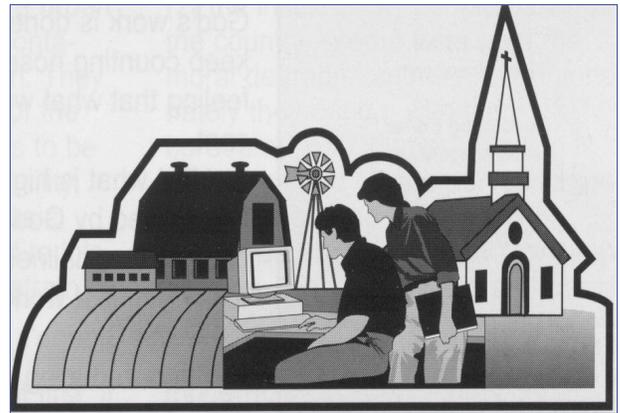


# Changes Affecting the Town & Country Church

*Barney Wells—a country church pastor for 34 years and now a seminary professor—taught a course for Bethel Seminary's (St. Paul, Minn.) Town and Country Doctor of Ministry program titled "Leading the Town and Country Church Through Change." I had the privilege of being one of Barney's students. What follows are some of my notes taken from class discussions as well as a few reflections of my own . . .*

Ron Klassen, RHMA Executive Director



Most rural areas are changing at a pace they've not experienced before. Pastors and church leaders would do well to be aware of these changes and how they might affect the church.

**1. De-agriculturalization.** While 25% of people in the U.S. live in rural America, less than 2% are farmers.

When Barney first arrived at his church in Walnut Grove, Illinois, only two in the congregation were not in ag-related jobs—a lawyer and Barney. Today only 20% of the church is in an ag business. Reasons for this demographic change include: (1) increasingly efficient farming techniques—most notable being larger farm equipment requiring less manpower, (2) a decline in farm income coupled with the lure of better wages in other occupations and (3) an expanding population creating an urban sprawl that is squeezing out farms and farmers.

De-agriculturalization provides lots of opportunities for pastoral care. Grief among farmers, sometimes of incredible proportion, should be met with love and compassion by the church.

**2. Globalization.** Most farmers are no longer provincial. An increasingly global economy, spurred on by such things as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), means farmers have a close eye on the world. They may care more about whether

it rains in Brazil than if it rains at home.

Minorities are moving into many rural communities, laboring as hired farm hands, lettuce and melon pickers, and feed lot or packing plant workers.

Challenges churches face with increasing globalization include smoothing racial tensions and reaching out to people of other nationalities. Pastors may also need to offer a listening ear to farmers who feel even less significant—not only are they a shrinking number in the U.S., but they now feel even smaller because they're a pawn in the global economy. Their fields are no longer the breadbasket of the world; their political clout is more diminished than ever. This lack of control can translate into anger and frustration.

**3. Industrialization.** Farming is ever-increasingly an industry and less a family venture. Many farms are large scale, with several dozen employees. Small hog operations are being replaced with mega hog farms. Poultry farms boast chickens by the hundreds of thousands.

These farm industries bring increased sophistication—college graduates, computerization, high-tech equipment, massive tractors and combines, and farming methods that have revolutionized the industry. For instance, fertilizer today might be applied with a \$250,000 spreader that is being guided by a satellite several

hundred miles up in the sky. Other examples include the ever-evolving use of hybrid seeds, selective breeding and genetic engineering.

These farming changes are bound to introduce a host of feelings into church contexts—on the one hand sadness, fear and anger because of real or threatened losses, on the other hand excitement because of new challenges. They also mean that the old stereotype many have of farmers being country hicks needs to change—with accompanying changes in how churches operate.

**4. Rurbanization.** Many in rural America today didn't grow up there. They've viewed any one of a number of alluring movies depicting beautiful rural scenery or reruns of "Mayberry" and have decided they want to move there.

Pastors would do well to take their church directories and analyze who is in their congregations today. Besides farmers, sitting in their congregations on Sunday might be some who commute to their jobs in the nearby city, retirees who have "escaped" the city, transplants who have moved into town to work in a factory that recently relocated there, people working in local service-industry jobs that have been created by burgeoning tourism, a guard from the local prison that was built a year ago in the area<sup>1</sup>, or professional people who can office anywhere due to advancing computer technology. There is much diversity today in rural America—so much so that "rural" can no longer be equated with "farming."

Who is in the rural church will undoubtedly affect how the church operates. For instance, Walnut Grove Church's first building addition was done years ago with almost no hired help (the rural method).

Presently the church is in the midst of its third addition, and they've contracted out almost all of it (the urban method).

Why do many churches start their Sunday services at 10:30 a.m.? Because farmers have to milk. How many milkers do you have in your congregation today? Walnut Grove Church recently started an 8:00 a.m. service which has attracted another segment of the population and led to 30% growth in attendance.

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These newcomers are a culturally mixed bag, perhaps best described by the word "rurban"—people with an urban cultural orientation who are living in a rural community

Those with one foot planted in the city and another in the small town often carry their dual

lifestyle aspirations into the church. They want the rural folksiness but also desire urban professionalism. They like spontaneity, but look for organization. They are drawn to the quaintness of the past, but expect certain things to be up-to-date—like the church facility, educational programs and music.

This cultural mix can lead to lots of challenges. Dudley and Walrath write about this scenario: "While local persons may welcome these newcomers at first, if the newcomers push for too much change the culturally mixed congregation becomes a stressful congregation. Those in which newcomers truly dominate often discover they are losing their appeal to long-standing residents. When such culturally mixed congregations lose their appeal to those who are native to the area and are unable to broaden their appeal sufficiently to include a large number of new persons moving into the area, they can lose heavily. They end up as churches that appeal to neither locals nor

newcomers, stressed as they are between two cultures. Culturally mixed congregations are especially vulnerable to conflict.

Ministers who serve in these congregations are painfully aware of their need for conflict-management skills.”<sup>2</sup>

**5. Post-modernization.** Unfortunately, like cities, rural areas are experiencing deterioration of belief in absolute truth, waning adherence to authority and declining morality. In fact, a survey by the National Rural Development Institute reveals that rural young people fared worse than their city counterparts in 34 out of 39 statistical categories, including immorality, alcohol and drug abuse, incidents of depression and crime.<sup>3</sup> Families, once the mainstay of rural communities, are now experiencing the same kind of disintegration as in urban areas. School violence is just as prevalent in small towns as in the cities.

Causes for this tragic phenomenon likely include: (1) mass media blanketing the country via satellites—creating a level playing field for sin, (2) the influx of city people moving to the country—some to escape the moral degradation there, but unfortunately they bring it with them, (3) boredom—with idleness leading to sinfulness and (4) the pervasive presence of the three most

common vices—alcohol, drugs and sex—inexpensive, readily available and easily transported to isolated places.

It goes without saying that postmodernization leads to lots of ministry opportunities for rural churches. There is certainly no shortage of challenges to be addressed.

We must be careful that the rural church remains relevant in the midst of the changes that are happening around it. This means—

- We can't continue operating as a "farm church" if most in our community aren't farmers.
- We can provide cultural understanding to rural and urban people in conflict with each other.
- We can help our church grieve over losses. We need to preach on topics like God's sovereignty (He is in control of what's happening in rural America), suffering (Why is God letting all this bad stuff happen to us?), and finding our identity in Christ—not our occupation.
- We can help our congregation see the challenges and opportunities that newcomers bring. Whereas at one time up to 85% of missionaries were from rural areas, now the mission field is coming to us!

<sup>1</sup>The rise of "injective" industries is another recent growth industry in rural America. Until recent years, rural America has been extractive—we have gotten good stuff out of it like crops, timber and fish. Now we're putting stuff into it—not nearly as wholesome—like landfills, prisons and toxic waste dumps. It used to be that counties with the least voters got stuck with this stuff; now towns are fighting for it—and the ones with the most voters get it.

<sup>2</sup>Carl S. Dudley and Douglas Alan Walrath, *Developing Your Small Church's Potential* (Valley Forge, PA; Judson Press, 1988), 43-44.

<sup>3</sup>Lee Mitgang, "Country Kids No Better Off," *Peoria Journal Star*, 23 May 1990, sec. A, p. 1, 3.

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Since the writing of this article, Ron and Barney, together with Martin Giese, have collaborated on a book – **Leading Through Change**. This book may be purchased through the RHMA website.