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Opportunities amidst Challenges: Denominations and Rural Ministry

ALVIN J. LUEDKE

The anniversary book of the rural congregation was quite confusing. In the first three decades, the congregation seemed to be confused about its Lutheran identity. In a cycle of three to four years, the congregation alternated its affiliation between two Lutheran synods. Additional reading of the congregation's history helped clear the confusion. While at first glance the congregation seemed uncertain about its identity, in reality the congregation identified with the Lutheran group that had trained and ordained its current pastor. So, each time the congregation called a new pastor in those early years, it officially changed the group with which it was identified.

The most important observation here is that the congregation was primarily concerned with calling a pastor for service. The denominational group with which the congregation was identified was of only secondary importance. Consequently, the value of the denominational group was to locate and provide pastoral leadership for the congregation.¹

CONGREGATIONS AND DENOMINATIONS

The ambivalence exhibited by this congregation toward denominational

¹E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 53.

The changing social, economic, and religious landscape of rural communities offers denominations an opportunity for demonstrating renewed relevance to congregations in those areas, as denominational leaders and structures help rural congregations identify and meet the mission challenges they now face.

identification is not uncommon among rural congregations in the United States.² It is more proper to say, however, that there has often been a strong identification with a particular denominational label, but less identification with and support of a denominational administrative structure. Predominant in these ministries are the needs of the local congregation and its ministry area.

But this emphasis on the congregation's needs is not new. Circuit-riding preachers on the American frontier concentrated on establishing preaching stations and congregations.³ Immigrants from Europe to the United States came from countries in which there was an established state church. The American context, with the presence of many church groups in a given geographic area, resulted in a type of religious economy in which churches competed with each other for members.⁴ This produced a strong congregational emphasis among many denominations in the United States.

Immigrant communities in the United States tended to be made up of homogeneous ethnic groups. New immigrants needed others who could understand their language. Relatives followed family members who had arrived earlier and who had provided a destination where others from their native country could settle. In some communities, immigrants were sponsored or indentured in order to secure passage to the United States. Others simply followed ethnic migration streams to communities where persons from their ethnic group were present.⁵ This has led researchers of religion and communities to state that "religion and ethnicity

²The term "rural" refers to communities and places that are quite diverse in size, economic base, and patterns of transition. Rural places may rely on agriculture, mining, forestry, fishing, recreational activities, or retirement activities as the main industries. Rural places may be single homes in open country, small gatherings of dwellings and buildings in open country, isolated and small communities, communities and towns along major transportation routes, recreation or retirement communities, or bedroom communities on the edges of large cities. The U.S. Census Bureau generally defines urban areas as incorporated places with a population of 2,500 or more. A place that does not meet the criteria of the urban definition is rural. A second, and perhaps more useful, definition is based on the metropolitan/nonmetropolitan designation. Metropolitan areas are generally defined as counties in which there is a city with a population of 50,000 or more. These are designated as metropolitan central city counties. Additionally, a county adjoining a metropolitan central city county and meeting a threshold of a certain percentage of its population commuting to the metropolitan central city county for employment is designated a metropolitan suburban county. Counties that do not meet the metropolitan definition are designated as nonmetropolitan counties. The terms rural and nonmetropolitan, while not equivalent according to Census Bureau definitions, are often used interchangeably. In this article I will use the term rural to also include nonmetropolitan and small town populations. Denominations differ in how they define rural ministries. For example, the term used in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is "Small Town and Rural," with communities self-identifying as small towns. Thus, there are no strict population guidelines for what is designated a "Small Town and Rural" (STaR) place or ministry. While I use the open country and small-town congregation in an agriculturally-dependent community as the model for this article, the reader should be aware of the diversity that exists in rural communities and congregations.

³Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

⁴Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁵Some communities' ethnic identities are linked with the denominational affiliation of congregations (for example, a German community is most likely to have a Lutheran or Roman Catholic congregation). Additionally, some communities may have congregations that are members of the same denominational group, but that are separate organizations because of their historical ethnic roots (for example, a Norwegian Lutheran congregation and a German Lutheran congregation in the same rural community).

usually went hand in hand.”⁶ Researchers have named this the homogeneous unit principle of denominations.⁷ This principle maintains that groups are best able to evangelize people most like themselves.⁸

When immigrant ethnic groups formed congregations in their communities, the congregation generally did not have a resident pastor. Instead, many congregations shared a pastor who rode circuit among several congregations, a necessity dictated by the shortage of ordained pastors. This shortage of ordained leadership was one motivating factor for the formation of denominational structures.⁹ A process to identify and train pastoral leadership was needed. Theological training became an activity that was supported by the combined efforts and support of congregations of a particular denominational group in order to provide persons prepared to serve as pastors in congregations. A second leadership issue was the testing and certification of pastoral candidates to meet certain standards for conduct as pastors. This was of particular concern among the frontier congregations, where certain persons were found to fall short of behavioral standards for church leadership.¹⁰ A third aspect of leadership to be addressed was an orderly process for congregations to call pastors to their respective ministry settings. Congregations formed and worked with denominational structures to accomplish the certification, oversight, and calling of pastoral leadership.

“the denominational structure existed to support the congregations and oversee and coordinate functions that congregations needed to do in partnership”

Another reason that congregations worked with denominational structures was to accomplish the work of foreign missions.¹¹ Cooperation through a denominational structure allowed congregations to be more efficient in the oversight of mission money, calling missionaries, and providing support for them in foreign lands. Control of the denomination, however, continued to rest in the congregations, in a system characterized as “centralized direction and local control.”¹²

It should be emphasized that the reasons for congregations to participate in denominational structures were to provide for the congregation’s ministry and to make its efforts more efficient. Denominations were seen as vehicles through

⁶Daryl Hobbs, “Social Organization in the Countryside,” in *The Changing American Countryside: Rural People and Places*, ed. Emery N. Castle (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995) 375.

⁷C. Peter Wagner, “Church Growth Research,” in *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950–1978*, ed. Dean R. Hoge and David A. Roozen (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979) 270–287.

⁸Bruce A. Greer, “Strategies for Evangelism and Growth in Three Denominations (1965–1990),” in *Church and Denominational Growth*, ed. David A. Roozen and C. Kirk Hadaway (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 87–111.

⁹Nelson, *The Lutherans*, 83.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 201.

¹²Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 73.

which to accomplish the ministry of the congregation. The congregation was still the primary locus of ministry activity, while the denominational structure existed to support the congregations and oversee and coordinate functions that congregations needed to do in partnership.

The concentration on the congregation as the main arena of ministry activity is seen today in the issue of financial support from congregations for denominational structures. There are often questions about how denominations connect with congregations' ministries and what services denominations provide with the money that congregations give to these structures. Another example of the emphasis on congregational ministry is the lack of interest in denominational programs or personnel until the congregation needs to call pastoral leadership. For many congregations, the denomination's only purpose is to "get us a pastor" as soon as possible.

Interestingly, this congregational orientation to ministry continues to be present even when many other organizations in rural communities are experiencing consolidation and cooperation. In many rural communities schools have consolidated, with the rural schools closing and the youth coming into the larger school in town, and even school districts in different towns consolidating into one. The pattern of farm transition has been a decrease in the number of farms and an increase in farm size.¹³ Agricultural markets have integrated to the point that a few transnational corporations control large proportions of the world's grain and meat processing and marketing.¹⁴ People in rural communities work together in various ways on school and community boards, in various civic clubs, and on city councils. Yet these same individuals continue to maintain their denominational group affiliations through their congregations rather than uniting into one community congregation. Whatever may be the reason—history, ethnic identification, a set pattern—congregations relating to particular denominational groups continue to survive in rural communities.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DENOMINATIONS TO RELATE TO RURAL MINISTRY

So what is the future of denominations in relating to rural congregations? What might help denominations be more relevant to rural congregations and their ministries? I offer some thoughts on how denominations might increase their relevance for rural congregations, and provide support to the ministry of congregations and the church. These thoughts, while not exhaustive of all possible activities, arise out of my own experiences in serving in rural congregations and communities and out of conversations I have had with denominational leaders, pastors, and laypersons in these contexts.

¹³Don E. Albrecht and Steve H. Murdock, *The Sociology of U.S. Agriculture: An Ecological Perspective* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990) 41–59.

¹⁴L. Shannon Jung et al., *Rural Ministry: The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 96–108.

1. View rural contexts as mission fields

One culturally popular notion is that the United States is a Christian nation. Several symbols reinforce the notion of America's religiosity. "In God We Trust" is stamped on our coins. The pledge of allegiance contains the words "under God." American flags are located in many sanctuaries. There are worship services and special music for national holidays. Prayers are offered for our leaders and our land. Yet, results of a survey of congregations and membership indicate that 38.7% of the people in the United States do not identify themselves as members of a religious group.¹⁵ Such a figure suggests that the United States is a mission field for Christian churches.

A popular notion of rural America is that it has a slower pace of life, is more peaceful than urban America, and is a place of religious commitment. But studies of rural communities suggest that numerous challenges are present in rural America. Communities dependent on agriculture, mining, forestry, fisheries, and other extractive industries have experienced financial stress for several decades.¹⁶ With these financial struggles have come increased depression, alcoholism, divorce and other family stress, suicide, and migration of people out of these communities.¹⁷ Social-science researchers found that, in times of stress, persons in rural communities often decreased their social activity, lowering the level of their participation in churches and other community organizations. Persons suffering financial failure reported little help from churches in their communities.¹⁸

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These challenges offer ministry and mission opportunities in rural communities. God is at work in these communities, and the congregations in these communities have opportunities to bring healing and hope to their neighbors. Denominations have an opportunity to connect with these ministries by providing leaders and congregations with the skills and vision to understand and reach out to the needs of the community, particularly serving those who may not belong to or be active in a congregation.

¹⁵American Religion Data Archive, "Summary information on the Religious Congregations and Membership data used for the 'Mapping' and 'Report' features." Online: <http://www.thearda.com/RCMS/2000/CCMMMethods.html>.

¹⁶Cornelia Butler Flora, Jan L. Flora, and Susan Fey, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004) 225–256.

¹⁷Everett M. Rogers et al., *Social Change in Rural Societies* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988).

¹⁸David L. Ostendorf, "Toward Wholeness and Community: Strategies for Pastoral and Prophetic Response to the American Rural Crisis," in *Renew the Spirit of My People: A Handbook for Ministry in Times of Rural Crisis*, ed. Karla Schmidt (Des Moines, IA: Prairiefire Rural Action, 1987) 70–76.

2. *Provide support to rural congregations, similar to support for new congregation starts*

New congregational starts are often subsidized financially by denominations. For many rural congregations, developing an intentional outreach ministry will demand transformation in their ministry focus and activities. This could easily be analogous to a mission start or redevelopment effort.

Rural congregations located in communities that are economically stressed and declining in population may also be on the edge of viability. These congregations may not have the cushion of resources to engage in the transformational ministry that is needed for the congregation to become a missional congregation. Denominations can have a very important part in supporting rural ministry by viewing the redevelopment and transformation of rural congregations as similar to new congregation starts, providing financial resources and pastoral leadership with missional training that will lead the congregation to a new vision and put in place programs to address new opportunities. Denominations can also provide a process for new models to help congregations organize for mission.¹⁹

There will be a difference between transformation of rural congregations and new congregation starts. While in new congregation starts, participants in the ministry may bring some history of participation in a previous congregation, there is no organizational history in the current ministry start. A rural congregation engaged in transformational change will have an organizational history as well as a history of the congregation's place in the community that will affect the new ministry efforts. Denominations can help congregations that are transforming their ministry to understand and deal with the implications of their history on their future ministry.

3. *Recognize the present and increasing diversity in rural contexts*

The number of non-Anglos and their proportion of the United States population continues to increase. This growth is pervasive across the United States. Because many denominations have had membership with predominantly northern and western European ancestry, this demographic transition of increased non-Anglo population is an important issue for denominations.

Rural communities are experiencing this same transition. In some parts of the upper midwestern United States the Native American population has been present since the beginning of Anglo immigration. In recent decades the Hispanic population, the fastest-growing non-Anglo group in the United States, has increased in number and proportion in some rural communities. More recently immigrants from Africa and Asia have added to the diversity in rural communities in this region of the nation.²⁰ The non-Anglo growth has particularly occurred in

¹⁹Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig and William O. Avery, *Cooperating Congregations: Portraits of Mission Strategies* (Bethesda, MD: Alban, 1999).

²⁰Joseph A. Amato, *To Call It Home: The New Immigrants of Southwestern Minnesota* (Marshall, MN: Crossings Press, 1996).

communities with industries in meatpacking, poultry processing, and construction.²¹

Denominations have an opportunity to play a very relevant part in helping rural congregations address the ethnic population transition occurring in their communities. Denominational structures can help identify and train leaders to serve in communities and congregations experiencing ethnic population transition. Because denominations have addressed this transition in many contexts, the denomination can provide resources for helping congregations plan and initiate ministry programs to address this transition.

“denominations have an opportunity to play a very relevant part in helping rural congregations address the ethnic population transition occurring in their communities”

4. Provide some financial equity for service in rural contexts

Rural congregations often cannot or do not offer salaries that are as high as those for pastors in urban contexts. Congregation size, financial resources in the congregation and community, and a history of lower salaries for pastors are stated as reasons for this lower pay scale. This differential in remuneration, however, can make rural ministry less attractive than ministry in more urban contexts. This may result in fewer persons willing to consider serving in rural contexts and in shorter calls in rural congregations.²²

An additional problem linked to salaries is the pension and benefits package. Depending on denominational program, pensions and other benefits may be a percentage of the base salary package. This means that as congregations increase a salary, pension and benefits costs increase as well. For some congregations facing financial stress, the increases can be problematic, and leaders may be asked to forego salary increases. If pensions are associated with salaries, pastors who served in rural contexts for their careers may have substantially lower pensions than colleagues who served in other contexts. Again, such dynamics may make service in rural congregations less attractive than in other contexts.

Some denominations have discussed the possibility of salary equalization to address this problem of salary and pension differentials. However, when a congregation is the organization that calls and pays the leader, salary equalization across congregations seems highly unlikely. A second item that denominations could address is equalization of pensions, where a year of service in a congregation results in the same pension benefit regardless of congregational context. Because some pen-

²¹Donald D. Stull, Michael J. Broadway, and David Griffith, eds., *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

²²David Poling-Goldenne and L. Shannon Jung, *Discovering Hope: Building Vitality in Rural Congregations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

sion programs are administered by a denominational structure, equalization of pension benefits may be more easily accomplished than salary equalization. Such an approach could make service in rural congregations more attractive for leaders.

5. Exercise care in developing social statements so they are realistic for rural contexts

A member accompanied me to a workshop about ministry in rural contexts. The workshop addressed the farm financial crisis, its continuing effects on rural communities, and implications of these effects for ministry. A social statement of a denomination addressing agriculture was presented and discussed.

On our return trip I asked the member for his evaluation of the workshop. He reacted quite negatively to the social statement. He thought the statement was not relevant to his situation and, furthermore, that it suggested he was unfaithful in his vocation. This member was a manager of a large corporate agricultural operation that relied heavily on machinery, the latest genetic technology in seeds, chemical inputs, and government farm program payments. In the social statement, he heard a bias against corporate farms and toward small farm operations, toward less use of technology and genetics, and toward a discontinuance of government farm programs. He said he felt alienated from his denomination and unable to support its adopted statement. Furthermore, he felt that through its statement his church did not understand his situation, and that he was trying to be a faithful steward of the land and to his calling as a farmer, while still making a living.

This conversation emphasized a reality that denominations need to consider. As noted previously, rural America is very diverse and is becoming even more diverse. This diversity challenges the way denominations develop social statements. Because of so many different contexts, social statements threaten to alienate faithful members who, because of given factors, may be forced to make choices that contradict the statements of their denominational body. They may even see the denomination's statement as irrelevant. Consequently, denominations should seek to account for diversity in their social statements, particularly in addressing issues that affect rural communities. The process of developing statements should seek to include persons who understand and can represent this broad diversity while continuing to call for faithful stewardship of natural and human resources. Additionally, denominations should consider how their social statements may allow for faithful decisions across a range of contexts and economic situations, asking how the statement is relevant to the broad context.

6. Facilitate and encourage dialogue between urban and rural contexts

In 1 Cor 12, Paul uses the image of the body, each part connected to the others, as an image for the church. We are joined spiritually in Christ. We are also joined, rural and urban, in physical ways. Each is dependent on the other to provide products and services. Issues of food production and safety, use of resources, pollution of natural resources, and economic justice affect everyone. What happens in rural America affects urban America, and vice versa.

Denominations include persons in both rural and urban contexts, and denominations can provide a forum and process for discussion and increased understanding of challenges and needs within these contexts. An effective dialogue could honor all contexts of ministry and provide an avenue for decisions and support in the church. Christian community dialogue will need to consider the implications, challenges, and opportunities of electronic communication resources.

Historically, denominations have been important to the ministries of rural congregations—especially in training, certification for ministry, and calling of pastoral leadership and in coordinating mission activities. While rural communities and congregations face numerous challenges, denominations still have the opportunity to be active in helping provide leadership and in assisting these congregations to understand and prepare for the mission challenges they face. The impact of denominations on rural ministry will depend on how they respond to these opportunities. ⊕

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