



A Focus on Church Planting in Rural America

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“We often use the phrase for some remote rural area, ‘out-in-the-middle of nowhere.’ No place is or no person is unimportant to God and should not be to us if we are obedient to our Master. Every place is some place for someone. Every person is someone to some person.

If we are to be faithful to the Great Commission we have no choice but to be concerned for all people. Therefore, an equal priority must be given not only to reaching the massive cities of our continent, but also the small cities, towns, and countryside populations.”

-- George W. Garner

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Overview

In an effort to develop an understanding of rural church planting in North America to support the Rural Matters program and the positional white paper, this report aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Where is rural North America?
2. What is the spiritual condition of rural North America?
3. What are the unique advantages and challenges in rural church planting?
4. What best practices might be gleaned from existing research on the broader scope of church planting in North America?

In 2007, Stetzer and Bird undertook an effort to create and compile information on the state of church planting in the United States. Their study included an extensive review of church planting studies, doctoral dissertations, journal articles, and church planting books and manuals. Their study found that there is an interest in church planting and this interest is continuing to increase. While their study focused predominantly on church planting as a whole in North America, a limited body of additional publications suggests that “an equal priority must be given not only to reaching the massive cities of our continent, but also the small cities, towns, and countryside populations.”¹

In 2015, Stetzer, Fries, and Im published a report titled *The State of Church Planting in the U.S.* The report summarized the findings from a survey that was conducted with approximately 1,200 church planters in the United States to gain information on the current state of church planting in the country. The study provided information on church plants, their pastors and attendees, and revealed that many church plants are effectively reaching the lost.

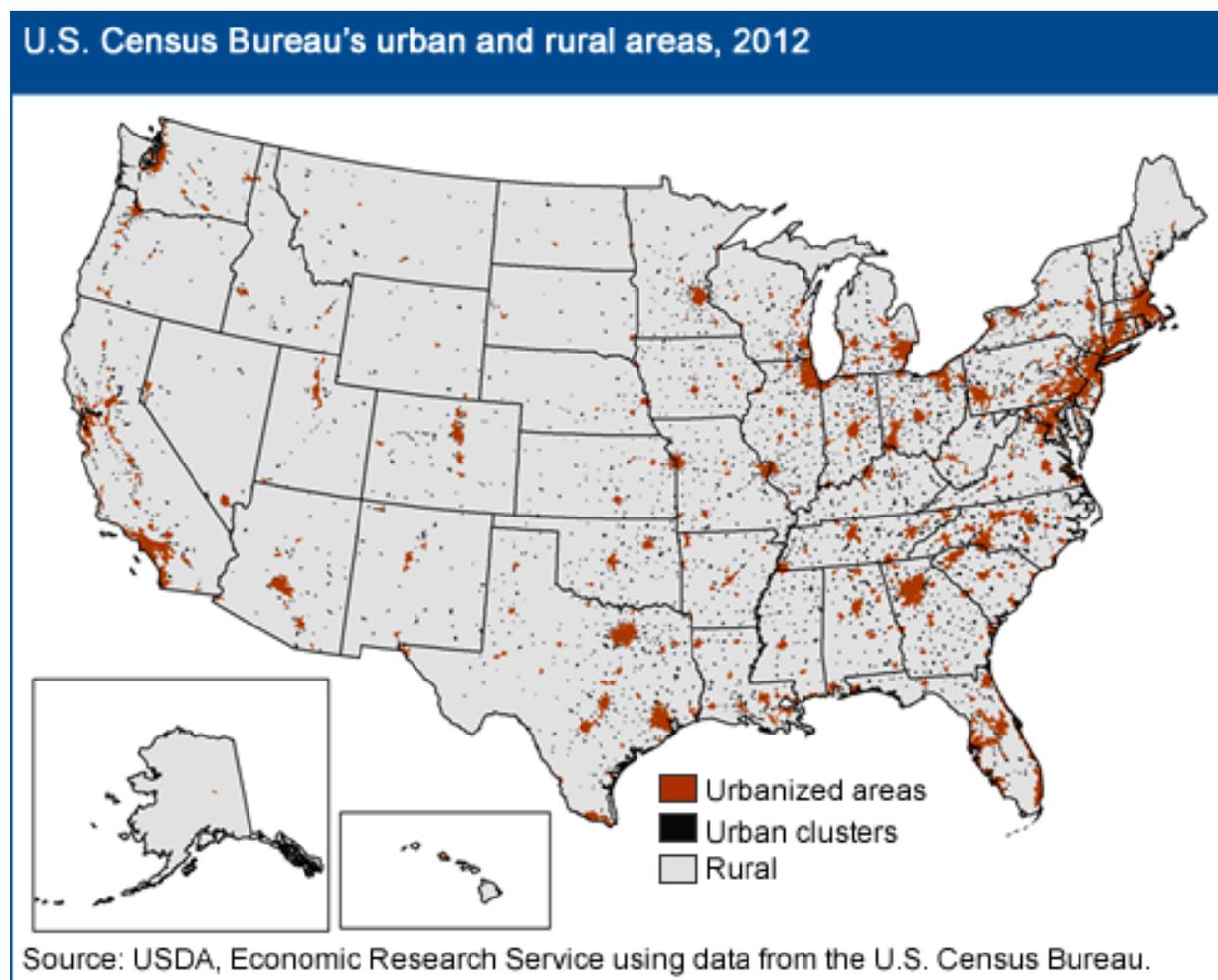
This report begins with an explanation of how “rural” America is traditionally defined as per sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture. The report then discusses the spiritual condition of rural North Americans and shows how large numbers of religiously “unclaimed” individuals live in nonmetro United States counties. Advantages, challenges, and suggestions for rural North American church plants are then described. The report concludes with an overview of Stetzer and Bird’s (2007) findings, Stetzer, Fries, and Im’s (2015) research, as well as a summary of more recent publications relating specifically to church planting in rural North America and reaching unreached populations in the United States. The report ends with a list of resources to equip and assist rural North American church planters.

¹ See also <http://www.jdpayne.org/2012/02/17/new-book-rural-church-planting/>.

Literature Review

Where is Rural North America?

The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban and rural areas based upon population and density into urbanized areas, urban clusters, and rural areas². Under this classification, an urban area must have 500 people per square mile and 2,500 residents. The following map displays urban and rural areas, as per the U.S. Census Bureau's criteria.



Isserman (2005) suggests that researchers and policy makers reliance upon the U.S. Census Bureau's definition to define and understand the term "rural" as it relates to the United States may be misleading and/or confusing and may lead to the misunderstanding of rural conditions. This classification may be misleading as areas such as Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana report 7,100 people per square mile while Wellsboro, Pennsylvania has approximately 2,500 residents

² See <http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/rural-economy-population/rural-classifications/what-is-rural.aspx>

total and is less than three total square miles. The U.S. Census Bureau classifies both communities as urban. Instead, Isserman (2005) suggests that areas should be classified as urban or rural not solely based upon the number of people per square mile. Areas should be categorized by urban metropolitan influence (i.e. proximity and influence of an urban metropolitan area on a community). Using this criteria, areas such as Wellsboro, Pennsylvania would then be classified more realistically as rural.

Another measure for defining rural communities was provided by The Carsey Institute (2006) and suggests that rural communities are those that fall into one of these three categories:

- Remote isolated communities facing issues such as higher poverty rates, higher unemployment, and lower per capita income than metropolitan areas. This includes many communities in America's "breadbasket" and tends to be those we traditionally think of as agriculturally driven and remote with fewer resources.
- Scenic communities with a tourist draw and/or a draw for older Americans to retire to (i.e. consider Champion, Pennsylvania as a scenic rural community, which draws tourists to experience year-round attractions – skiing, biking, hiking, etc. – at major resorts, parks, and other tourist and historically significant destinations)
- Re-migration rural communities where 20-year-olds migrated out of, but have since returned in their 30s to raise their families.

Offering an additional way to classify rural, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) categorizes counties or county equivalents into metropolitan (metro) and nonmetropolitan areas.

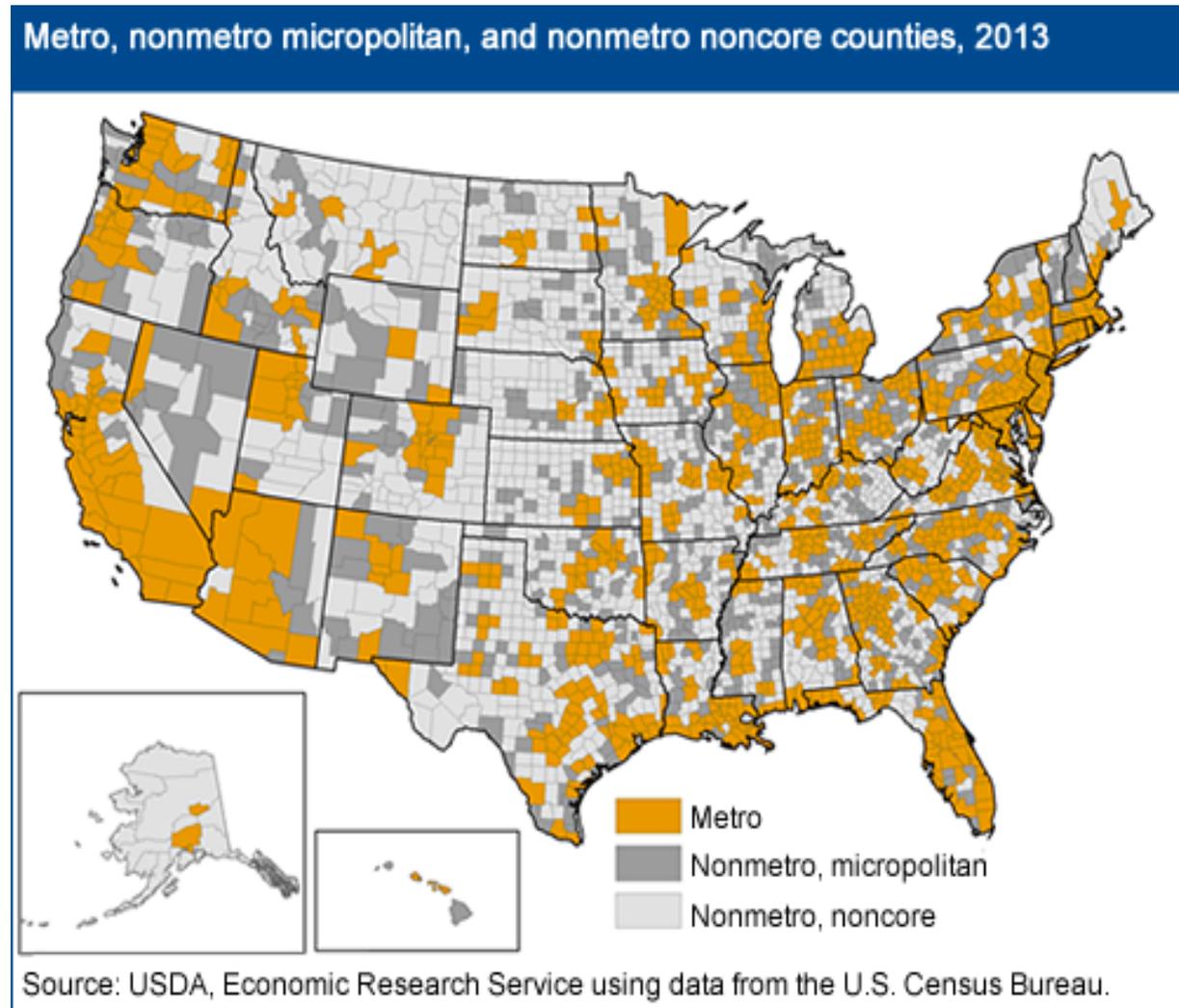
The OMB (2013) defined metropolitan (metro) areas as "broad labor-market areas" that include:

1. Central counties with one or more urbanized areas. Urbanized areas are densely-settled urban entities with 50,000 or more people.
2. Outlying counties that are economically tied to the core counties as measured by labor-force commuting. Outlying counties are considered economically tied if 25% of workers living in the county commute to the central counties, or if 25% of the employment in the county consists of workers coming out from the central counties—the so-called "reverse" commuting pattern.

According to the OMB (2013), nonmetro counties are outside of metro areas and subdivided as follows:

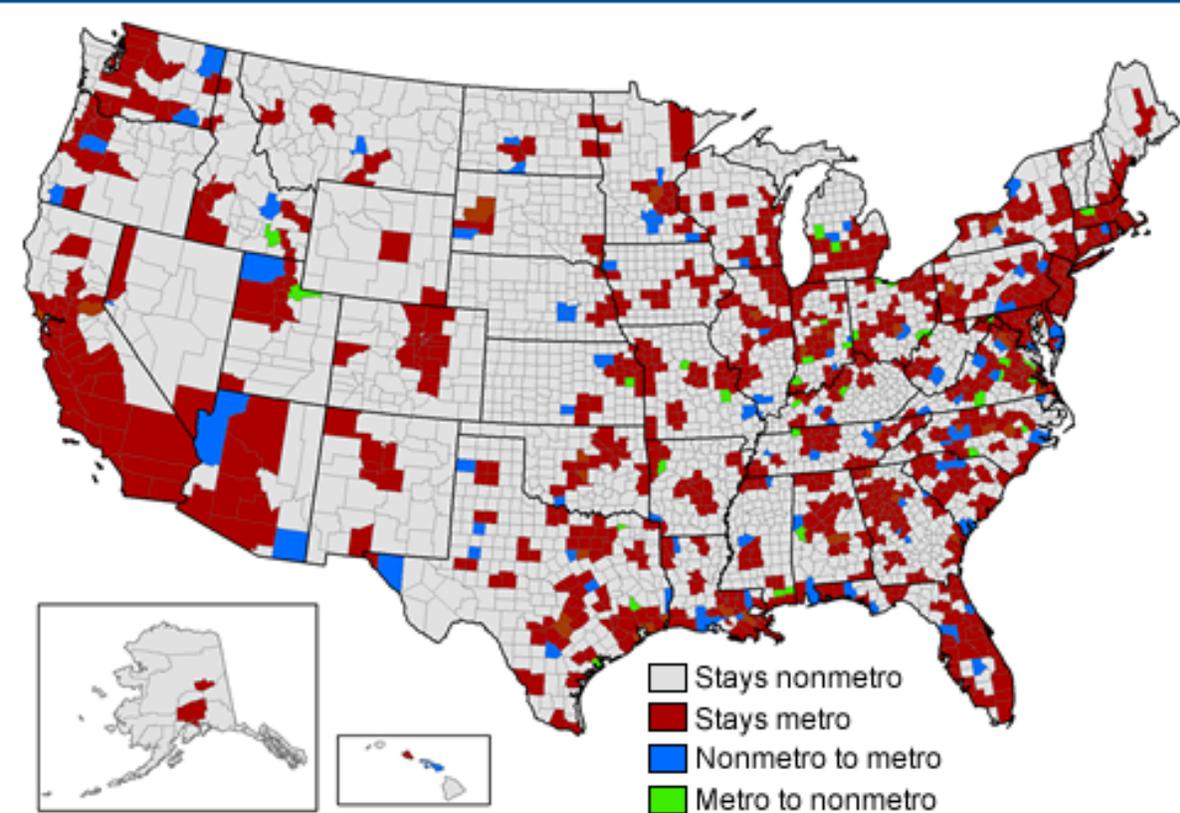
1. Nonmetro micropolitan (micro) areas are labor-market areas centered on urban clusters of 10,000-49,999 persons and defined with the same criteria used to define metro areas.
2. Nonmetro noncore areas are all remaining counties that are not part of "core-based" metro or micro areas.

The following map depicts metro, nonmetro micropolitan, and nonmetro noncore areas. The light gray represents the most rural areas of the country (i.e. nonmetro, noncore areas).



Between 2003 and 2013, the majority of US counties remained either nonmetro or metro, however some counties shifted from either nonmetro to metro, or from metro to nonmetro. The following map depicts counties changing metro status between 2003 and 2013.

Counties changing metro status, 2003-2013



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Using the metro and nonmetro classifications, the Economic Research Service of the United States Department of Agriculture assigns Rural-Urban Continuum Codes to every county in the United States. The categories are subdivided into three metro and six nonmetro groupings, resulting in nine possible classifications. The codes provide researchers with a more detailed classification system, beyond a simple metro-nonmetro dichotomy. The Rural-Urban Continuum Codes for US counties are updated every ten years and were last updated in 2013. A description of each code is presented in the table below.

2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

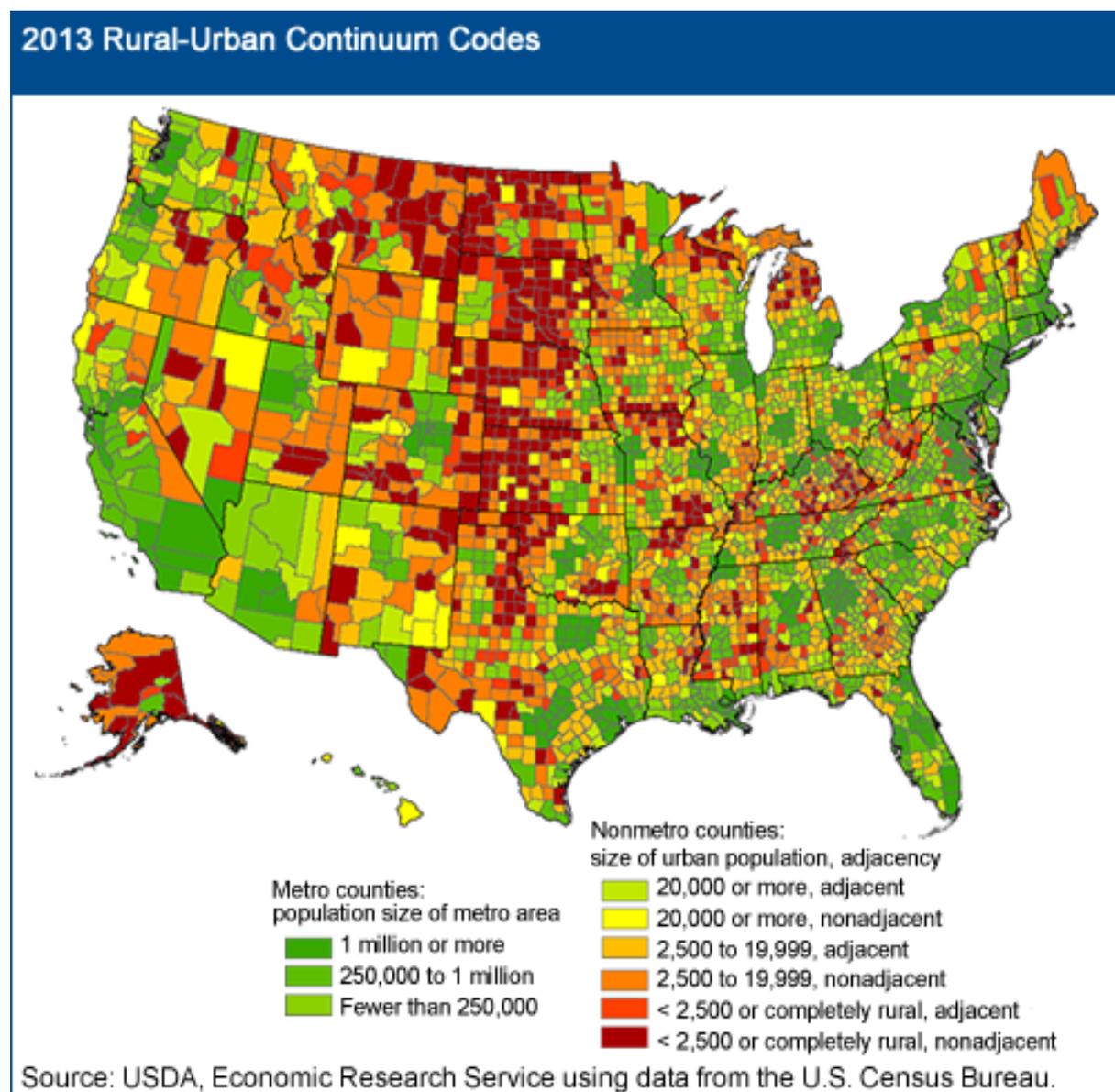
Code	Description
Metro Counties	
1	Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
2	Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
3	Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Nonmetro Counties:	
4	Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
5	Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area
6	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
7	Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
8	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
9	Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area

In 2013, 1,167 metro counties and 1,976 nonmetro counties were identified in the United States based on the Rural-Urban Continuum Code criteria. While the number of nonmetro counties outnumbered the number of metro counties, 85% of the US population lives in metro areas.

2013 Rural-Urban Continuum Codes, Number of Counties and Population

Code	Number of Counties	2010 Population
Metro	1,167	262,452,132
1	432	168,523,961
2	379	65,609,956
3	356	28,318,215
Nonmetro	1,976	49,293,406
4	214	13,538,322
5	92	4,953,810
6	593	14,784,976
7	433	8,248,674
8	220	2,157,448
9	424	2,610,176
US Total	3,143	308,745,538

The most rural counties, classified with a “9” on the Rural-Urban Continuum Code scale, are generally located away from the coasts and concentrated in the center of the United States. A map depicting the USA subdivided by county Rural-Urban Continuum Codes is presented below.



Spiritual Condition of Rural (Nonmetro) North America

The U.S. Congregational Membership Report, supported by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), offers a nation-wide county-by-county report of religious trends. Data for the report was most recently collected from the 2010 U.S. Religion Census, a study that coincides with the overall US census. 236 religious groups participated in the study, including 217 Christian denominations and associations, and reported 344,894 total congregations with 150,686,156 adherents. The information was gathered to inform the number of congregations and adherents within each state and county in the United States. Adding the total number of adherents together for any state gave the total number of “claimed” individuals, and subtracting that figure from the state’s overall population gave the number of “unclaimed” individuals, not participating in any religious body surveyed. Please note those labeled as “unclaimed” in the report should not be assumed to be irreligious or atheists. “Unclaimed” can also refer to adherents of religious groups not listed in the data.

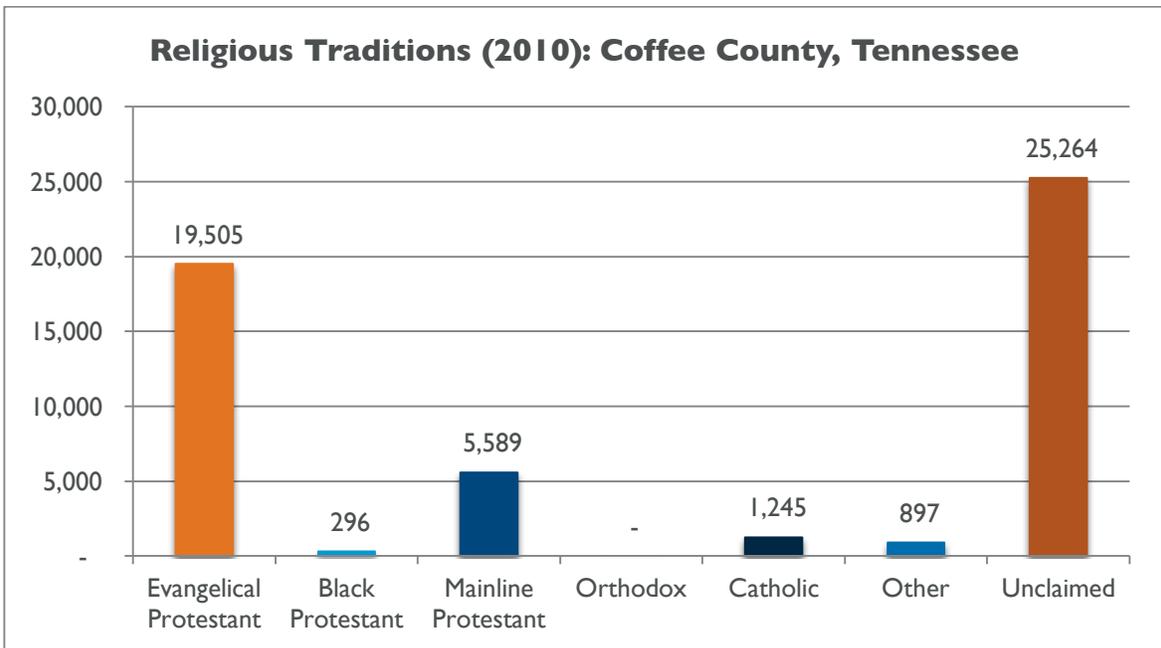
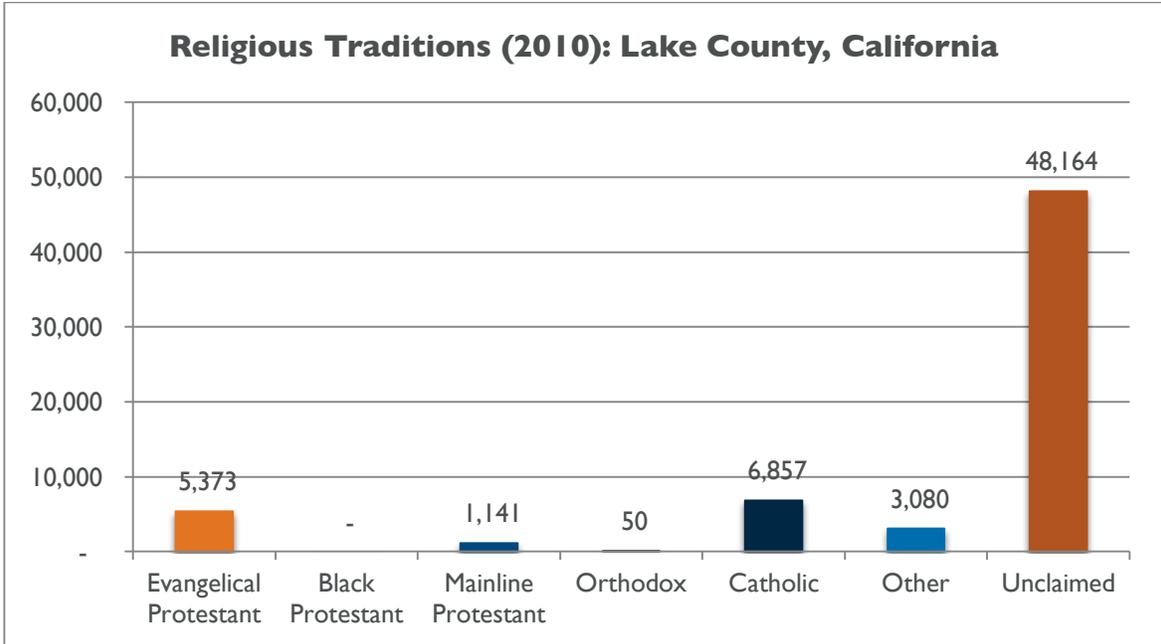
High numbers of “unclaimed”³ individuals live in rural counties in the United States. To demonstrate this fact in this report, 12 nonmetro US counties were randomly selected. Two counties were selected for each of the nonmetro Rural-Urban Continuum Code codes, which are presented in the table below. For each selected county, the total county population and the percentage of the population that is “unclaimed” are also displayed. In these randomly selected nonmetro counties, the percentage of the population that is “unclaimed” ranges from 8.7% - 79.0% and the average percentage “unclaimed” is approximately 50%.

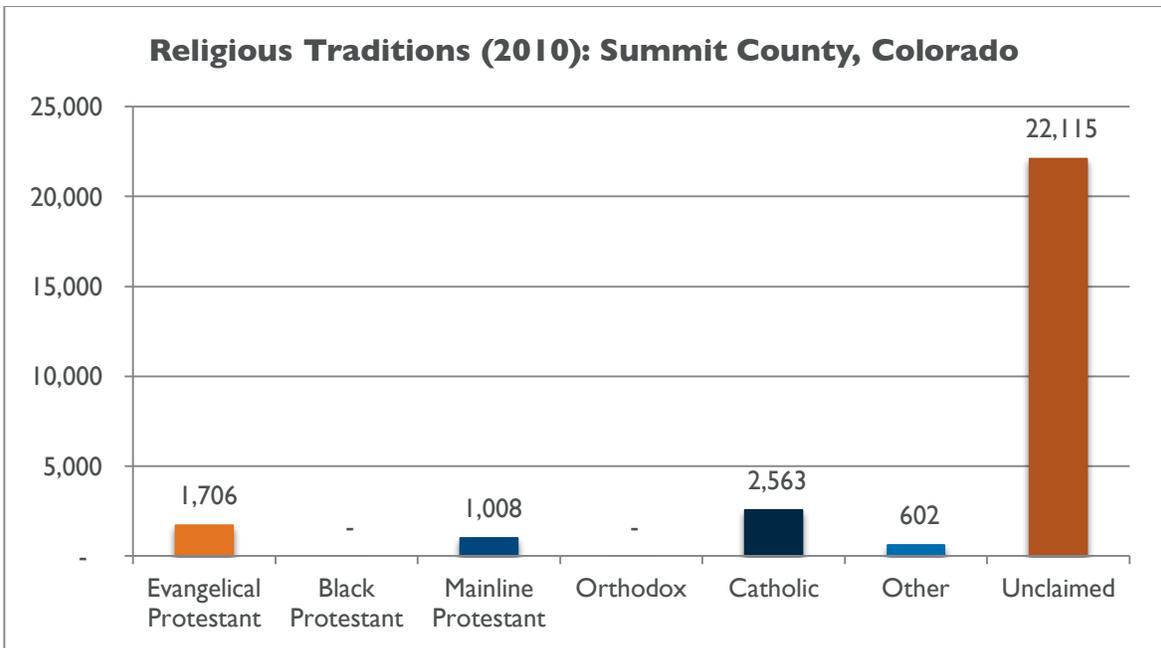
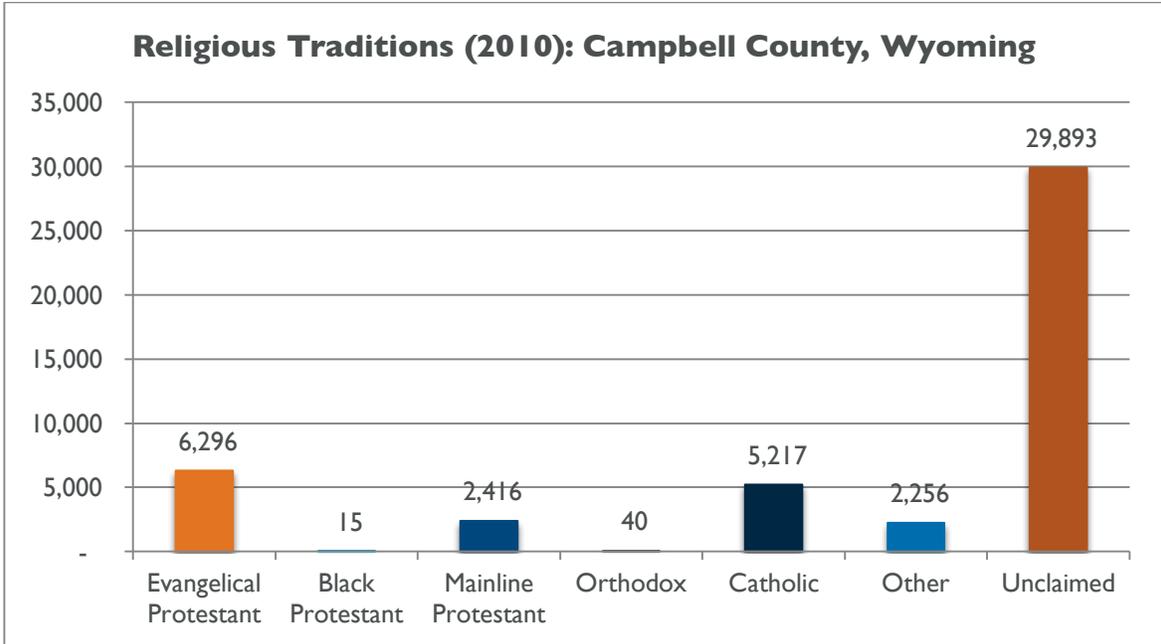
³ The unclaimed estimate is usually a bit high in most areas, but not drastically so. And when used (as it often is) to compare the religious involvement rate of different areas, it is a reliable indicator. When used as an indicator of non-religious people, it is misleading. Separate studies indicate that perhaps two-thirds of those not part of any religious body are still religious, and in fact the vast majority of those consider themselves Christian.

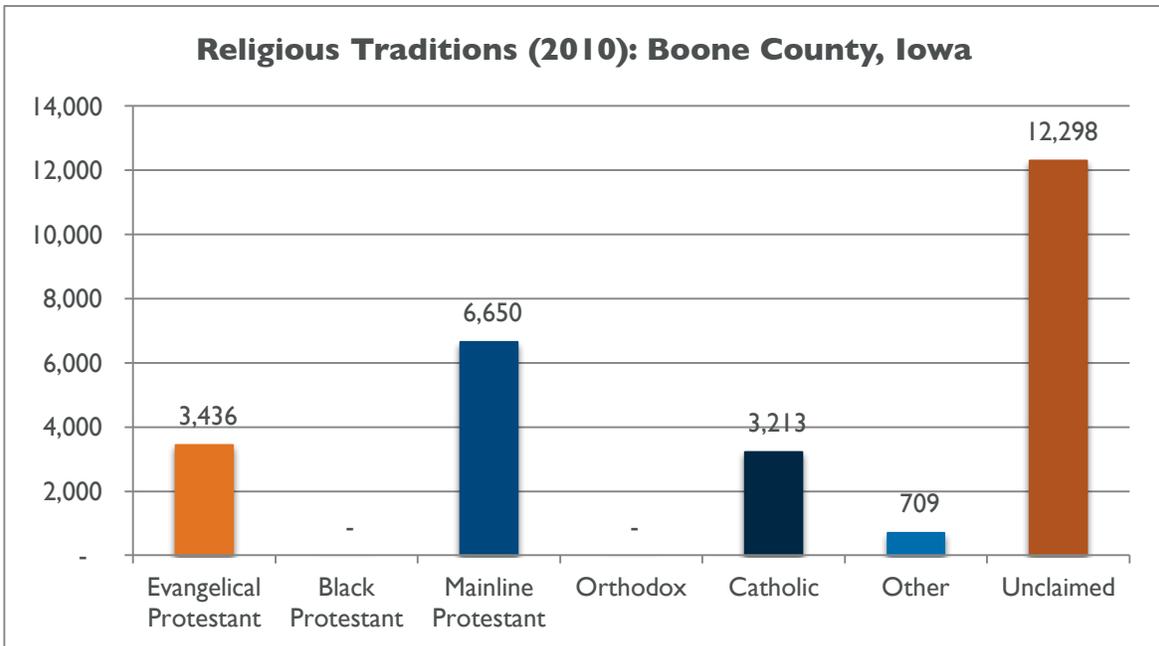
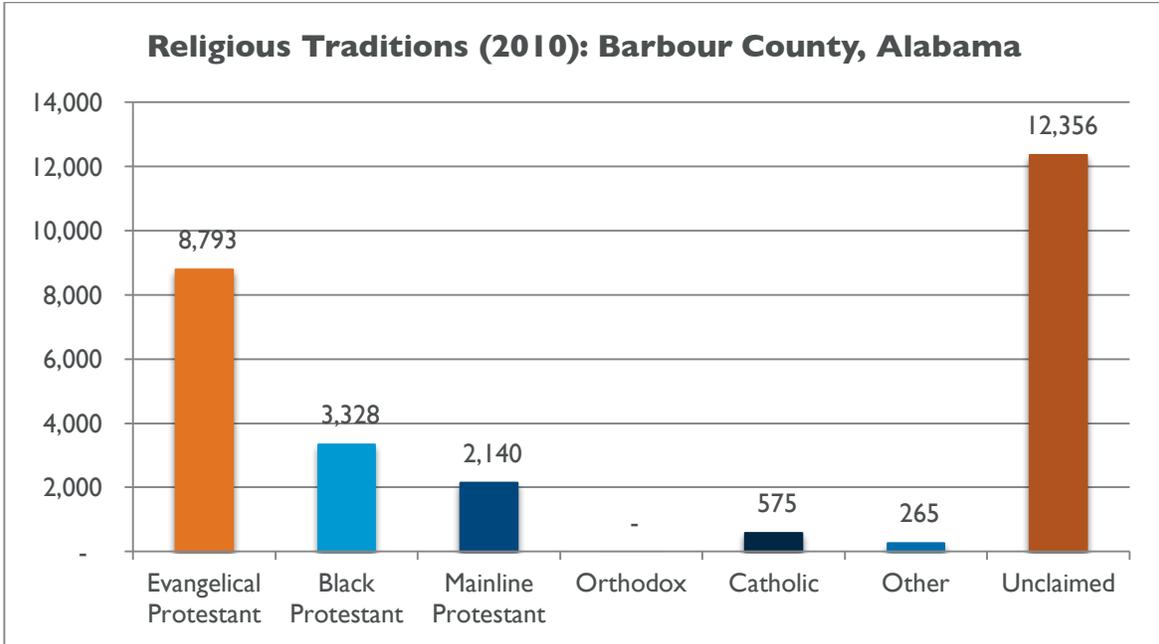
A Sample of Population and Percentage of Unclaimed for Each Nonmetro Rural-Urban Continuum Code

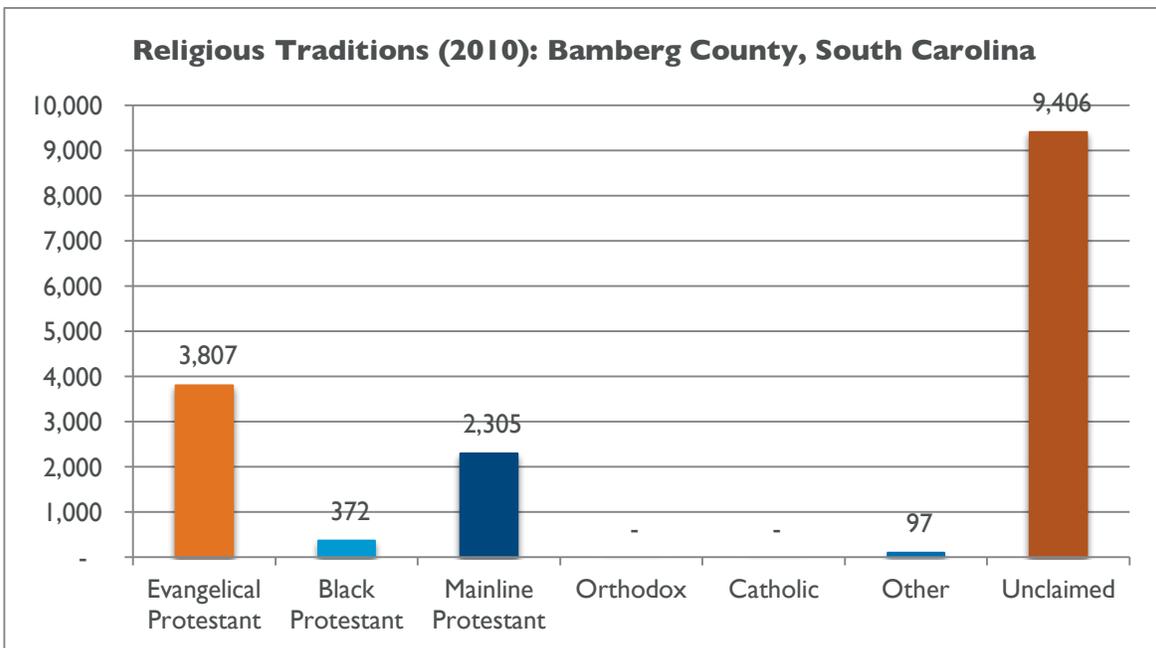
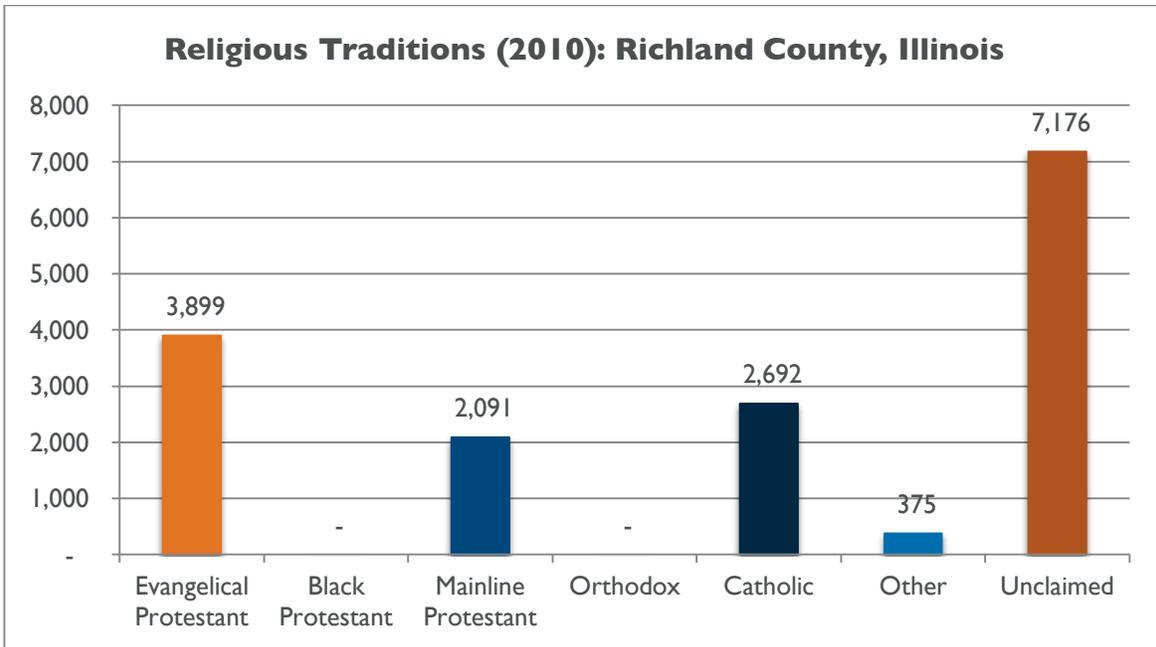
State	County	RUCC Number	Population	% UNCLAIMED
CA	Lake County	4	64,665	74.5%
TN	Coffee County	4	52,796	47.9%
WY	Campbell County	5	46,133	64.8%
CO	Summit County	5	27,994	79.0%
AL	Barbour County	6	27,457	45.0%
IA	Boone County	6	26,306	46.7%
IL	Richland County	7	16,233	44.2%
SC	Bamberg County	7	15,987	58.8%
KY	Monroe County	8	10,963	48.7%
ND	McLean County	8	8,962	8.7%
MN	Cook County	9	5,176	48.5%
TX	Roberts County	9	929	33.2%

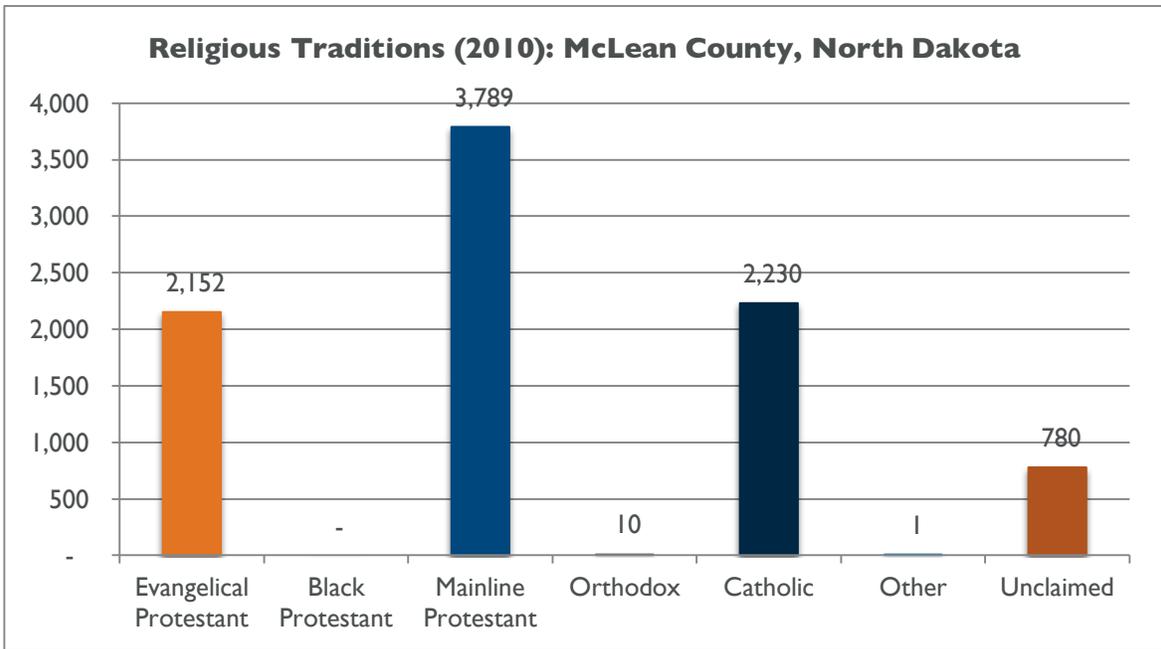
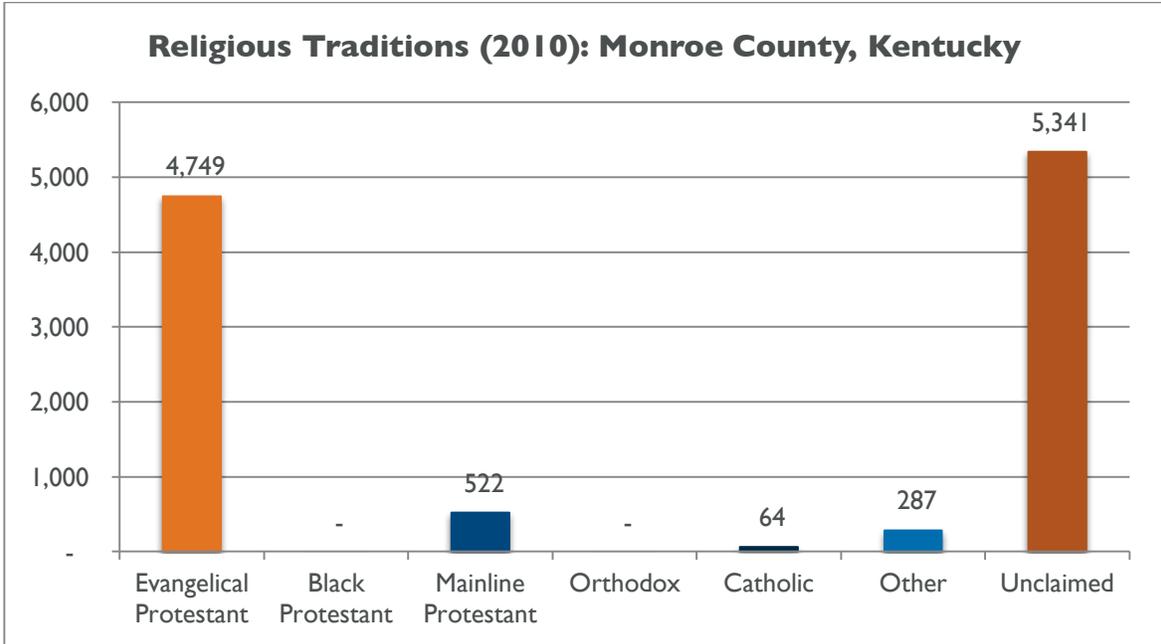
The following graphs depict the number of respondents in each of the 12 randomly selected nonmetro counties that adhere to the various religious traditions presented in the survey and those that did not align with the provided religious traditions and are thus considered “unclaimed”. In 10 out of the 12 selected nonmetro counties, the number of unclaimed is greater than those aligning the provided religious traditions. Based on this data, one could deduce that there is a great need for evangelical churches to reach those that are “unclaimed” in nonmetro US counties.

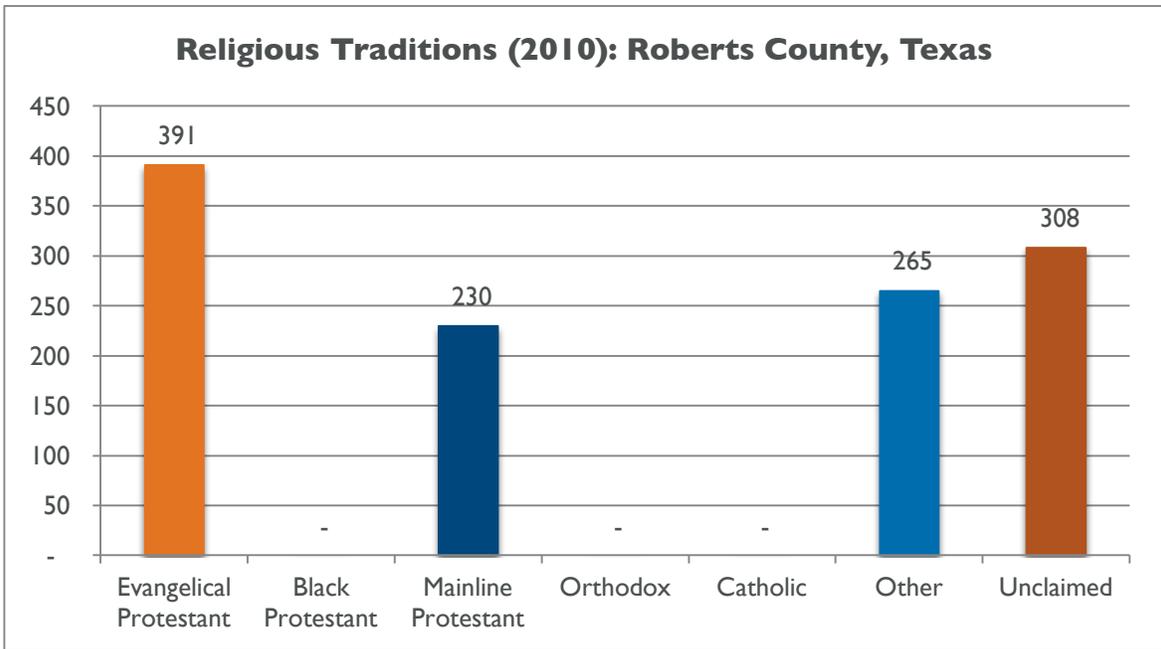
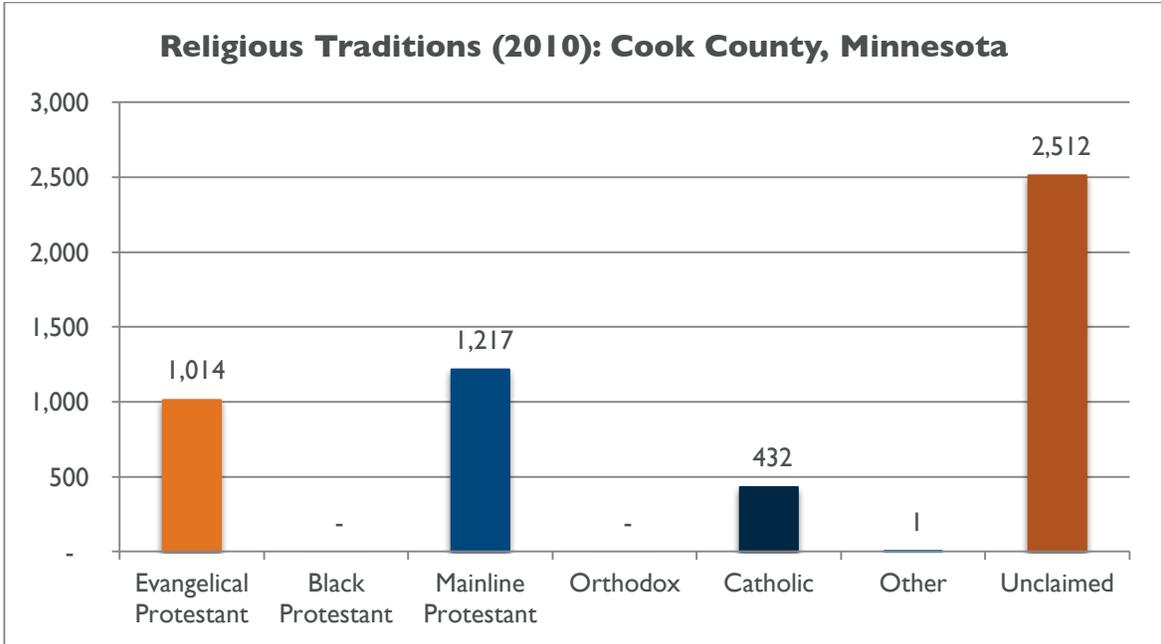












Church Planting in Rural North America

Planting to Reach the Unreached

While Payne's (2014) compiled research, in his ebook *Unreached Peoples, Least Reached Places: An Untold Story of Lostness in America*, makes a case for the need for church planting overall in the United States (not specifically urban, suburban, or rural communities), he discusses the need to focus on unreached people on our home soil in areas that are least reached by evangelicals.

Interestingly, Payne (2014) suggests that evangelicals are better at reaching unreached people in foreign countries than in the United States. He says, "...with all the research and resources, evangelicals have failed to identify who lives in our backyard. We have better information on an unreached people group living in the Himalayas than we do of that same people group living in the United States."⁴

It appears that many church planters in North America focus upon areas with large populations in an effort to reach a much larger segment of people. However, according to Gray⁵, "Statistics show that whether you are in a large city or a small town, about two-thirds of the people are unchurched." He also suggests "People in small communities still have problems...We need to see that people without Christ in small communities are lost." Additionally, Widner says, "We shouldn't exclude any area, because people in small towns need the Lord too."

Advantages of Rural Church Plants

Moore's (2012) research⁶ appears to agree with Payne's (2014). In addition, Moore (2012) asserts that there are three environmental advantages to building churches in rural communities. These advantages include:

1. *Perseverance of the Rural Church* – Citing research from Pegge Boehm and associates from the Center for Theology and Land: Rural Ministry Program at the Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, Moore (2012) ascertains, "In numerous rural communities, the church is the most resilient institution." Furthermore, the church is "the convener of community, and out-survives even the local tavern."

⁴ See pages 32-33 of Payne's ebook for a list of current research being conducted of unreached people in the United States as of the publication of Payne's text.

⁵ Steve Larson, Dennis Dickson, Chris Gray, and Darin Widner successfully planted Assemblies of God churches in rural communities in North America. These men shared their experiences in an interview published in the Assemblies of God online *Enrichment Journal*. See

http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200004/056_small_community.cfm.

⁶ W. Scott Moore's research, published in *Rural Revival: Growing Churches in Shrinking Communities*, focused upon rural churches in North Alabama. He focused upon churches that experienced a "significant" growth in average Sunday school attendance, because, according to Moore's research, "Sunday school is the foundational strategy in a local church for leading people to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and for building on-mission Christians through open Bible study groups that engage people in evangelism, discipleship, ministry, fellowship, and worship." He studies four associations (eight churches) in rural Alabama by deploying a survey-based methodology.

2. *Shared Optimism Among the Congregants* – Again citing research from Pegge Boehm and associates from the Center for Theology and Land: Rural Ministry Program at the Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, Moore (2012) suggests, “The church witnesses to a hope beyond decline; it remains realistically optimistic even in a depressing situation. It offers a vision that buoys the spirits of many rural peoples.”
3. *Considerable Absence of Competition* – Moore (2012) states that people in rural communities must look within the confines of their community to meet their basic needs. However, Moore (2012) also suggests that this lack of competition may be threatened with the advancement of technology, which is challenging traditional elements of community spirit. He says, “...unless it [competition] is counteracted in some way, there will soon be little of genuine community spirit and interest left in multitudes of rural sections.”

Challenges of Rural Church Plants

Though these may also be true in church planting outside of rural communities, Larson, Dickson, Gray, and Widner⁷ specifically cite the following as challenges in reaching rural communities:

- *Denominational Loyalty* – According to Larson, “People may not have been to church in 30 years, but they claim a denominational loyalty.” They identify themselves with a denomination even if they are not actively practicing their faith. Therefore, they may be more apt to continue to identify with that denomination as they look to re-join a church community.
- *Lack of Trust* – First, according to Gray, it’s important for the people to understand who you are. Understanding who someone is and what they stand for helps to establish trust. According to Gray, “This is especially true in a rural area.”
- *Lack of Experience* – Gray suggests that without adequate pastoral experience [and possibly training and support] problems and/or a lack of credibility may exist.
- *Lack of Momentum* – According to Larson, “If you are not moving ahead, people will think you are not doing anything.” He suggests that this is especially difficult in rural communities because you may not have yet been able to develop the programs the community expects of a church (e.g., children’s programs, Bible study, community outreach, etc.).
- *Lack of Finances* – Widner shared one example of how challenging finances can be during church planting. “One of the biggest challenges we are facing is getting the finances together to complete our building. We are moving into the old church, but we have to do quite a bit of remodeling.”

⁷ See http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200004/056_small_community.cfm.

- *Lack of a Building* – According to Larson, “Some people think, they won’t last because they don’t have a building.” He suggests that this is a credibility concern.

Recommendations for Rural Church Plants:

The U.S. Congregational Membership: County Reports, compiled by ARDA, can help identify the most unreached communities throughout North America.⁸ Many of these unreached communities are located in rural areas. In considering how to reach communities in the United States with the highest percentage of unreached people, Payne⁹ (2014) suggests the following:

- *Be Intentional* – “It is necessary to be intentional about reaching the peoples among us.”
- *Learn as You Go* – “Books are good, but you must put the books down and be among the people.”
- *Be Willing to Make Mistakes* – “Making mistakes is part of the journey...The people to whom you minister expect it, for they know they will make mistakes when relating to you.”
- *Use the Bridges of God* – “God has allowed for social networks to develop among people. These networks, or bridges as they have been called, are designed for the gospel to travel across.”
- *Spend Time with the More Receptive* – “While we should share the gospel with everyone – including the most hostile peoples – wise stewardship and the biblical example direct us to give priority to those asking, ‘what must I do to be saved?’ We do not have an unlimited amount of time and resources.”
- *Understand the Generational and Cultural Differences* – “People groups are not the same.”
- *Use Contextually Appropriate Methods* – “In the process of reaching and teaching others, we must recognize that our cultural preferences for functioning as a church are not necessarily biblical requirements. We must be discerning, teaching these new believers what the Bible says about the local church. At the same time, we must avoid (as much as possible) the impartation of our cultural preferences. Our approach should be to assist them in thinking through how to apply biblical principles to their contexts as they plant churches.”
- *Participate in Evangelism that Results in New Churches* – “If we desire to see the peoples work across the bridges of God and make disciples in other contexts, then they need to be reached and taught to obey the commands of Jesus in the context of church planting.”

⁸ See <http://www.thearda.com/RCMS2010/selectCounty.asp>.

⁹ Please Note: Payne’s research focuses upon unreached population in the United States overall, not specifically just in rural communities.

- *Use a Simple Strategy and Highly Reproducible Methods* – “New believers look to you for an example. The way we model disciple making, teaching obedience, and planting churches communicates the way they should do it.”
- *Model Partnership, Not Paternalism* – “It is important to see them as equals, rather than infants who are unable to carry the gospel and multiply disciples, pastors, and churches across the world. Remember, they have just as much of the Holy Spirit as we do. We must not be lord over them.”

Though Moore (2012) demonstrates that the shrinking population base in many rural communities is certainly a challenge for rural church planters, Larson, Dickson, Gray, and Widner^{10 11} suggest the following strategies to reach successfully rural communities:

- *Clearly Define a Vision* – According to Larson, “We defined two or three things we wanted to do and stuck to them.”
- *Emphasize Denominational Affiliation* – According to Dickson, “People want to know you are Assemblies of God because they know what you believe.” Additionally, this demonstrates support on a district and national level, which may suggest stability to the community¹².
- *Networking and Relationship Building* – According to Gray, “When people come to our church, they find a caring and loving environment. People outside the church sense the camaraderie...People feel accepted. We also try to make everything we do relevant to their situation.” Widner also emphasizes the need to get to know the people within the community and become their friends. He says, “You can’t reach a smaller community unless the people accept you.”
- *Reach Out to Children* – According to Dickson, “When parents see that we love their children, they come.”
- *Direct Mail Instead of Door-to-Door* – According to Larson, “Going door-to-door would have turned off people in our community because Jehovah’s Witnesses go door-to-door. When we send out a 3,500-piece mailing, our attendance generally increases by about 20 to 30 as a result [i.e., approximately a 1% response rate].”

¹⁰ Paul Drost, director of the Church Planting Department for the Assemblies of God, visited with four pastors who have successfully planted churches in small communities. Steve Larson planted a church in a rural community west of Rochester, Minnesota. Dennis Dickinson planted a church in Pass, Oregon. Chris Gray planted a church near three small communities on the border of Pennsylvania and New York with a total population of approximately 15,000 people. Darin Widner restarted a struggling church and also planted a church near Bluff, Missouri.

¹¹ See http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200004/056_small_community.cfm.

¹² Later in this literature review we discuss three approaches to church planting (denominational, church planting network, and church planting churches). Dickson appears to suggest that the denominational approach may be most effective.

Additionally, Moore's (2012) research suggests that rural churches should maintain focused on worship, prayer, singing, and preaching within the church. While the style of worship appeared unimportant to most of Moore's survey participants, the rural church's emphasis on these key components are instrumental to reaching and maintaining a strong relationship with the community. These are key factors rural community members expect to experience at church.

Stetzer and Bird's 2007 Study of the State of Church Planting in the United States

In 2007, Stetzer and Bird undertook an effort to create and compile information on the state of church planting in the United States. According to Stetzer and Bird, "The present study was undertaken to generate and consolidate information on the current state of church planting in the United States and to provide insight into the lack of church multiplication."

Crucial to Stetzer and Bird's (2007) study is the definition of a church plant. Therefore, they define a church plant as "newly organized localized gatherings of followers of Jesus Christ which identify themselves as churches, meet regularly to engage in spiritual activity, and would broadly be defined as Protestant."

Stetzer and Bird's (2007) study included an extensive review of church planting studies, doctoral dissertations, journal articles, and church planting books and manuals, after which they chose "a few relevant studies." These studies included, The Vineyard Study (Hunter, 1986), The Philpott Study, The NAMB Study (North American Mission Board) of the Southern Baptists (Southern Baptists Convention, 2007), and Steve Gray's research (Gray, 2007). Some key findings from each study are summarized below¹³.

The Vineyard Study concluded:

- The disposition of the lead church planter was the most important factor. A lead church planter with a passive approach to ministry is prone to failure; however, church planters with an aggressive strategy for penetrating the community and gathering leaders for the kingdom more frequently had successful church plants. Therefore, effective church planter recruiters better recognize divinely chosen and gifted leaders for church planting.
- Proper site location (i.e. the city or town for the church, potential facility or church building) is necessary for success.
- The need for training church planters and their teams are important.

The Philpott study found the following:

- Spousal support for church planters is a must.
- The importance of casting vision cannot be overemphasized.

¹³ For complete references, please see Stetzer and Bird (2007).

- Material resources are less important than one might believe.
- Coaching plays a significant role in the life of the planter.
- Church planters should have a plan for both developing leaders and involving them as soon as possible.
- Church planters need to be sure of their calling.

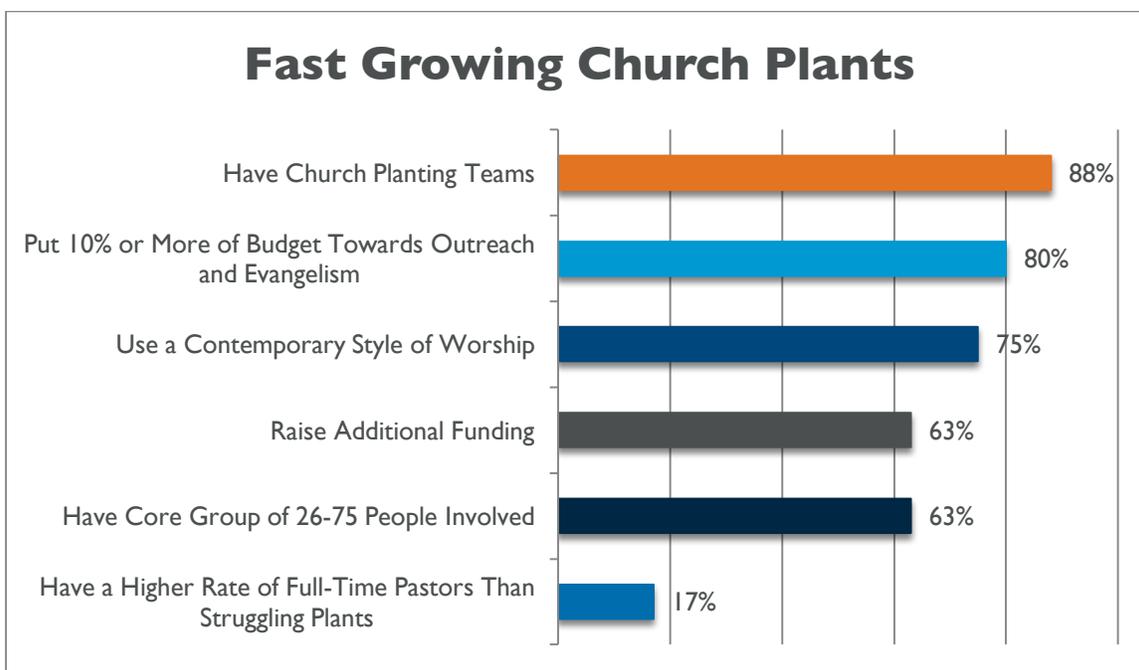
The NAMB study found that 68% of church plants still exist four years after being started. In testing over 100 factors for significance in relationship to church plant survival, the following are the top reasons for survival listed in order of importance.

1. Realistic expectations of the church planting experience and what it entails.
2. The new church plant offers leadership development training within the plant.
3. A proactive stewardship development plan is developed within the plant.
4. The church planter meets regularly with peers.

In regard to church health, the NAMB study looked at numbers of conversions and baptisms. The factors that most highly correlated with these indicators of health included:

- Engaging in evangelism/ministry outreach (food banks, shelter, drug alcohol recovery)
- Conducting a mid-week children's program and conducting special children's events (Fall Festival, Easter Egg Hunt, etc.)
- A stewardship plan for self-sustainability
- A church planter who is full-time rather than part-time
- Starting a daughter church within three years
- Holding membership classes, leadership classes, and planting classes
- Delegating leadership roles to church members

Finally, Gray's research was focused on factors that helped the church plant exceed the 200-attendance mark quickly. According to Stetzer and Bird (2007), "Gray compared 60 fast-growing church plants and 52 struggling church plants and found important differences." (n.p.) Among fast growing church plants, churches tended to have church planting teams, put a significant portion of the budget towards outreach and evangelism, and have a contemporary style of worship, among other factors.



Gray also found that fast growing church plants:

- Often had additional sources of support
- Had planters that were given more freedom to cast vision, choose their target audience, and spend their finances
- Had multiple paid staff and were started by a team
- Utilized preview services and small groups prior to the initial launch
- Utilized more seed families
- Had children and teen ministries in place
- Offered at least three ministry opportunities (i.e. children’s ministry, youth ministry, family ministry, etc.) to new attendees
- Had over 101 attendees at their first service.

Additionally, Stetzer and Bird (2007) conducted a quali-quant study of “over 200 church planting churches, over 100 leaders from 40 denominations, 45 church planting networks, 84 organic church leaders, 12 nationally known experts, and 81 colleges and seminaries.” The results convey the similarities and differences of church plants led by denominations, church planting networks, church planting churches, and house churches. There appear to be differences between the efforts of denominations, church planting networks, and church planting churches. These differences are outlined below.

Denominations

Even though, according to Stetzer and Bird (2007), most church plants are connected in some fashion to a particular denomination, many denominational and regional agencies are struggling with how to train church planters more effectively and consistently. One example of a denomination's challenge was the multicultural dimension of denominations, whereas most church plants are culturally specific.

Recruitment and Training –Stetzer and Bird's (2007) research suggests that only 68% of national and regional denominations utilize some type of church planter assessment, but the researchers' literature review suggests a correlation between assessment, training, coaching and church planting success. Additionally, Stetzer and Bird found that denominations that place an emphasis on church planting are also tapping leaders through a variety of avenues (e.g., church planter internships or paid staff from an organization dedicated to assist with church planting).

Funding –Stetzer and Bird (2007) identified a number of factors that relate to funding denominational church planting efforts:

Church planting funding is shifting from a regional or national initiative and oversight to local churches. In this model, regional and national organizations are coming along side local churches to provide assistance with leadership recruitment, assessments, training and development, and sometimes coaching. Since they are providing these services, they appear to be providing less funding. Typically, according to the researchers, regional and national agencies are now providing 33% or less of the local church's church planting funding needs.

Assessment – Stetzer and Bird (2007) found that denominations are reporting an increase in church planting efforts at the local church level, but only 15% of the local churches are actually planting churches. Additionally, the researchers found among several denominations that the most successful church plants are those within a specific ethnic group. Regardless, denominations report that overall they may not be tracking church plants effectively; this is something denominations must focus upon to yield more reliable statistics and consistent support for planting efforts.

Church Planting Networks

Stetzer and Bird (2007) summarized research conducted by the Leadership Network (via a survey of 45 church planting networks and 24 in-person interviews of church planters supported by church planting networks) and found that denominations place a greater value on planting churches that are "similar to themselves." This signifies that denominations are leading church plants within their denomination. In contrast, independent church planting organizations (i.e., church planting networks) are thinking differently than denominations and not necessarily planting churches like themselves or within a specific denomination. These church planting networks, according to the researchers, are formed based upon "ideology, theology, independence, entrepreneurial spirit, kingdom mentality, frustration with existing systems, vision, calling, or the seeming necessity of a different kind of church for the community."

Therefore, the researchers defined a church planting network as “a group of churches that have publicly acknowledged that they are intentionally working together for the purpose of church planting and have a cooperative strategy to accomplish that goal.”

How Networks Emerge – Church planting networks, according to Stetzer and Bird (2007), emerge from a “common ministry paradigm” (e.g. Vision USA, Church Planting Network, Infinity Alliance). These networks tend to have “a common theological statement that is broader and allows cooperation in spite of ideological differences on issues perceived as secondary.” Additionally, some church planting networks emerge from a local church (e.g. GlocalNet from Northwood Church in Keller, Texas; and Global Outreach from Spanish River Church in Boca Raton, Florida).

Relationships as Catalyst – According to Stetzer and Bird (2007), “The trademark characteristic of church planting networks is the ongoing emphasis upon the relationship between the planter and church planting entity (i.e. the network). This relational bond is emphasized over their financial relationship (which often still comes through traditional denominational or other channels).”

Assessment and Training – According to the researchers, over 75% of church planting networks report having a process in place for assessment, training, and support of a new church plant. On average, of the 20 applications a church planting network will receive in one year for a new church plant, the network will only accept 20% (n=4) of those who apply.

Ministry Paradigm and Style – According to the researchers, “missiology is a common term and driving force with many networks... These networks aim to plant churches that will adopt the vision of partnering or pioneering in planting other churches in the future.” Therefore, the healthiest networks appear to be led by “charismatic leaders who attract other leaders.”

Budget and Funding – According to the researchers, budgets and funding are skewed because though a church may be planted through a church planting network, the church planters may also receive financial support through a denomination.

Reproduction – The number of churches planted via church planting networks is increasing annually. According to the researchers, upon surveying church planting networks, the number has risen from 1.9 to six churches per year. Reproduction is strong within church planting networks, according to Stetzer and Bird (2007), because there is a stronger emphasis on “team planting” (i.e. many church planting networks do not permit a lone pastor even though there will be a lead planter for each team). A lead planter often times develops his (or her) own team.

Analysis – According to the researchers, church planting networks appear to spend more time on assessing leaders than on actual formal training. They believe the screening of church planting leaders is crucial.

Church Planting Churches

Stetzer and Bird (2007) identified church planting churches as those churches that directly planted at least two other churches and have a specific strategy for planting churches. The researchers analyzed surveys from 173 church planting churches in the United States.

Budgeting and Funding – The researchers identified a number of commonalities among church planting churches in relationship to budgeting and funding.

- New church planters must raise a large portion of their own budget (between 50 to 80%).
- The remaining funding comes from the church itself and/or the denomination.
- The researchers identified a correlation between amount of funding and the aggressiveness of the church in the effort. The least funded efforts are more likely from the most aggressive churches.

Staffing and Partnerships – According to the researchers, one-third of large church-planting churches dedicate paid staff positions to church planting, but these paid staff members only appeared to spend about 50% of their time focusing on church planting. The researchers did identify a correlation between the number of paid staff positions and the number of churches planted (i.e., the more staff dedicated to church planting the more churches planted). Additionally, there appears to be a correlation between the senior pastors' commitment to church planting and the number of churches planted. The greater the commitment, the greater the number of churches planted. Finally, a correlation appears to exist between the aggressive growth of the church and the number of churches planted. The more aggressively the church itself is growing, the more churches will be planted.

Church Planting Indicators – While we may think that larger churches are more apt to build more churches, in fact, Stetzer and Bird (2007) found that churches with 200 or less attendees are four times more likely to plant a church than churches with 1,000 or more attendees.

Recruitment, Assessment, Training – Similar to church planting networks, according to the researchers, churches that are more aggressive in regards to planting churches, appear to have more well-defined church planter recruitment and assessment measures in place. The churches see their role as preparing “the planter for the work in the field” and pressing “him to self-sufficiency.” Additionally, training practices appear to be unique to the church itself. Common, though, amongst the churches is ensuring a shared vision and understanding of the value of church planting between the church and the church planter. As with church planting networks, relationship development appears key to recruitment efforts.

Analysis – As per Stetzer and Bird (2007), “Church planting churches are a determined group. They are independent thinkers and aggressive by nature. They consistently told us their goal was to create self-sufficient church planters and churches.” Additionally, because the churches themselves do not heavily fund the church planting efforts, they place a lot of emphasis on training the church planting leaders.

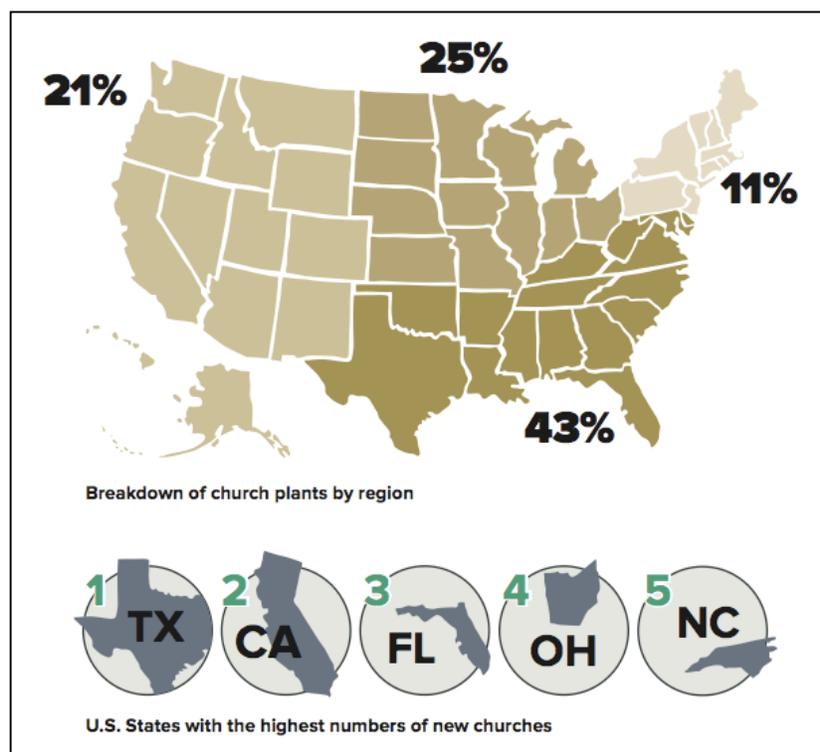
Stetzer, Fries, and Im's 2015 Study on the State of Church Planting in the United States

In 2015 Stetzer, Fries, and Im published a report with the findings from their study that sought to gain information about the current state of church planting in the United States. In their study, church planters across 17 different denominational and church planting networks were asked to complete a 20 to 30 minute online survey. About 1,200 church planters completed the survey, of which 843 respondents fit the criteria to be used in analysis of having churches planted since 2007 and still operating today.

Where are Church Plants?

The research revealed that church plants are mostly located in the South, an area already saturated with many churches. In the survey, Southern church plants accounted for 43% of all new churches. The Northeast, home to a significant percentage of the population and the most unchurched region in the U.S., received only 11% of new churches. The research revealed that there should be an increased commitment to strategically planting churches in more of the unchurched areas in the U.S.

Breakdown of Church Plants by Region¹⁴



¹⁴ This infographic, *The Breakdown of Church Plants by Region*, originally appeared in Stetzer, Fries, and Im's (2015) research report.

Church Plant Pastors

Pastors of church plants participating in the survey tended to be Anglo and relatively well educated.

Ethnicity - Anglo pastors of new churches outsized their percentage of the U.S. population by 10-15% where as African-American and Hispanic pastors were not represented at a rate consistent with their percentage of the entire U.S. population.

Education - Church planters in the sample were generally well educated, though diverse educational levels were represented. In the study, 81% of church planters had at least a college degree with 42% having a graduate degree. Twelve percent had some college/university experience, 5% were only high school graduates, and 1% did not have a high school diploma.

Church Plant Attendance

Attendance tended to increase over the first four years of existence at church plants participating in the survey. The average attendance at church plants per year of existence is listed below.

Average Attendance at Church Plants Per Year of Existence

Year(s) of Existence	Average Attendance	Median Attendance
1	51	30
2	74	45
3	95	60
4	124	72

The study found there were four major trends that seemed to affect higher attendance: a highly public presence, a commitment to multiplication, a generous attitude towards the planter/pastor, and a focus on new members.

Highly Public Presence - In the study, new churches that were committed to a highly public presence generally experienced higher attendance.

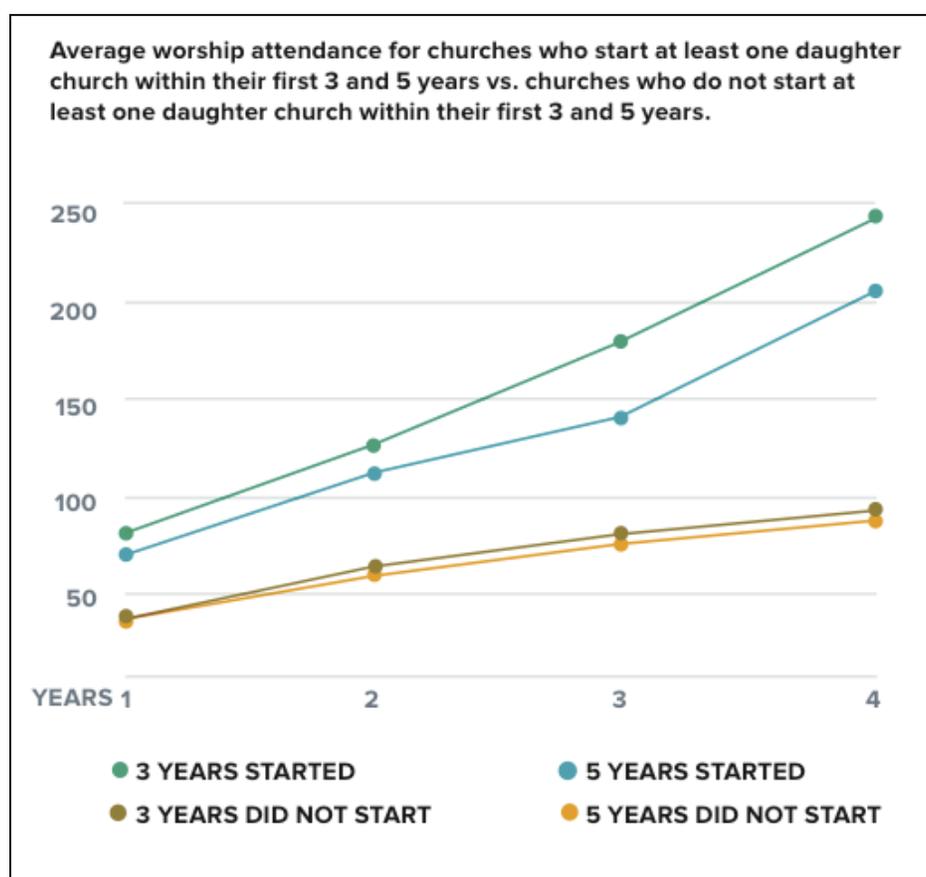
- **Church Meeting Location** - Church plants that met in schools or industrial/warehouse spaces generally had a higher attendance than those who met in other locations. The average attendance at year four at church plants meeting in schools was 187, compared with an average attendance of only 94 at churches meeting in other locations. The average attendance at year four at church plants meeting in industrial or warehouse spaces was 238, compared with an average attendance of only 111 at churches meeting in other locations.
- **Mailers** - Churches that used mailers generally had greater attendance numbers than those that did not use mailers. The average attendance at year one for churches who used mailers was 69, compared with an average attendance of only 46 for churches who

did not use mailers. At year four, churches whom used mailers had an average attendance of 173 compared with an average attendance of only 110 at churches that did not use mailers.

- **Radio/Television Ads** - Churches who used radio or television ads as one of their top three forms of publicity generally had greater attendance figures than churches who did not use these ads. At year one, churches who used radio or TV ads had an average attendance of 82, compared with an average attendance of 49 at churches that did not use the ads. At year four, churches who used radio or TV ads had an average attendance of 208, compared with an average attendance of 120 at churches that did not use the ads.

Commitment to Multiplication - Church attendance tended to be greater at church plants that started daughter churches. Please reference the graph below.

Average Worship Attendance for Churches Who Started at Least One Daughter Church Within Their First Three and Five Years¹⁵



¹⁵ This infographic, *Average Worship Attendance for Churches Who Started at Least One Daughter Church Within Their First Three and Five Years*, originally appeared in Stetzer, Fries, and Im's (2015) research report.

A Generous Attitude Toward the Planter/Pastor

- **Training** - Churches whose leaders received a minimum of a month-long training course provided by their denomination or network generally experienced greater attendance than churches whose leaders did not receive such training. The average attendance at year four at churches whose leaders received a minimum of a month-long training course provided by their denomination or network was 247 compared with an average attendance of only 120 at churches whose leaders did not receive this training.
- **Financial Compensation** - Churches that provided financial compensation to their leaders generally experienced greater attendance than those who did not provide financial compensation. The average attendance at year four at church plants whose leaders received financial compensation was 142, compared with an average attendance of only 59 at churches whose leaders did not receive financial compensation.

A Focus on New Members - Churches who held new members classes generally experienced greater attendance than churches who do not hold the classes. The average attendance at year four of church plants that held new member classes was 139, compared with an average attendance of only 98 at churches that did not hold the classes.

New Commitments to Christ

The data from the survey showed that church plants generally saw an increase in the number of new commitments to Christ over the course of their first four years of existence. The table below displays the number of new commitments to Christ seen in church plants by year of existence.

Number of New Commitments to Christ Seen in Church Plants by Year of Existence

Year(s) of Existence	Average New Commitments	Median New Commitments
1	11	4
2	14	5
3	18	6
4	17	6

The study found that churches who prioritize a public and digital presence, have intentional outreach activities and programs, and invest in developing lay leaders tended to see more people make commitments to Christ.

A Public and Digital Presence

- **Mailers** - Church plants that used mailers as one of their top three forms of publicity saw, on average, more commitments to Christ than churches who did not use mailers. The average

number of commitments to Christ at year one at churches who used mailers was 21, compared with 8 commitments, on average, at churches that did not use mailers.

- **Podcasts** - Church plants that used podcasts as a form of communication tended to see more commitments to Christ than churches who did not use podcasts. Churches who used podcasts had an average of 16 commitments to Christ during their first year, whereas churches who did not use podcasts had an average of 10 commitments.

An Intentional Outreach Strategy - The study found that churches who offered programs and activities for the unchurched tended to see more people make commitments to Christ than churches who did not offer these elements. For example, churches who used a sports league as a continuing form of outreach saw more commitments to Christ at year one (15) than churches who did not use a sports league (10). At year four of the church plant, churches who used a sports league as a form of outreach had an average of 23 commitments to Christ, where churches that did not utilize a sports league had only 15.

A Focus on Leadership Development - Churches that had an intentional leadership development plan for their members tended to see more people make decisions for Christ. Churches who offered a leadership development plan for their membership saw more commitments to Christ at year one (13) than churches who did not offer a leadership development plan (7).

Reaching the Unchurched

The survey found that the majority of church plant attendees come from a church background. Only 34% of church plants are comprised primarily of people from an unchurched background.

What Helps Church Plants Reach the Unchurched?

The study found that church plants that had more unchurched attendees tended to have a public presence, an intentional strategy to reach the unchurched, and created opportunities for the message of Christ to be shared with unchurched people.

- Among church plants that used prayer walking in preparation for their launch, 38% of attendees are majority unchurched, whereas only 33% of attendees are majority unchurched in church plants who did not use prayer walking before their launch.
- Church plants that used special events for children as a primary form of outreach had more unchurched attendees (37%) than churches who did not use special children's events as a primary form of outreach (30%).
- Church plants that used ongoing Bible studies as a form of outreach had more unchurched attendees (38%) than churches that did not use ongoing Bible studies as a form of outreach (30%).
- Church plants that used door-to-door outreach as a primary strategy for their launch had more unchurched attendees (45%) than churches that did not use door-to-door outreaches prior to their launch (33%). It was found that even some "dated" methods

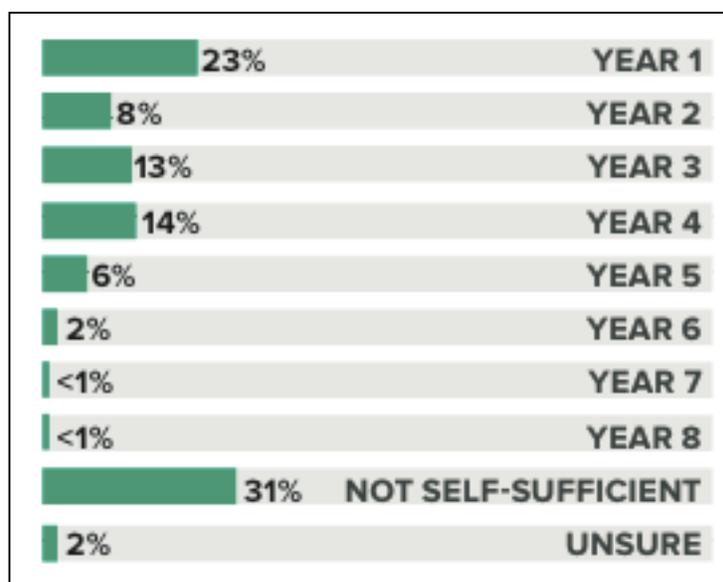
such as door hangers are quite effective in reaching the unchurched. Forty-five% of attendees at churches who used door hangers or flyers as a form of outreach are majority unchurched, whereas only 31% of attendees at churches who did not use these methods are majority unchurched.

- Church plants that used ongoing sports leagues as a primary form of outreach had more unchurched attendees (46%) than churches that did not use sports leagues as a primary form of outreach (32%).

Financial Sustainability

In this study, financial self-sufficiency was defined as a church plant receiving no financial support from outside sources. The data showed that nearly half (44%) of churches started in 2012 or earlier became financially self-sufficient within three years. Thirty-one percent of churches that were started in 2012 or earlier had not reached financial self-sufficiency at the time of the survey. The graph below shows the year at which church plants participating in the survey became financially self-sufficient.

The Year at Which Church Plants Became Financially Self-Sufficient¹⁶



According to the report, the “sweet spot” for attaining financial sustainability is three-to-four years. If a church plant is unable to become financially self-sufficient by that point it is unlikely that the church will ever be financially self-sustainable. The research showed that churches who prioritized a public presence, focused on new membership assimilation, developed leaders, and had financial wisdom and integrity are churches who tended to achieve financial sustainability.

¹⁶ This infographic, *The Year at Which Church Plants Became Financially Self-Sufficient*, originally appeared in Stetzer, Fries, and Im’s (2015) research report.

A Public Presence

- Churches who put their sermons online as a communications tool tended to be more self-sufficient in three years (71%) than churches who did not put their sermons online (57%).
- Churches who used a school as a meeting space were more self-sufficient within three years (74%) than churches who did not use a school as meeting place (60%).

New Member Assimilation

- Churches who held new member's classes were more self-sufficient in three years (71%) than churches who did not hold new member's classes (53%).

A Focus on Leadership Development

- Churches who developed a leadership training plan for their membership were more self-sufficient within three years (68%) than churches who did not develop a leadership training plan (57%).

Financial Wisdom and Integrity

- Churches who developed a proactive church stewardship plan to move the church to self-sufficiency were more self-sufficient within three years (72%) than churches who did not have a plan (53%).
- Churches who financially contributed to other church plants were more self-sufficient within three years (71%) than churches who did not contribute financially to other church plants (54%).
- Churches whose pastor received what they believe to be adequate financial compensation were more self-sufficient within three years (73%) than churches whose pastor did not receive what they believe to be adequate financial compensation (57%).

Multiplication

Multiplying churches are defined as those that plant daughter church(es) and in looking across the data of churches surveyed, a number of characteristics were present among multiplying churches. These characteristics include having a public focus, prioritizing discipleship, and contributing to other church plants.

- *Having a Public Focus* - Church plants that multiplied tended to have more of a public focus than church plants that did not multiply. For example, 40% of church plants that utilized a podcast as a means of communication started another church within their first 5 years of existence compared with only 16% of church plants that did not utilize a podcast.
- *Prioritizing Discipleship* - Church plants that multiplied tended to place a high priority on discipleship evidenced through discipleship programs and a culture of one-on-one discipleship throughout the church. Among churches that practiced one-on-one

discipleship, 26% started another new church within their first 5 years of existence. Among churches that did not practice one-one-one discipleship, 14% started another new church within 5 years of existence.

- *Contributing to Other Church Plants* - Among churches that contributed financially to other church plants, 31% started another new church within their first 5 years of existence, compared with only 6% of churches that did not contribute financially to other churches.

Resources for Rural Church Planters

There are several important research tools the rural church planter can access for specific county-by-county information. The United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service's State Fact Sheets provide information on population, income, poverty, food security, education, employment, agriculture, top commodities, and exports. There are links available to most county-level data as well.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service State Fact Sheets: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/state-fact-sheets.aspx>

The U.S. Congregational Membership Report, supported by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) offers a nation-wide county-by-county report of religious trends (as of the 2010 U.S. Census).

U.S. Congregational Membership: County Reports:
<http://www.thearda.com/RCMS2010/selectCounty.asp>

the **ARDA**
Association of Religion Data Archives

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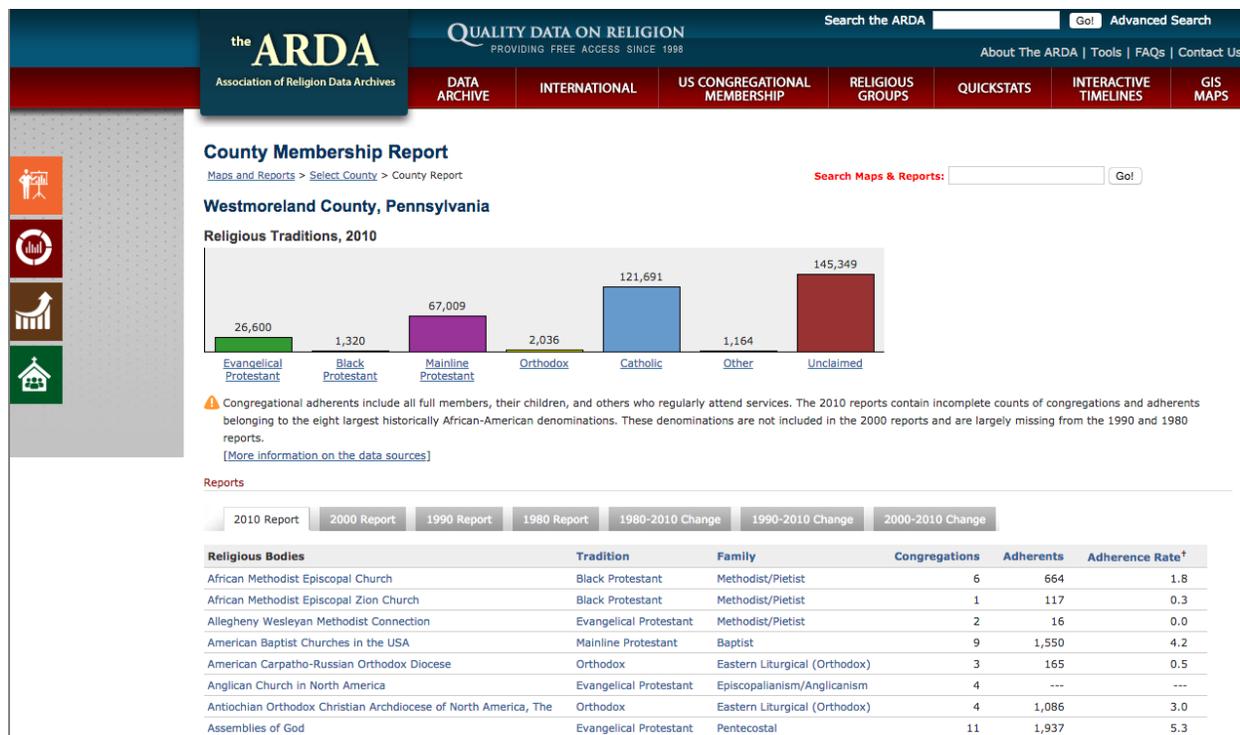
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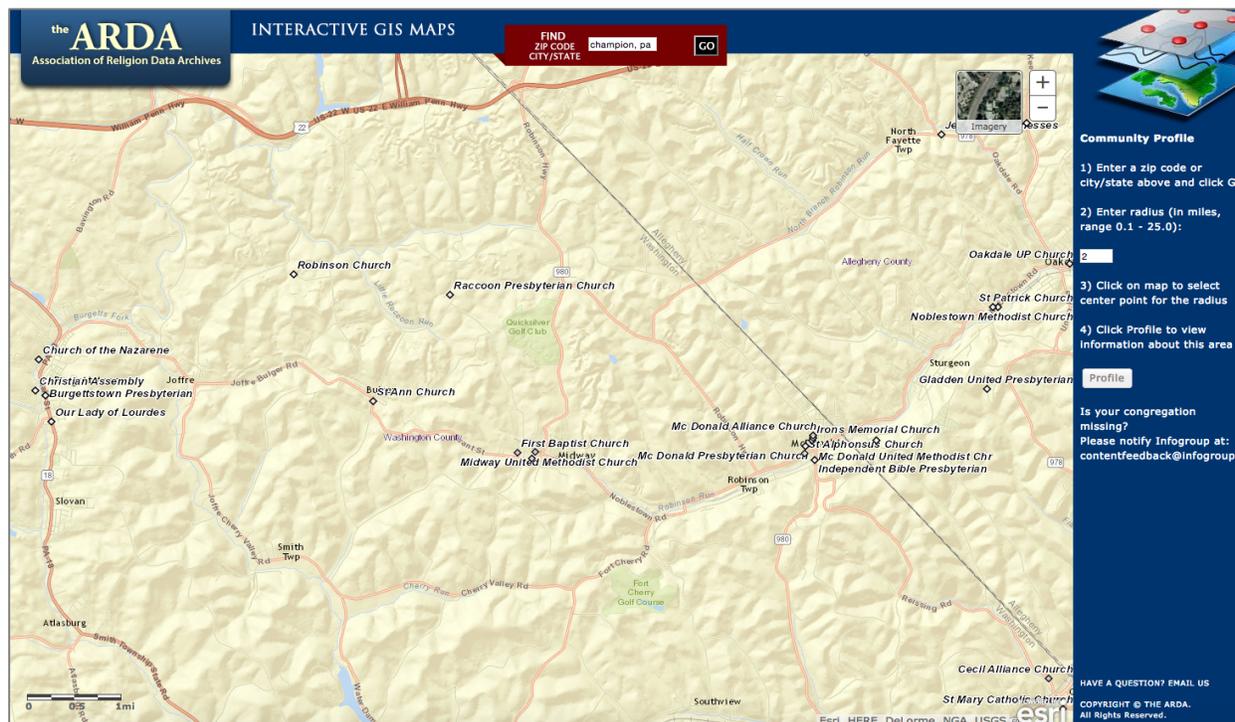
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- Baldwin County
- Barbour County
- Bibb County
- Blount County
- Bullock County
- Butler County
- Calhoun County
- Chambers County
- Cherokee County



ARDA, through its Community Profile Builder, also includes interactive GIS maps. According to ARDA, “This tool assists church and community leaders in accessing free online information about their communities. The initial map shows the location of other churches and the Profile Builder provides users with social, economic, and religious information on communities or neighborhoods of interest.



Additional Resources

The following organizations appear to be key players in church planting efforts throughout North America.

Leadership Assessment

- Church Planter Candidate Assessment
- Church Planting Assessment Center
- New Church Specialties
- New Church Initiatives
- Church Planting Solutions
- Church Planted Profiles
- Lifeway Assessment Center

Leadership Bootcamps

- Liberate
- Acts 29 Network
- Stadia
- Converge Church Planting

Associations and Organizations

- Church Multiplication Network (<http://churchmultiplication.net/#info>)
- Association of Related Churches (ARC)
- Evangelical Church Alliance
- National Association of Evangelicals
- 9Marks
- The Gospel Coalition (TGC)
- Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals
- Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics
- Institute for Creation Research
- The Christian Research Institute
- Rural Home Ministry Association

- Village Missions' Small Church Leadership Development Network
- Terry Dorsett's Blog (www.rhma.org)
- Gary Farley's Blog (<http://thoughtsfromdrt.blogspot.com/>)
- Appalachian Regional Ministry
- Southern Baptist Bivocational/Smaller Church Network
- Louisiana Baptist Convention Bivocational/Smaller Church Website

The following text provides information on church planting in the United States. Though the report does not focus exclusively on rural church plants, much of the information relevant to church plants regardless of location.

Stetzer, E., Fries, M., & Im, D. (2015). *The state of church planting in the U.S.* Nashville, TN: Lifeway Christian Resources.

The following texts provide additional insight into rural church planting and growth. While these resources were reviewed in preparation of writing this literature review, they were not incorporated into the paper because these texts, while certainly serving as excellent resources to those interested in rural church planting, are not written as empirically sound research studies, which was the intention of this literature review. These texts instead provide the personal journeys and experiences of rural church planters.

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Additional relevant texts are available at: <http://www.wbamd.com/rural/>

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