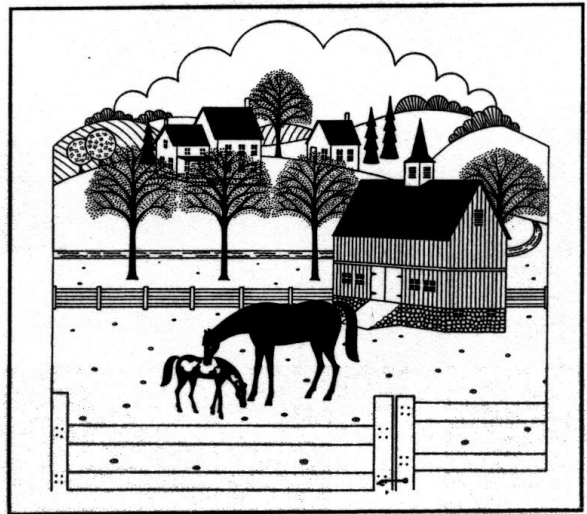


Contrasting Rural and Urban

A high percentage of pastors in small towns come from urban backgrounds. Furthermore, in recent years many urbanites have migrated to the country. Often a collision of cultures is the result. This article explores common differences between rural and urban people. While reading through the differences that follow, it is important not to look at them as right or wrong.

*These differences were gleaned from three primary sources: (a) Martin Giese's master's thesis, "A Pastoral Training Program for Rural Churches" (Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, 1993), (b) Kent Hunter's book, *The Lord's Harvest and the Rural Church* (Beacon Hill Press: Kansas City, 1993), and (c) a doctor of ministry class taught at Bethel Seminary by Barney Wells titled "Leading the Town and Country Church" (July 1999).*



Assessing success

Because of ongoing economic hardship and other crises regularly encountered (like bad weather and crop diseases), success to many rural people is making it another year. But for urban people, surviving is not good enough. They have been successful when this year's sales exceed the last. Urban people believe the church is successful when attendance and giving are up and the number of programs has increased.

An urban background pastor may struggle with a "survival is success" mentality in part because books on church growth put his "plateaued" church in an unfavorable category. If the church does not respond to his ideas for additional programming, he may take this as personal rejection, when the real problem is different cultural orientations.

The pastor who finds himself in a "survival is success" congregation needs to first of all affirm survival. To say, "All we're doing is surviving," is to not understand the rural culture. Instead he should applaud survival: "Praise God, we've survived! He must still have a purpose for us. Let's move forward as He allows!"

If progress in the rural church is too slow, the pastor might consider loops of ministry that extend beyond the local context.

Small is beautiful

Small is attractive to most rural people. Large might be threatening. They fight school consolidation because they do not think bigger is better. They may have mixed feelings about growth in their church. Many urbanites, on the other hand, see a direct correlation between a church's size and its vitality.

The pastor needs to make sure his theology is right. God does not view small as inferior, neither should he (Deut. 7:7-8, Zech. 4:10a). A smaller youth group is not inferior; fewer worshippers does not mean inferior worship. Some of the most meaningful experiences happen in intimate contexts.

Perhaps the rural pastor's greater focus should be on church health rather than growth. Hopefully the growth will come, as it often does, even in sparsely populated areas.

Independent, but interdependent

Rural people tend to live, work, and think independently. While they are close-knit and

know what it means to be good neighbors, they are also rugged individualists, more likely to “tough it out” by themselves than seek help. They often cooperate with each other because they need to, not because they are drawn to work together.

It is helpful to understand the difference between independence and interdependence. For many farmers, interdependence is a necessary concession. There are many uneasy and temporary alliances formed between farmers, usually to accomplish a task that cannot be done alone (like cattle branding, harvesting, and helping each other out in times of crisis). This does not necessarily reflect a desire to work together as much as an unspoken understanding that “If I don’t help you build your barn, you may not help me at harvest time.” This does not mean they are antisocial, it is just their tendency to first try to figure out how to go it alone.

It can be difficult for rural people to find consensus and pull together. For instance, they’ve had a hard time agreeing on farm policy, which has made it difficult for them to unite to achieve common goals.

Urban people, by contrast, are used to living close together and working with other people. This does not mean they all get along or that they enjoy being with people more than their rural counterparts, but they are more accustomed to it.

When the pastor fails to bring a congregation to a consensus or lead in a certain direction, he might put too much blame on himself or take it as personal rejection, when in reality it is just the culture.

Planning for the future

On the farm there are constant reminders of limitations and inability to control surroundings because of unpredictability due to factors beyond one’s control (e.g., crop failures, bad weather, and fluctuating

markets). In contrast, urban people live in controlled environments (e.g., precise manufacturing, technology that operates like clockwork, thermostats).

These two vastly different environments spawn key differences between how city and rural people might think. For instance, with so many uncertainties, establishing vision and setting goals—the subject of numerous books and seminars—may be regarded by rural people as presumptuous, foolish, and perhaps even sinful. How can one make plans when he doesn’t know what tomorrow will bring (James 4:13-16)? But the urban pastor is likely to view goal setting as essential (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

These differing perspectives can be balanced by realizing that even agrarians set goals. They have things in mind to do for the day, an idea of how much land they would like to eventually farm, and how big they would like their cattle herd to become. But they tend to hold these goals loosely and somewhat privately.

Pastors in these contexts can set private goals. They can work with the leaders and congregation to set flexible goals. These goals might be informal rather than carefully scripted. And, the whole concept of vision should probably be kept low-key.

Specialization orientation

Rural people tend to be jacks-of-all-trades but masters-of-none. Their work requires that they be a welder, carpenter, plumber, mechanic, and electrician. While perfectionists are found in rural areas just as in urban, one cannot possibly be proficient in all things. And so, rather than ask, “Can I do the job well?” rural people ask, “Can I do the job?”

Pastors from urban backgrounds might be accustomed to more specialization. City people tend to do fewer things, which means they do those fewer things pretty

well, and then they hire specialists to do what they cannot do.

This could create friction. Rural people's whole approach to ministry might be, "We'll do the best we can." They will likely be satisfied with an adequate keyboard player. Church maintenance projects might be approached with the thinking: "At least we won't have to hire it done."

Wise pastors will realize the rural perspective has more to applaud than condemn. A willingness to serve is better than a "Let's hire it done" mentality. Participation is usually a higher virtue than perfectionism. At the same time it is good for the pastor to, in a gentle and non-condescending manner, nudge his people in the direction of quality. One country church pastor summed up the needed balance very well: "High standards of performance have been modeled and gradually accepted. At the same time, we have honored everyone's abilities."

Finances

Few things are more baffling to pastors from urban backgrounds than the agrarian's approach to finances. For one thing, an agrarian might think his pastor is better off financially than he, not because he makes more money but because he has a regular paycheck.

Urban people don't understand the "poor-rich" farmer. While farmers may have considerable assets, their asset-to-income ratio is imbalanced. They may live at near poverty level.

The farmer's assets are non-liquid and non-monetary (land, machinery, livestock). When there is a money crunch at church, the urban pastor might wonder why a rural person doesn't sell a cow to help out. But he is reluctant to do so because the cow is his source of income.

Because life is unpredictable and income not guaranteed, rural people tend to find ways to get by and save for a "rainy day." They do not view "excess funds" as "excess" because sooner or later they will be needed.

Rural people tend to be more practical with spending. They are more likely to fix plumbing than spend money on a computer upgrade.

"Budget" might be a foreign term to a rural person. How can one budget when income is unknown? This may be viewed as presumptuous.

Not knowing these things, the pastor may feel personally rejected when he makes a suggestion for an expenditure that is vetoed, or think that his congregation is "unspiritual."

Outlook on life

Frequent disappointments can produce a pessimistic outlook. This is the rural person's defense mechanism, his protection against dashed hopes. It works this way: If he expects the worst, then whatever happens isn't so bad. Say "Good morning!" to a farmer and he might reply, "Oh, I don't know. It looks like rain." To which you might respond, "That'd be great for the crops." To which he might respond, "Might drown us out." A farmer never has a good year, never makes any money. Yet, at the same time farmers are some of the most optimistic people around, as evidenced by the fact they keep putting a crop in the ground no matter how many times they've been hailed out or how low the price of wheat.

The urban background pastor might tire of his rural congregation's negative outlook, tire of a "But what if" mentality. He needs to understand why rural people tend to be more chronically pessimistic and not allow their pessimism to become his pessimism. The pastor also needs to make sure the church is an oasis in the desert of discouragement. While sensitive to the

farmer's outlook, he should not allow it to impede the progress of the church.

Task orientation

Even if by personality rural people are time oriented, the nature of their work forces them to be task oriented: "First I'll do chores, then run to town for repairs, then fix the baler, then go a few rounds in the field."

This task orientation often is due to imprecise timing because of factors beyond their control. It is impossible, for instance, to schedule the behavior of animals. Rounding up cattle may take an hour or half a day.

If the church needs a new roof, in response to the question of when, the agrarian will say, "After planting." When is that? Answer: "When it's done." This can be frustrating for the urban pastor who carries a DayTimer.

A rural person might show up late to a meeting saying, "I had one more round to go in the field." Pastors would be wise to not make an issue of this task orientation.

Many pastors plan their work by the clock. But an agrarian is not likely to understand if he can't see his pastor because it's "his time to study." The farmer might live 40 miles away and this is the time when he had to come to town, and he decides to drop in to see his pastor.

To some degree, timeliness is cultural. With many rural people, 7:00 p.m. means "more or less around that time."

Definition of work

A new pastor was assisting in a feed store, helping to fill sacks with corn. As he pulled his first bag off the scale and started to close it, the pastor noticed a look of concern on the face of the store owner. "When we tie sacks, we use a miller's knot," he said. "I don't suppose you can do that." He didn't know his pastor had farmed for 10 years.

When he easily tied the knot, the store owner was impressed. "You're the first preacher I ever saw," he told him, "who knew anything at all about working."

A rural person might define "work" as manual labor. Desk work may not be viewed with the same respect. An urban background pastor may not understand why he is accused of not working hard. This can be a threat to his credibility. This difference in perspective can be eased if the pastor gets out of his study from time to time and does manual labor. As he earns credibility, he can back off from physical labor and devote more time to pastoral ministry.

View of each other

Rural people tend to think in terms of how they relate to each other, as opposed to functions and titles. Urbanites might say, "This is Bob. He is the chairman of our board. He is a senior partner in a law firm and also serves on the town council." But rural people would probably say, "This is Bob, Jim and Nadine's boy. He lives down at the old McPherson place."

An urban pastor may think his people care about his degrees, theological expertise, and career experience, when in reality they care most about how he relates to them. He needs to, as quickly as possible, work himself into the web of relationships by doing things like attend ball games, go to parties and celebrations, invite people over, visit widows, go to cattle sales, join the volunteer fire department, and frequent the coffee shop. Having impact in a rural community doesn't just happen when the pastor fulfills his official duties; it will also happen through relational bonding.

Decision making

Because they are more informal and unstructured, rural people tend to view committee and congregational meetings as an opportunity to fellowship. Dialogue will

drift from the business at hand. This may not settle well with a pastor who believes meetings should have a focused discussion, motion, and vote.

Rural people are used to being involved in every decision, great or small. The pastor may be frustrated by the “petty” issues that are brought up in meetings.

Rural people’s reluctance to talk in public, usually because of their private nature and non-verbal tendencies, means they are not as likely to share their opinions at meetings. And, they don’t want to risk conflict. After all, they have to live with each other the rest of the week! Thus it is likely that some decisions will be made after the meeting through an informal but carefully worked out

way of exploring how everyone feels. Often these “meetings after the meeting” convene in the church foyer, on the phone, in the cafe, or on the street corner. While rural people may give assent to formal decision-making processes, they don’t put a lot of stock in those processes. Any formal way of arriving at a decision can be rendered meaningless by informal discussions.

Pastors might get frustrated when their people easily approve a decision at a meeting, only to later hear them complain about it, ignore it, or reverse it. Rural pastors are wise to first talk about ideas and issues informally, letting people come to a consensus, then bring the issue to a meeting and a vote.



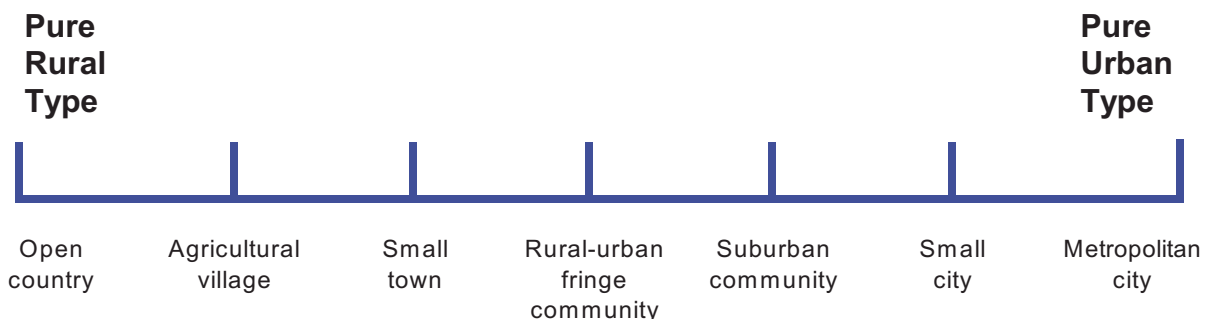
Can one accurately categorize rural and urban?

Contrasting rural and urban is imprecise because rural communities vary greatly. As a whole they differ more among themselves than they do from urban areas. Also, it is hard to differentiate between personality and culture. Sometimes people operate certain ways because of their personalities and sometimes because of their cultural orientation.

Furthermore, rural and urban differences are seldom a dichotomy; more often they are a matter of degree. Rogers and Burdge show in the continuum below that most people and communities are neither

completely rural nor urban. The degree to which they are one or the other is determined by where they are on the continuum. How much of a contrast there is between rural and urban persons or settings depends on how far apart they are on the continuum. People from a metropolitan city will experience the greatest of cultural differences with those who live in open country.

In spite of the imperfections of cultural classifications, they do aid understanding of urban and rural differences.



This graph was reproduced, with slight adaptations, from *Social Change in Rural Societies*, by Everett Rogers and Rabel Burdge (Meredith Corporation: New York, p.267).