

The logo for Rural Matters consists of a dark blue circle containing a white letter 'R' with a green leaf-like shape at its base.

RURAL
MATTERS

Strategy Briefing

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RURAL AMERICA: GENERAL OVERVIEW

“Rural America” consists of both “micropolitan” (population ~10,000) and generally rural areas. It is best understood as comprising nine distinct regions:

- Old South/Middle Southwest
- Mountain Appalachia
- Northeast
- Great Lakes-Ohio River
- Midwest and northern plains
- Rocky Mountain West
- Desert Southwest
- Northwest High Desert
- California

DEMOGRAPHICS

17% of the U.S. population – approximately 51 million people – live in rural areas. Though the population is increasingly racially diverse, most individual communities remain racially homogenous. Roughly 50% of rural counties are decreasing in population, due to both mortality rates and emigration.

Migration is primarily responsible for population increase and decrease in rural America. The largest immigrant population is individuals age 50 and over, primarily moving to retirement and leisure communities in Florida and the Southwest. Mexican and Central American immigration increased in the 1990s and 2000s, but has likely dropped to net zero since 2008. Individuals under 30 continue to leave for urban centers at high rates. Migration is generally driven by economic considerations, with “boom and bust” cycles related to single industries in individual communities.

The best indicator for population growth in rural areas is proximity to metropolitan areas. However, many of these communities lack infrastructure and planning for increased population.

KEY POINTS: 50+ individuals are a significant growth population, as are minority immigrant populations. Most communities are challenged either by 1) declining population, 2) potential absorption into larger metropolitan areas, and most rural areas are losing individuals or families under age 30.

ECONOMY

Rural American communities compare poorly to their urban counterparts in most major economic indicators. These include:

- Higher unemployment (both short- and long-term)
- Higher poverty rates (both children and adults) – 48 of the 50 counties with highest child poverty rates are rural

- Lower median household income
- Lower workforce participation rate
- Lower educational attainment
- Higher disability status

Only 6.5% of the population is engaged in farming. Manufacturing, the service industry, and recreation and tourism are larger employers than agriculture. Most communities are dependent upon a single industry, and are subsequently vulnerable to “boom and bust” cycles. Examples include natural gas drilling in the Dakotas impacted by lower oil prices, and recreation in the West impacted by drought.

KEY POINTS: Rural America is typically economically vulnerable and dependent upon single economic engines. Only a small portion of the population engages in agriculture. Lack of health care access and quality educational institutions are significant challenges.

RELIGION & FAITH

Most rural communities embrace a historical cultural Christianity (the South, Midwest) or non-affiliation (the West, New England). Congregations that exist tend to be small, family-oriented, aging, and change-resistant. They are dependent upon bi-vocational clergy, though many lack a consistent pastoral presence. Subsequently, lay leadership is generally necessary and valued.

Mainline Protestantism is disproportionately represented in many rural communities due to a historic parish model. Other significant Christian traditions are holiness churches, Southern Baptists, and Catholics.

KEY POINTS: Common objections to church planting in rural areas include that they are too many existing churches, it is economically unsustainable, it offends existing churches, it drains resources from existing churches, and historic affiliation barriers are too high for new denominational/non-denominational churches.

CHURCH PLANTING MODELS

I. Second-Career/Senior Adult Church Planters

Context: The largest growing demographic group in rural America is age 50+. This is due to:

- The aging of indigenous rural populations
- The migration of 50+ individuals from urban and suburban areas to leisure and retirement communities in rural areas

Recommendation: Churches begin intentionally recruiting and developing “second career” church planters (and potential launch teams) among their 50+ congregants who intend to move when retiring. Early retirement is framed as an intentional opportunity to plant and develop a self-sustaining church in 5-10 years. Churches will likely utilize recreational and community centers in retirement/leisure communities as facilities, have

low operating costs and small programming footprints, and focus missional giving and “multiplication” efforts on international and/or urban church plants elsewhere.

Case Study: Community Christian Church in Naperville, IL, is a multi-site megachurch with thirteen campuses. Two of these campuses – Carillon and Highpoint – are intentionally planted within 55+ “active adult” communities. These locations include intentional staff, volunteers, small groups, and outreaches contextualized for their community. Each are led by campus pastors who intentionally moved into the community in order to plant campuses.

2. Heritage-Specific Church Plants

Context: Rural areas tend to emphasize historic culture and heritage; even when these cultures are no longer dominant in contemporary practice, they are dominant in worldview and celebration. Additionally, rural individuals (and churches) tend to be change-resistant and suspicious of outside influence.

Recommendation: Region-specific church planting initiatives that are highly contextualized by heritage. These may include (but are not limited to) ethnic, vocational, or recreational heritage markers. Key to this movement are indigenous planters who are able to manifest the culture authentically.

Case Study: Cowboy Churches + Texas Baptists

The “cowboy church,” or “country church,” movement has successfully contextualized church plants for individuals who identify with Western heritage. Churches meet in rodeo arenas, baptize in stock tanks, worship with country & western music, and intentionally embrace all aspects of cowboy culture. It is estimated there are between 800-1,000 cowboy churches nationally.

Though begun independently, the movement’s greatest success has occurred in the last 15 years through the method’s adoption by the North American Mission Board and Baptist General Convention of Texas (Texas Baptists). Beginning in 2001, Texas Baptists now report approximately 200 churches with approximately 40,000 worshipers meeting weekly. More significantly, the BGCT estimates that cowboy churches comprise 2.5% of its total church membership but are responsible for 10% of its annual number of baptisms.

3. Rural-specific Multisite Churches

Context: Most rural areas have numerous church buildings, but aging congregations, unstable finances, and are unable to support full-time or even part-time pastors. Additionally, it is demographically unlikely that even healthy rural churches will grow numerically large enough to financially support a full-time pastor or other staff.

Recommendation: The development of rural-specific multisite churches. The typical urban/suburban multisite model – a large, wealthy “mother” church with significantly smaller dependent campuses, often with livestream or pre-recording preaching – is unlikely to work in most rural areas. This is due to expensive internet access, financial constraints, and low population density.

Rural-specific multisite can utilize existing church buildings, with an emphasis on local, lay campus pastors and in-person preaching by a lead pastor or said campus pastor. The key differences between rural-specific and urban/suburban multi-site models include:

- Primary use of traditional church buildings rather than schools/warehouses/etc
- Likely higher prevalence of church mergers
- Less video preaching
- Heavy emphasis on lay leadership, even at senior leadership levels
- Generally smaller campuses, and more equal campuses (attendance + finances)

Case Study: Brand New Church, pastored by Shannon O’Dell, is one of the fast growing multi-site churches in America. Its emphasis is on rural, multi-site church locations. Its first campus is located in Bergman (pop: 445) with six additional physical campuses along with a global campus. Their median population of towns with campuses is 2,223.

Pastor O’Dell emphasizes the significance of volunteer engagement, healthy organizational structure, relevant teaching, and highly empowered campus pastors. Brand New Church uses primarily video teaching, but is led by a local campus pastor and maintains a small staff burden. Many campuses are the result of mergers with small and dying congregations.

4. Regional Church Planting Movements – “Pockets of Lostness”

Context: The most frequently cited causes for concern with church planting in rural areas are 1) too many existing churches, 2) it costs too much, 3) it competes with and offends existing churches, 4) it drains resources from other churches. Despite this assumption of “rural America is already church,” the least reached states in the country are heavily rural (Utah, New England) and the large majority of the 100 least reached counties are rural.

Recommendation: An intentional focus on “pockets of lostness.” Many urban/suburban church planting strategies focus on national, rather than local, partnerships that implicitly or explicitly compete with local churches that are deemed ineffective or irrelevant. Additionally, many church planters move in from other areas without significant support from the local community. This strategy is ineffective in rural areas due to:

- Credibility – churches not supported locally are unlikely to succeed
- Finances – high cost church plants are unlikely to grow enough to become sustainable
- Missional – The vision of “become a megachurch” is an unreasonable bar for success in rural areas

Rather, intentional local partnerships that plant locally-supported churches in “pockets of lostness” effectively address these concerns. This approach has the added benefit of providing the possibility of missional engagement and vitality of local partnership churches, and identifying indigenous church planters.

Case Study #1: The Wilkes county region of northwestern North Carolina includes multiple churches pioneering in rural church planting work. These include Foothills Church, Cross

Point Church, High View Church, and The Rock Church. These churches serve a geographic area of 100 square miles that had not seen a church plant in 15-20 years, and collectively have 19 campuses. In 2014, The Rock Church intentionally separated several campuses into independent congregations. The largest town in the area is approximately 40,000 people.

This movement was sponsored and resourced by the Baptist State Conventions of North and South Carolina. By working alongside of existing local churches to address local pockets of lostness, these state-wide associations have facilitated more vital congregations and new congregations to reach rural communities.

Case Study #2: The Association of Related Churches (ARC) is a church planting network in North America (with small international activities) focused on “launching life-giving churches.” It offers church planters vetting, training, and support. It focuses on four commitments:

- Starting strong - launch team, fundraising, basic ministry design
- Reaching the unchurched - Bible-based teaching, authentic relationships, family ministry, and cultural relevance
- Building relationships - networking with pastors and other planters
- Financial support - an interest-free loan to start the church, which churches repay with additional donations in order to support further ARC church planting

ARC began in 2000 with six founding pastors - Greg Surratt, Billy Hornsby, Scott Hornsby, Rick Bezet, Chris Hodges, and Dino Rizzo. Billy Hornsby served as president until his death in 2011; Greg Surratt has served since. ARC is currently overseen by a Lead Team of influential pastors and ministry leaders from around the country. 2015 marked its 500th church plant, and is now planting over 50 churches annually with an annual funding base of \$2 million.

ARC, while not exclusively focused on rural places, has pioneered a model of local church-supported, financially sustainable church planting that emphasizes effective training, community relevance, and long-term growth.

5. “Business as Mission” Church Planting

Context: Less than 10% of rural Americans work directly in farming and agriculture. Compared to urban America, rural America features higher unemployment, lower educational attainment, lower workforce participation, higher disability, and lower incomes. Lack of economic opportunity is a key factor in emigration for young adults.

Recommendation: The development of “business as mission” church planting models with rurally valuable and sustainable business models. These may include (but are not limited to): small retail chains, restaurant franchises, vocational trades, small-scale manufacturing enterprises, and health care. Such a model enables church planters to have sufficient financial resources, and add value and vitality to local rural communities.

An iteration upon this model is identifying necessary rural community professions – teachers, coaches, hospice workers, mail carriers, etc – and intentionally equipping them for bi-vocational church planting ministry.

Case Study: Trinity Bible College in Ellendale, North Dakota, launched a certificate program in 2009 to equip coaches to be bi-vocational rural church planters. Combined with a ministry preparation degree, a program graduate is equipped with the necessary skills to coach in a sport of their choosing and serve in a local church setting. It seeks to capitalize on the significant influence and relational connectedness exercised by coaches in rural communities. Led by current Athletic Director/Head Football Coach Dustin Morgan, the program aims to place 500 coaches and PE teachers in American schools over the next ten years.

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