



**RURAL MATTERS: Planting, Revitalizing,
Resourcing and Sustaining Life-giving,
Spirit-filled Ministry in Rural America**

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Introduction

Small-town rural America has long symbolized the heart of the nation. Tight-knit community. Open land of opportunity. Hard-working values. There's much to be admired in the heartland of America. Yet the recent growing migration to the cities is re-shaping the landscape of rural communities. As more people and resources move to urban settings, the rural heartland has gradually become under-resourced, overlooked, and often forgotten. Men and women who heed the call to ministry in these areas often fall off the radar, as they bear the burden alone. While the rural population in America is shrinking, its need for thriving and vibrant church community remains the same as any other part of the world. There is a critical need for strong church communities in rural America.

The United States has long been a supply line for foreign missions, sending individuals and families to serve remote, difficult, and unreached peoples in areas around the world. In the spirit of fulfilling the Great Commission, churches and individuals alike become senders and are sent themselves through prayer, service, and financial resourcing. Yet honoring the Great Commission calls for concern for all people, including those living in our own communities.

A significant proportion of unchurched individuals reside in rural communities of America. The deteriorating spiritual condition of rural areas combined with the unique challenges of small-town communities calls for renewed focus on church planting in rural America. A resource network and initiative, Rural Matters, has been developed to plant and sustain life-giving, Spirit-filled churches in every community, with a specific focus on rural and remote communities throughout the United States. This paper serves to present a case for rural ministry, as well as offer best practices to equip those who feel called to minister in the rural heartland.

Challenges of Rural America

Rural communities across the country are witnessing a decline in spiritual vibrancy. Based on data in a 2010 study from the U.S. Religion Census, there are high percentages of religiously "unclaimed" individuals who live in rural counties in the United States. "Unclaimed" individuals are the number of people living in the community that are in excess of the total number accounted for in reported church attendance. In 10 out of the 12 selected non-metro counties from the study, the proportion of religiously "unclaimed" is greater than those who align with the provided religious traditions.¹ From counties in California and Tennessee to Wyoming and South Carolina, the data demonstrates emptiness in churches across rural communities and the urgent need to reach those who are religiously "unclaimed."

The significant population migration to cities has exacerbated the challenges of rural America further. The dramatic rise in media and agricultural technology led to a massive exodus to the urban areas. In one century, the global population in cities rose from 14 percent to more than 50 percent and is projected to rise to 72 percent by 2050.² According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 85 percent of the United States population lives in metro areas, representing a

significant majority in comparison to the rural “non-metro” areas.³ The decreasing population size in rural areas has left these communities under-resourced with weakened support systems.

Social and human service concerns abound in rural America. Issues such as poverty, quality education, and mental health present more difficult challenges and support gaps in rural communities compared to their urban counterparts:

- In 2013, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 16.2 percent of the rural population to be considered poor according to the official poverty measure (OPM), as compared to 14.3 percent in urban areas. A similar trend showed the poverty rate for children in rural areas to be higher than urban, 23 percent as compared to 19.4 percent.⁴
- Schools in remote rural locations scored lower on National Assessment for Educational Progress tests in 2013 than the U.S. average.⁵
- More than 60 percent of rural Americans live in mental health professional shortage areas.⁶
- More than 90 percent of all psychologists and psychiatrists, and 80 percent of MSW’s work exclusively in metro areas.⁷

Although rural America provides the majority of the country’s food, energy, and environmental resources, people living in these areas are not sharing in its economic growth. U.S. Agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack affirmed the reality of the declining capacity and influence of rural communities in January 2013, “Rural America, with a shrinking population, is becoming less and less relevant to the politics of this country...”⁸ The diminishing impact of rural communities among lawmakers is resulting in less government investment and resourcing in these areas. While there are multiple factors affecting the decline in population and social conditions in rural communities, the result is the same: people living in the rural heartland are left underserved and disregarded, despite having the same needs as those in other areas.

Renewing the Call for Rural Church Planting

In response to the spiritual and social condition of rural America, an initiative known as Rural Matters was initiated to plant and sustain life-giving, Spirit-filled churches in every community, with a specific focus on rural and remote communities in the United States.

Rural Matters is spearheaded by Bryan Jarrett, Lead Pastor of Northplace Church in Sachse, Texas. Raised in the Mississippi Delta in Eastern Arkansas, Pastor Jarrett knows rural life firsthand. Knowing the challenges faced by rural pastors, including isolation and lack of resources, Pastor Jarrett was personally inspired with a burden to reach his “tribe” of people who live in the rural heartland.

Led by non-denominational pastors and ministry leaders, Rural Matters serves to eliminate the stigma of pastors who choose to minister in these often underserved communities while also equipping ministers to better serve the rural populations. There are new, successful methods of rural church planting and revitalization recommended by Rural Matters that are gaining momentum:

- Multi-site models that create economies of scale
- Micro-enterprise and bi-vocational strategies that can attract and support quality leadership
- City and suburban churches acknowledging that rural communities are as much a mission field as international opportunities to fund and support
- The church becoming the primary provider for social solutions including treatments for mental health, drug addiction, suicide prevention, and more

Those that feel called to minister in the rural heartland of America would not be alone. Through Rural Matters, they join a strong community of other pastors and ministry leaders with the same passion and burden to reach the unreached closer to “home.”

Rural Church Planting: Advantages & Challenges

Among the studies on reaching the unreached in rural communities, there are several unique advantages and challenges identified to rural church planting.

Some of the opportunities unique to rural churches include being part of a tight-knit community, more homogeneous values, and low costs of existing building facilities. Research has also shown several environmental advantages to church planting in rural communities:⁹

- *Perseverance of the Rural Church* – The church is usually the most resilient institution in rural communities, a convener of the community and typically outlasts local businesses.
- *Shared Optimism Among Congregants* – The church witnesses to an eternal hope beyond decline; it can stay realistically optimistic even in depressing situations. The rural church can offer a vision of hope that lifts the spirits of people in the community.
- *Considerable Absence of Competition* – People within rural community usually look within the confines of their community for basic needs; this lack of competition could be threatened with advancement of technology, which will challenge traditional elements of community.

Rural churches often face challenges as well, including feeling second-class, pastors struggling to work bi-vocationally, and limited access to resources and programs. Studies have also cited other challenges in reaching rural communities¹⁰:

- *Denominational Loyalty* – People often identify themselves with a denomination even if they are not actively practicing their faith. They may be more inclined to continue to identify with a particular denomination as they rejoin a church community.
- *Lack of Trust* – This is important in many areas, but especially true in rural communities. It’s important for people to understand who is the church leadership; understanding who someone is and what they stand for helps establish trust.
- *Lack of Experience* – Limited pastoral experience and potentially limited training and support may lead to lack of credibility.
- *Lack of Momentum* – When there is lack of visible movement, people will often think nothing is happening. This is especially prevalent in rural communities because church

leadership or staff may not have been able to develop the programs fully that serve the community, including children's programs, Bible study, outreach, and more.

Rural Matters serves to maximize the opportunities of ministry in rural communities, while supporting pastors and ministry leaders in overcoming the challenges.

Rural Church Planting: Other Recommendations

In recognition of the various challenges and advantages of church planting in rural communities, studies have suggested other best practice strategies to equip rural church planters, including¹¹:

- *Clearly Define a Vision* – Define two or three things the church is set to do and stick to them.
- *Emphasize Denominational Affiliation* – People want to know denomination so they can know what the church believes. This may also demonstrate support on district and national level, which could suggest stability to the community.
- *Networking and Relationship Building* – Get to know the people within the community and become their friends. Help people feel welcome and accepted.
- *Reach Out to Children* – When parents see their children are loved, they often come.
- *Direct Mail Instead of Door-to-Door* – Mail marketing showed greater effectiveness in increase in church attendance.

Call to Action

The next great mission field may not be some exotic country or remote village, but the rural heartland of the United States. The declining spiritual as well as social conditions of rural communities call for renewed attention and resourcing that can be served well by the local church. Rural Matters aims to revitalize efforts for rural ministry and equip pastors and ministry leaders to bring thriving and vibrant church communities to rural America.

All who are called by the Great Commission can play a part in reaching people in the most remote areas of rural America. For some, it will mean making a decision to follow God by personally moving to a rural community and planting a life-giving church in the area. For others, it could be “sending” others to plant a church or minister in a rural community through financial resourcing and prayer. There could be others who feel called to join and support efforts at an existing rural church. For all who feel stirred to be a part of reaching the unreached in the rural heartland, Rural Matters serves to equip them to fulfill this calling.

¹ The Association of Religion Data Archives | Quality Data on religion. (n.d.). <http://www.thearda.com> (Retrieved May 9, 2016).

² “U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050.” Pewhispanic.org. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/85.pdf> (Retrieved June 10, 2016).

³ USDA ERS – Rural – Urban Continuum Codes. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes.aspx> (Retrieved May 9, 2016).

⁴ “Opportunity for All: Fighting Rural Child Poverty.” Whitehouse.gov. https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/rural_child_poverty_report_final_non-embargoed.pdf (Retrieved May 10, 2016).

⁵ Fishman, Dan. “School Reform for Rural America.” Educationnext.org. <http://educationnext.org/school-reform-rural-america> (Retrieved May 10, 2016).

⁶ “Rural Mental Health.” Ruralhealthinfo.org. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/mental-health> (Retrieved May 10, 2016).

⁷ “Rural Mental Health.” Ruralhealthinfo.org. <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/mental-health> (Retrieved May 10, 2016).

⁸ Doering, Christopher. “As more move to the city, does rural America still matter?” usatoday.com. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/01/12/rural-decline-congress/1827407> (Retrieved May 11, 2016).

⁹ Moore, W.S. (2012). *Rural Revival: Growing churches in shrinking communities*. Rogersville, AL.: Eleos Press.

¹⁰ “Church Planting in the Small Community: Interview with Steve Larson, Dennis Dickson, Chris Gray and Darren Widner.” Enrichmentjournal.ag.org. http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200004/056_small_community.cfm (Retrieved May 11, 2016).

¹¹ “Church Planting in the Small Community: Interview with Steve Larson, Dennis Dickson, Chris Gray and Darren Widner.” Enrichmentjournal.ag.org. http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200004/056_small_community.cfm (Retrieved May 11, 2016).