privately published by Carl Hamilton, at Ames, Iowa in 1973. He looked back over a century of Iowa's rural history and told what happened to his family, his father, grandfather, and great grandfather, Joseph K. Hamilton, who came to Iowa from the east and died in 1911 at the age of 94. In No Time At All (Hamilton, 1973) used over 100 pages to present family history under 79 section headings. Some are: Country Schools 1900: Three Teachers a Year!; Ol' Pete and King: Two Very Special Horses; When School Busses Used Real Horsepower; Going to the Sandhills for Feeder Cattle; and Depression and Foreclosure Leave Their Marks. This rural family history has no section heading or mention of religion, churches or Sunday School. In the newspaper account of the funeral of great grandfather Joseph it states he was a member of the Methodist Church for 80 years, and grandfather R.A.'s funeral was in the Methodist Church in 1911, but no church is mentioned in the account of father B.A. Hamilton's death in 1967.

While this rural family had in each generation become less aware of the church, the rural church had nevertheless remained in the area, as part of the

community and neighborhood. The earliest county study (Landis, 1922) of Clay County, Iowa, reported 33 churches, an average of one for each 508 persons. From an early Sunday School Report of Van Buren County, Dreier (1963) found 46 churches in 1933, an average of 274 people per church, and 37 churches in 1963 for an average of 264 people per church. In the 50 years between 1922 and 1972 the country church has not died; it has changed, not unlike the family farm, and in some townships has become fewer in numbers and larger in its property holdings, while in other places in rural America the rural church, like the rural farmer, remains poor, weak and leaderless.

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