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A Story, Metaphor, and a Matrix for the Truly Rural Church That Grows Christ Followers in an Uncertain Future

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

A STORY, METAPHOR, AND A MATRIX FOR THE TRULY RURAL CHURCH
THAT GROWS CHRIST FOLLOWERS IN AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY LON HIDER

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies

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All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my EPIC group. You know who you are. Twelve years of people growing together in difficult circumstances inside and outside the church. It is a bit of cliché, but the following applies to us:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...

This sounds like life in the paradoxical Kingdom of God. And it reminds me of the words of Paul: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

Thanks for always showing up and staying in conversation when others could not bear to listen or take the trip. A teacher is dead without hungry souls, challenges, and curious minds. You kept me coming back for more, and we learned together.

I treasure our bonds of friendships.

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- Leonard Sweet for expanding my horizons on so many fronts.
- My cohort for the good times, the resources, the challenges, and the inspiration.
- Loren, Cliff, Heather, and Tim for guidance in unfamiliar territory
- Rural churches for giving me something to write about.
- EPIC group for being the support and fellow travelers through this process
- My family for their patience with my absent- minded ways.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APC	Attractional Propositional Colonial
EPIC	Experiential Participatory Image-Rich Connective
MRI	Missional Relational Incarnational
PTI	Preserve Traditions Idolize
TRC	Truly Rural Church

ABSTRACT

The Church is always one generation away from extinction. There are larger trends that jeopardize the future of rural churches in my area. Evidence suggests there will not be enough Millennials to keep these rural churches viable. The rural churches built themselves on the “world-as-it-used-to-be.” But this world is fading with younger generations. Current approaches are unlikely to keep the ship afloat

The “world-as-it-used-to-be” distorted the biblical narrative culminating in Christ. This story does not have weight with younger generations. If followers of Jesus in a rural context can embrace the correct biblical narrative, they can grow in their humanity and reflect Christ. The real issue is not “how can we keep the churches afloat” but “what kind of church can make disciples of Jesus in a rural context”. The rural churches in my area have an operating system that works against the production of disciples. These churches are in the last stage of their life cycle. Having a “good death” may be the best result for these churches. A new matrix built to make disciples is the optimal result.

This matrix will reject the urban church operating systems that focus on numbers and the rural operating systems that focus on preservation. Leonard Sweet proposes a new model that reflects the operating system of Jesus that he believes is missional, relational and incarnational (MRI).

The future rural church in my area needs this operating system built on the NT metaphor of Christ as the Icon of God. This metaphor connects us to the metaphor of the Church as “a river of living water”. These metaphors reflect an MRI operating system as part of new matrix that grows disciples.

Growth in Christ demands a Kingdom of God mindset. This happens through an emotional connection to a leader (s) who creates a learning community in an intimate context and practices certain kinds of spiritual disciplines. This new church will build on the strengths of their rural culture and be experiential, participatory, image-rich and connective (EPIC).

CHAPTER ONE:
STANDING INSIDE A TRULY RURAL CHURCH

“There's a place dear to me where I'm longing to be
With my friends at the old country church
There with mother we went, and our Sundays were spent
With my friends at the old country church

Precious years precious years, sweet memory
Oh what joy they bring to me
How I long once more to be
With my friends at the old country church”¹

¹ “The Old Country Church,” Hymnary.Org, accessed January 8, 2019,
[http://hymnary.org/theres_a_place_dear_to_me_where_im_longi/..](http://hymnary.org/theres_a_place_dear_to_me_where_im_longi/)

Introduction

A ministerial association in the rural town of Manistique Michigan (population 3097)² meets to discuss the future of their churches. In the past, their churches (like the bulk of churches) could count on younger generations returning to church with their families, checkbooks, and willingness to serve. But the lack of younger generations and an abundance of gray hair tell them this pattern is in jeopardy.

One pastor blames it on economics. Younger generations need jobs and so they move to the metropolis. For those left behind, the stress of just making a living prevents them from active church involvement and financial support. There are not enough available and interested younger generations he can involve in the church.

Another pastor believes it has more to do shifting values. The younger generations who attend his church don't show up for the business meetings and don't want to sell pies for the annual church fundraiser. They seem more interested in their electronic devices and lives outside of the church. He sees a real disconnect between his faithful older generations and the smattering of young generations who attend church.

A third pastor feels our country needs a revival. He believes traditional values are under attack and remembers a time when the Church had more influence in Manistique. It was shameful not to go to Church when he was growing up in this town. But now he sees more people in kayaks and golf carts than he does in the pews on Sunday morning. Some of his most faithful attendees are becoming less frequent in their church attendance. Many of the younger generations he knows are "shacking up" or having babies with

² Suburbanstats.org, "Current Manistique, Michigan Population, Demographics and Stats in 2017, 2018," accessed December 31, 2018, <http://suburbanstats.org/population/michigan/how-many-people-live-in-Manistique>.

different partners. He remembers a time when the school protected Wednesday night for Catechism and church youth groups but now they schedule practices after school.

It demoralizes another pastor. Her church tried several things to get more young people involved including contemporary worship and more programs for younger generations but none of that has worked. In fact, these changes only seemed to divide her congregation, and she lost several older families.

The final pastor believes we should just focus on "who we have" rather than "who we don't have". He feels issues like economics and cell phones are beyond our capacity to control. If God has given us a lot of gray hair, then let's focus on them and not waste energy on things beyond our control. He believes younger generations will come back to church once they have families like previous generations have done.³

The above stories highlight what is happening in my rural area. In some western movies, Native American tribal leaders sit around the campfire discussing what to do about the trend of westward expansion that threatens their way of life. They, however, were at the mercy of trends that could not be reversed. My premise is that the rural churches in my area are at the mercy of trends that (in all probability) cannot be reversed and therefore represent a growing threat to the continued viability of the rural congregations in my area.

These churches base their congregational life on the "world- as- it- used- to- be". This matrix, however, has an impoverished understanding of the biblical narrative that climaxes in Christ and does not equip them for the world "world-as- it- is- becoming". Because of this, they cannot draw, hold or grow younger generations as followers of

³ "The Great Decline: 60 Years of Religion in One Graph," Religion News Services, last modified January 8, 2019, <https://religionnews.com/2014/01/27/great-decline-religion-united-states-one-graph/>.

Christ. If the rural church can build its life around the biblical narrative that climaxes in Christ, then it will:

- Have an operating system equipped for the "world-as-it-is-becoming."
- Make disciples from the ranks of younger generations.

As the world of these rural churches shakes and shifts, they fight to stand on the rock of yesteryear. The shadows of those towering white steeples still dominate the landscape, but their cover of influence shrinks as the new world rises. People walk beneath these steeples as the bells ring, but you can see their heads bowed to the little blue screens of their cell phones. In their hands they hold the future and they can see and hear seductive new possibilities. For younger generations the light of this brave new world pushes the institutional church into the background even as the flood of urbanization sweeps them into the city.

Meanwhile, the gray-haired Silents and Boomers who dominate the church serve watered -down Folgers coffee in the fellowship hall and after church scurry to their homes to catch the kickoff and drink Old Style beer (unless they come from a teetotalling congregation).

Twelve years ago, our community did not have a Starbucks and you could not find a craft brew in the pub or grocery store. Today the saloons serve a variety of IPA's and locally produced craft beers.

Ten years ago, when someone "binged" they meant driving an hour to the mall and not watching an entire season of "House of Cards" on Netflix in one day. High speed internet was an oxymoron in our community.

Shops and schools are not open for business every year on November 15th so that everyone can partake in the opening day of deer season. But today we have a special season in August just for our youth, in hopes they will take an interest in an event that has lost its power in the lives of younger generations. This was never a problem in the past. Our world is changing.

The older you are the more familiar you are with the “world-as-it-used-to-be” and less fluent in the “world-as-it-is-becoming”. As Leonard Sweet points out in his book *Carpe Manana*, older generations are now the immigrants living in their native land and younger generations the natives.⁴

For rural churches their idolatry of the rural mindset (as we will establish later) rooted in Christendom, makes it very difficult to adjust to the “world-as-it-is-becoming”. A well-known dynamic of rural churches is “we have never done it that way before”.⁵ The church works for older generations who comprise the bulk of the leadership and the finances. Another maxim of rural churches is: “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it” and “good enough is good enough”.⁶ In my experience as a pastor for 4 rural congregations in my area, they expect younger generations to appreciate and serve how things have always been. The evidence (as we will see) suggests that most of them don’t:

For example, older adults in congregations all over the country have been waiting for years for the younger generation to “step up” and take their turn running the committees that run the church. Well, not actually *running* the committees

⁴ Leonard I. Sweet, *Carpe Mañana: Is Your Church Ready to Seize Tomorrow?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

⁵ Anthony G. Pappas, *Entering the World of the Small Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

⁶ Gordon MacDonald, *Who Stole My Church: What to Do When the Church You Love Tries to Enter the 21st Century* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

because the younger generation is clearly too young to actually *run* things yet, but at least they should step up and do the work!

Unfortunately, very little "stepping up" is ever going to happen because younger families, usually made up of adults with careers and children with activities, have very little time for committees. Frankly, they barely have enough time for church. And furthermore, they aren't likely to view committee work as the kind of "work of the church" to which they're willing to commit time. Occasional teaching? Sure. A food-packing event that they can do with the kids? Definitely. Worship Committee meetings? Not so much.⁷

The Focus of My Research

The focus on my research is with 16 rural congregations in my local vicinity.

Most of these congregations are mainline churches:

- Presbyterian USA,
- United Methodist,
- Evangelical Lutheran,
- American Baptist,
- Episcopalian
- 3 Congregational churches (I pastored these from 2005 to 2016).

They also have evangelical/fundamental churches:

- Independent Fundamental Baptist
- Manistique Bible church (a split from the Independent Fundamental Baptist)
- Pentecostal
- Foursquare

⁷ Sarai Rice, "(How) Will Millennials Change the Church?" Congregational Consulting Group, accessed January 8, 2019, <http://www.congregationalconsulting.org/how-will-millennials-change-the-church/>.

- Lighthouse (a church plant)

There are 3 Catholic churches one in town and two outside of town.

Manistique had a Free Methodist (a church I pastored in the eighties) and a Seventh Day Adventist Church, but these congregations are no longer in existence.

My research area, therefore, comprises a broad spectrum of Christian churches on the theological and denominational continuum all within the same rural culture in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Just like the rural county they inhabit, these congregations are aging; the median age of people in the county is 50.4 years and the largest groups of people are those over the age of 65 at 26.4 percent compared to 16.4 percent for those under the age of 18.⁸ The national median age is 37.7 and people over the age of 65 accounts for 14.9 percent of the total population. People in my community are 12.7 years older than the national average.⁹

Based on personal observation, the bulk of the people in these congregations are over the age of 50 and these older generations provide the bulk of the leadership and financial support for their congregations. We will identify the contributing factors for this "graying" of the congregations and what it might mean for the future of these churches. The churches are older and small. The largest church averages around 70 in attendance. Most of the other congregations, however, are under 40 or less on Sunday

⁸ "Quickfacts: Schoolcraft County, Michigan," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/schoolcraftcountymichigan/PST045216>.

⁹ "Older Americans Month: May 2017," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/cb17-ff08.html>.

mornings. They are almost universally white as reflects the county's demographics at 86.3 percent (native Americans are 9.6 percent).¹⁰

The Meaning of TRC

My area has what I call truly rural churches (TRCs). Norman Rockwell paintings don't capture the complexity of life for people in today's rural America.¹¹ There are rural communities, for example, in certain parts of the United States experiencing immigration from Hispanics who bring with them larger families¹² and a different culture. Some rural churches live close to expanding metropolitan areas. These churches may experience people coming from the suburbs to sit in the pews. I attended such a church on the outskirts of St Louis. The building sat in a rural cornfield and as the church morphed into a suburban megachurch, the original members abandoned the church.

The reality of rural life is getting more complex and difficult to quantify as "rural". My rural area however comes close to the traditional image of rural life defined by these characteristics:

- isolated from metropolitan areas
- have a white population with little diversity
- reflect a stagnant population that is aging in place¹³

¹⁰ "QuickFacts: Schoolcraft County, Michigan," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/schoolcraftcountymichigan/PST045216>.

¹¹ Kenneth Johnson, "Where Is 'Rural America,' and What Does It Look Like?," *The Conversation*, accessed December 7, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/where-is-rural-america-and-what-does-it-look-like-72045>.

¹² Daniel Lichter, "Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America," *Rural Sociology* 77, no. 3 (March 2012), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4606139/>

¹³ "Quickfacts: Schoolcraft County, Michigan," U.S. Census Bureau, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/schoolcraftcountymichigan/PST045216>

- live by a traditional rural mindset.

This mindset provides the lens through which they view life and the church.¹⁴ It has several key features that include:

- The land (and the water in my community) exerts a powerful impact in their lives. Outside of their doors is a natural world that has sustained them for generations.
- The status quo ensures traditions that define the quality of life. Innovation and change are, therefore, a threat.
- The best life relies on habits, custom and rituals. Introspection and self-analysis are, therefore, pointless and perhaps harmful
- The experience of time is circular and not linear.¹⁵ Linear moves from the known to the unknown. Rural folk however live to re-enjoy what they have always enjoyed.

A Brief History

The TRC's in my area are the product of westward expansion that began in the 1800s as people spread out all over the continental United States.¹⁶ This boom time lasted from the 1870s to the early 1900s (it lasted until the 1920s in my area).¹⁷ In my community, the village of Garden had numerous saloons, grocery stores, barbers, and two

¹⁴ Shannon L. Jung and Mary A. Agria, *Rural Congregational Studies: A Guide for Good Shepherds* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Jung and Agria, 31.

¹⁶ "Westward Movement | United States History," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/westward-movement>.

¹⁷ Ken Padgett, "History of Michigan's Lumber Boom," The Agile Writer, accessed January 8, 2019, http://agilewriter.com/History/Mi_lumber.htm.

churches according to a local historical resource called "Our Heritage". Today this same town has one grocery store, no saloons (they both closed in the past 5 years), no barbers and two churches. Working families built these two churches in the late 1800s. Today this same town resembles more of a ghost town than a boom town with retirees and empty-nesters doing the work in the church and not working families.

The lumbering town of Manistique floated logs down the Manistique River processing them at their paper mill. The town in 1880 registered 693 persons and by 1890 had 2890 and increase of 342%. Its population continued to rise peaking at 6920 by 1920 and has shrunk almost every decade to its current population of 3097. This represents a 223% percent decline from the heyday of the 20s.¹⁸

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as opportunities in rural areas slowed urbanization picked up speed: "In 1790, only about one out of every twenty Americans (on average) lived in urban areas (cities), but this ratio dramatically changed to one out of four by 1870, one out of two by 1920, two out of three in the 1960s, and four out of five in the 2000s."¹⁹

Church Dynamics

TRCs are a religious (more or less) expression of their rural culture and small church dynamics.²⁰ As someone who tried to expand theses perspective as a pastor and as a community organizer, they are very difficult to adjust with a fuller biblical perspective.

¹⁸ "Manistique, Michigan," Wikipedia, November 2, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Manistique,_Michigan&oldid=866941768.

¹⁹ "Decennial Census Official Publications," US Census Bureau, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/decennial-publications.html>.

²⁰ Jung and Agria

TRCs have constructed their lives on a rural matrix that resists change.²¹ As Jesus reminds us in one his parables, new wine for those with an old wine palate tastes inferior (Luke 5:39). In addition, the TRC's in my community are all small in church attendance. In fact, the largest church is around 70 adults in regular attendance. This is a "large" church in my community. Being both small and rural creates dynamics that define the uniqueness of life in a TRC. Carl Dudley explains:

Like most primary groups, the small church creates its own internal environment. The strength of membership commitment to each other has a self-sustaining quality that helps the church become independent of the pressures on the outside. To those who belong, the group life provides an ideological contact with the past, and an emotional support in the present. The more the world around them changes, the more members of the group feel the need to conserve the essence of the past. The small church is essentially a conservative group.²²

Whether these dynamics are a positive or a negative for TRCs in my area is debatable. Perhaps rural people will just "dig their heels" deeper into the soil of the "world as it-used-to-be" and somehow maintain their culture despite the trends seeping into their world. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues the triumph of the Trump campaign is evidence of rural culture pushing back on a world that has forgotten them.²³

The moral (I do not mean this in the vernacular sense of "moral" as good, right, virtuous, or principled. I mean it rather in the more specialized sense of a place to which and in which people feel an obligation to one another and to uphold the local ways of being that govern their expectations about ordinary life and support their feelings of being at home and doing the right things) outrage of rural America is a mixture of fear and anger. The fear is that small-town ways of life are disappearing. The anger is that they are under siege. The outrage cannot be understood apart from the loyalties that rural Americans feel toward their

²¹ Jung and Agria.

²² Carl S. Dudley, "Unique Dynamics of the Small Church," accessed December 7, 2018, <http://ebscholar.org/misc/psc2004/Unique%20Dynamics%20of%20the%20Small%20Church.html>.

²³ NPR.Org, "Rural Voters Played A Big Part In Helping Trump Defeat Clinton," November 14, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/2016/11/14/501737150/rural-voters-played-a-big-part-in-helping-trump-defeat-clinton>.

communities. It stems from the fact that the social expectations, relationships, and obligations that constitute the moral communities they take for granted and in which they live are year by year being fundamentally fractured.²⁴

I will argue these dynamics worked in the "analog" (not digital: not computerized)²⁵ "used-to-be" experience of older generations but are becoming passé in the "digital world" inhabited by younger generations. Native American cultures as "it-used-to-be" could not stop the trends splitting them from the past like the locomotives splitting the prairie. They had no choice but to adapt.

There will always be rural places and rural values, but the real question is how much of the "used-to-be" world of rural life can survive given the power of certain trends. The TRCs built their life around a "used-to-be" world like the Lakota depended upon the buffalo.²⁶

Is there another alternative? Maybe rampant urban dissatisfaction might sweep the nation and people would move into rural areas. Perhaps the economic engine of urbanization will reverse itself and younger generations can find jobs without leaving rural communities. Or perhaps some catastrophe will cause people to seek the relative security of rural places. Perhaps younger generations are just going "through a phase" and will become churchgoers when they get to a different season in life.

For our purposes, we assume the trends will continue as we name the implications of these trends for the TRCs in my area.

²⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *The Left Behind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, Kindle Edition, 2018), 74.

²⁵ *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "Definition of Analog," accessed January 8, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/analog>

²⁶ Rose Kern, "The Heart," *Prairie Edge & Sioux Trading Post*, June 16, 2011, <https://prairieedge.com/tribe-scribe/the-heart-soul-of-the-lakota-the-buffalo/>.

The Prognosis

Decreasing population and an aging congregation are not good omens for the TRCs in my Area. As Randall Nichols observes:

While many churches face a trend of declining membership, rural churches face even greater difficulty in securing pastoral leadership than larger urban and suburban congregations. As memberships decline, so do the numbers of pastors willing to serve rural congregations a trend that furthers the decline in rural churches. The Fund for Theological Education reports that less than half of rural churches in the United States have a full-time pastor.²⁷

Even if younger generations picked up the baton and get involved in the TRCs, will there be enough of them left to keep the TRC's viable? We could see many of them closing their doors for a lack of funds to pay for a pastor and building related expenses. The consolidation of churchgoers who lost their church could keep some TRCs afloat. This follows the pattern of what is happening to the schools in our area. After the boom time and the population declined, smaller schools folded and merged into one larger school.

This community has housed me most of my life, and when my school consolidated with two other schools, this gave us over 600 students (K-12). Today this same school has 175 students.²⁸

This drastic shrinking over the last 40 years results from two factors: younger people leaving our area to raise a family somewhere else and shrinking family size.

²⁷ Randall Nichols, "Pastoral Leadership for the Small, Rural Church: The Second Career Pastor" (DMIN diss., Portland Seminary, 2018), 16.

²⁸ Big Bay de Noc School, "About Our School," accessed December 7, 2018, https://www.bigbayschool.com/school_district/about_our_school.

People don't bear large families like they did in the past.²⁹ In rural areas people produced larger families because it created workers for the family farm or home-based business.³⁰

In my area many of those I knew as a kid from larger families moved away because the local economy did not provide enough employment for all them. Few of those who graduated from my high school class still live in the area.

A common proverb in our community declares: "you move away to work, and you come back to die". People return to their roots once they retire. This pattern might save the TRC's in my area should enough of them return AND get involved in a TRC.

Another pattern might save the TRCs and that is retired or empty nest people moving to rural areas drawn to the rural lifestyle. Transplants made up the bulk of the membership in one TRC I pastored. For a brief period in the 80s we experienced a wave of new people moving into the area. Some are predicting the baby-boomers will seek out areas like mine to retire.³¹

But there are doubts about the strength of this pattern in my area of the Midwest according to the Population Reference Bureau:

The recent decline in migration rates among baby boomers is significant because they were expected to jump start economic growth in rural America. Many rural areas, especially parts of the Midwest and Appalachia, have been losing population for several decades. Between 2000 and 2010, there were 1,094 counties that lost population, compared with 689 counties during the 1990s. An influx of baby boomers could help provide economic relief to areas experiencing

²⁹ Ephrat Livni Kopf Dan, "The Decline of the Large US Family, in Charts," Quartz, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://qz.com/1099800/average-size-of-a-us-family-from-1850-to-the-present/>.

³⁰ Ephrat Livni, Dan Kopf Dan, "The Decline of the Large US Family, in Charts," Quartz, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://qz.com/1099800/average-size-of-a-us-family-from-1850-to-the-present/>.

³¹ Allesandro Malito, "America Will Soon Be Overrun by Senior Citizens. Yes, That Includes You," *Market Watch*, May 13, 2017, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/this-chart-shows-how-fast-america-is-getting-older-and-what-it-means-for-you-2017-05-03>.

population loss by boosting the demand for services, housing, and transportation. An increase in population can help create a larger tax base and bring more federal dollars to distressed communities. Since the baby-boom cohort is highly educated, a net increase in boomers could also help plug the brain drain in many rural areas, which is struggling to hold on to young adults who are drawn to educational and employment opportunities elsewhere.³²

This assumes that enough of returning/retired boomers will get involved in the life of the TRC's in my area. Studies show that baby-boomers are returning to church after the busyness of their working lives.³³ But will they return with enough strength to keep the bulk of the TRCs viable?

Should the TRC's in my area survive through an influx of Baby Boomers will this pattern continue for retiring Gen X and Millennials? A recent study reported on by the Washington Post predicted the closure of Mainline churches in 23 years:

Christians recently celebrated Easter, a Sunday where many churches are robust and full. But, if current trends continue, mainline Protestantism has about 23 Easters left. The news of mainline Protestantism's decline is hardly new. Yet the trend lines are showing a trajectory toward zero in both those who attend a mainline church regularly and those who identify with a mainline denomination 23 years from now.³⁴

My area has 8 mainline churches out of 13 protestant congregations. Catholic churches are also in decline.³⁵

³² Population Reference Bureau, "More U.S. Baby Boomers Staying Put," Population Reference Bureau, June 13, 2013, <https://www.prb.org/us-babyboomers-staying-put/>.

³³ USC News, "Are Baby Boomers Returning to Religion?" USC News, last modified April 10, 2018, <https://news.usc.eduhttps://news.usc.edu/140334/baby-boomers-and-religion/>.

³⁴ The Washington Post, "If It Doesn't Stem Its Decline, Mainline Protestantism Has Just 23 Easters Left," accessed December 7, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/04/28/if-it-doesnt-stem-its-decline-mainline-protestantism-has-just-23-easters-left/?utm_term=.b4e016c3b16e.

³⁵ Gallup Inc, "Catholics' Church Attendance Resumes Downward Slide," Gallup.Com, accessed December 31, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/232226/church-attendance-among-catholics-resumes-downward-slide.aspx>.

Based on my observations of the aging membership of the TRCs the number 23 fits the approximate number of years left for the Boomers who work with the shrinking Silent Generation to "run the show" for the TRCs in my area. Without an influx of Generation X and Millennial leadership these TRCs will die of old age. This would seem to leave the bulk of TRCs with closed doors.

Why It Matters

In my area the TRCs have been at the center of community life. As historian Ronald Wells has written:

The church was more than a religious meeting place; it was a cultural nest, integrating families, social classes, and nationality groups. It gave members a cultural identity and status and socialized them into the community. 'As forces of order,' said John Mack Faragher, 'churches reinforced the basic cultural assumptions, guiding tender consciences and influencing personal behavior at home and at work.' The reach of rural churches was remarkable. They provided charity and aid in times of sickness and disaster, educated children, offered recreation and leisure activities, facilitated marriages, consoled the grieving, buried the dead in the adjacent cemetery, and sought to legislate morality through political action. The church building was a sacred space in the community's center. It belonged to everyone, and the parson as a community leader was priest to all, in the sense of reflecting a local educated elite with social standing. Among immigrant groups, churches-built communities by attracting newcomers. Rural life truly was church centered.³⁶

One wonders what would happen in rural communities like mine if these institutions closed their doors. While I have no doubts that the body of Christ will be present in rural communities, what will rural communities look like if their institutional powers fade? The evidence (as we will see) points toward fading influence for TRCs.³⁷

³⁶ Ronald Wells, *History and the Christian Historian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 161.

³⁷ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Reviving the Dying Small-Town Church," The Gospel Coalition, n.d., accessed December 5, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/reviving-the-dying-small-town-church/>.

Marc Dunkelman in his book *the Vanishing Neighbor* argues the new world we are living in has abandoned what he calls "the middle ring of society." This lack of a middle ring is a prime reason our country is so polarized today.³⁸ We don't experience regular face-to-face interactions like we did in the past that can help us reach a middle ground. Before TV, social media and the amenities we now enjoy, the rural church functioned as a middle ring. These TRCs created space for face-to-face interactions. In rural communities like mine the church functioned as a middle ring. As Dunkelman states: "Instead of a middle ring, however we are seeing the rise of an inner ring of intimates and an outer ring of experts and acquaintances we find on online."³⁹ The church in rural areas functioned as a middle ring where people volunteered, met their neighbor week after week, and supported an institution they trusted. The pastor served as your expert. This is the "world-as-it-used-to-be".

In my community older generations gather to play cards in the town hall or meet at the Moose Club. On Sundays they go to church because that is what you do. They are not (as a rule) fluent in Twitter or seeking advice from a host of online experts. They still put their faith in institutions like the church.⁴⁰

The rural church has been an important thread in the fabric of rural life. What will happen if this thread unravels in rural communities? What will take its place? The rural church used to be "the only game in town" and therefore exerted tremendous influence

³⁸ Marc J Dunkelman, *The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community*, W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition.

³⁹ "The Vanishing Neighbor," accessed December 7, 2018, https://www.goodreads.com/work/best_book/27860582-the-vanishing-neighbor-the-transformation-of-american-community.

⁴⁰ Mike Allen and Renee Allen, *Generational Differences Chart*, <http://www.wmfc.org/uploads/GenerationalDifferencesChart.pdf>.

but this influence is under duress. How will rural communities function without the church at the center of rural life?

Also, even though the TRCs presented an incomplete and distorted narrative about Christ (a later section in this dissertation), this very flawed church still served as a doorway into Christ. My girlfriend in high school dragged me into her TRC from time to time. Even though boredom suffocated me in that pew, and today I reject so much of their overall approach, this TRC influenced my decision for Christ.

How will Christ reveal himself should the bulk of the TRCs go out of business?

CHAPTER TWO:
SITTING IN THE ISSUES OF A TRULY RURAL CHURCH

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'.¹

¹ Genius, "The Times They Are A-changin'- Bob Dylan," Genius Lyrics, accessed January 10, 2019, <https://genius.com/Bob-dylan-the-times-they-are-a-changin-lyrics>.

The Nones and the Dones

“You've probably heard of the Nones. That's the name researchers have given to the growing number of people who now claim to have ‘no religion.’ While stories about the Nones have dominated the media in recent years, I've been focused on a different group of people. I'm a sociologist who has been studying dechurched people. They're what I call the Dones.”² This quote from Joshua Packard describes those who are “done” with Church. He describes in this book *Church Refugees* that “Dones” are a multigenerational trend of people leaving the Church:

The Dones are not composed of one generation. They are not merely the young that don't like traditional churches, and they aren't the older that don't approve of modern church methods. They are a multi-generational group that were, at one time, core members of churches serving faithfully on a regular basis in every aspect of church life. And now, they are done.³

It's about people who make explicit and intentional decisions to leave the church and organized religion. We call these people the dechurched or the Dones: They're done with church. They're tired and fed up with church. They're dissatisfied with the structure, social message, and politics of the institutional church, and they've decided they and their spiritual lives are better off lived outside of organized religion. As one of our respondents put it, 'I guess the church just sort of churched the church out of me.’⁴

The institutional Church has problems both internally and externally. The growth of the Dones shows people exiting the Church from the inside. While the growth of the Nones shows an expansion of those with no interest at all. This is what a study by Pew Research revealed about the Nones:

² Joshua Packard, “Meet the 'Dones',” *Christianity Today*, March 2016, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/summer-2015/meet-dones.html>.

³ Nathan Cherry, “The Dones: The Demographic the Church Ignored, Forgot, Then Lost,” February 24, 2015, <https://nathancherry.com/2015/02/24/the-dones-the-demographic-the-church-ignored-forgot-then-lost/>.

⁴ Josh Packard, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE with Church but not Their Faith* (N.p.: Group Publishing, Inc., Kindle Edition, 2015), 181

The “Nones” (those who are not religiously affiliated) are second only to Protestants in this country in terms of their numbers: However, a new survey by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted jointly with the PBS television program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, finds that many of the country's 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as "spiritual" but not "religious" (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor.

With few exceptions, though, the unaffiliated say they are not looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.⁵

The Nones commitment to spirituality without the Church shows the enormous failure of organized religion. The rising numbers of Nones and Dones reject Church rather than faith. These insider Dones gave their best to the Church, and the Church failed them. But the outsider Nones, while appreciating certain contributions churches make to society, view the Church with disdain.

Does this pattern hold true in rural areas? Are there rising numbers of Nones and Dones? I could not find specific research on rural Dones and so I can only speak from experience. I would say there are different classes of Dones in my rural area. I have encountered four kinds of Dones in my area:

- Some are “Finicky Dones”, meaning they will return to church to try out a new pastor. After my installation as pastor, certain people returned because of the issues they had with the former pastor. Once the honeymoon period wore off, I saw people leave because of issues they had with my leadership. I have seen this pattern repeatedly.

⁵ Pew Research Center, “Religion and the Unaffiliated,” Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/>.

- Others are “Sideline Dones”, meaning they take themselves out of active involvement if they don’t like something in the church. They attend church with varying amounts of frequency while they bide their time. After I resigned, several people on the fringes returned to their former level of involvement. Things went back to the way things were. This is “their church”.
- The third groups are the “Wounded Dones”. The church hurt them and they won’t go back to that specific church or churches that have similar dynamics. They do not blame the Church at large but the church type that wounded them. The similarities of TRCs mean they stop going to church altogether or they attend with less frequency.
- The fourth groups are the “Done” Dones. These folks gave their heart, bodies and soul to the church but no longer believe in the institution en masse. They can’t go back. I pastor a small group of these folks in my home.

With each new series of “coming and going and quitting” the number of people using this revolving door gets smaller. The TRC experiences the law of diminishing returns as the larger trends of urbanization, globalization, secularization, technology, and amenityism eat away at their viability. But those finicky and sideline Dones coming back through the revolving door give the church a temporary boost of hope when they resume their former commitment.

I could not find specific research into rural Dones but there are surveys that suggest rural Nones are growing:

Philip Barlow, a professor of religious studies at Utah State University who wrote a book on Midwest religious life, said the distinctions between rural and urban populations have decreased with widespread mass communication and travel. In his book and other surveys, he found that those who say they are 'spiritual but not

religious' was first strong on the coasts but has grown to the rural Midwest and Bible Belt of the South.⁶

Rural areas are not immune to trends sweeping the country. They may be slower to adopt these trends, but they do filter down into rural areas. Rural areas, for instance, had lower rates of divorce than Urban areas but this is no longer true.⁷ At one-point high-speed internet did not exist in my rural area but this is no longer true. These trends impact the tightly woven fabric of rural life and the role of the rural church.

The "Nones" are not rejecting the Church as much as they are embracing a non-Christendom society.⁸ Younger generations lead this trend.⁹ The "Dones" are rejecting the Church that failed them.¹⁰

Based on my observations as a resident in my rural community and as a Pastor the "Nones and the Dones" trend is growing in strength. I pastor a group of "Dones" and the vast majority of younger generations I know in the community fit the category of rural "Nones". Some are "Nones" in practice calling a particular church "their church" even if they haven't attended in years. They are practicing "Nones" even if they identify with a particular TRC.

⁶ Mike Kilen, "Why Fewer Rural Iowans Are Going to Church," *Des Moines Register*, October 23, 2015, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2015/10/23/christian-churches-face-decline-rural-iowa/73993340/>.

⁷ Sabrina Tavernese and Robert Gebeloff, "Once Rare in Rural America, Divorce Is Changing the Face of Its Families," *New York Times*, March 23, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/us/24divorce.html>.

⁸ Pew Research Center, "Religion and the Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/>.

⁹ Pew Research Center, "Religion and the Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-religion/>.

¹⁰ Packard, *Church Refugees*.

As TRCs age, they can ill afford to have "Dones" step out of church involvement and "Nones" either grow in number or stay on the sidelines.

Millennials

The TRC's in my area can stay in existence for the next twenty years based on the age of its current membership. These kinds of churches are tough and will refuse to close until it becomes almost impossible to continue.¹¹ I pastored a small congregation in the 80s in my hometown with 12 members, most in their 70s and 80s. They had been a thriving congregation in the 1950s, but their membership dwindled as their children grew up and moved away. After my departure, this TRC continued for a few years but closed their doors as their faithful membership entered assisted living, were confined to a Medicare facility or passed away.

As tough as the TRCs are, at some point younger generations need to step up so the church to continue. Today the TRCs gamble that the pattern of younger generations filtering back to church will continue and they will bring their families, their time and their money with them. The jury is out on whether this pattern will continue with Millennials. Who are the Millennials? The U.S. Census Bureau describes them this way:

Millennials, or America's youth born between 1982 and 2000, now number 83.1 million and represent more than one quarter of the nation's population. Their size exceeds that of the 75.4 million baby boomers, according to new U.S. Census Bureau estimates released today. Overall, Millennials are more diverse than the generations that preceded them, with 44.2 percent being part of a minority race or ethnic group (that is, a group other than non-Hispanic, single-race white).¹²

¹¹ Carl S. Dudley, "Unique Dynamics of the Small Church," accessed December 7, 2018, <http://ebcrochester.org/misc/psc2004/Unique%20Dynamics%20of%20the%20Small%20Church.html>.

¹² "Millennials Outnumber Baby Boomers and Are Far More Diverse, Census Bureau Reports," U.S. Census Bureau, June 25, 2015, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>.

The Sociologist Rodney Stark believes Millennials will follow the pattern of older generations and return to church with their families in tow.

Stark begins by refuting the claim Millennials' Church attendance represents an unprecedented rejection of the Church. He concedes that 'younger Americans are attending church less often than are older generations,' yet he denies this has resulted in lower overall church attendance. He says younger Americans have 'always' attended church less often than their elders. But 'generation after generation,' they start attending church more often as they get older and start families. Consequently, church attendance has remained remarkably constant over the past three decades.¹³

Moses Bratrud concludes from his interview with Stark that the problem has more to do with an aging congregation than disappearing youth: “In fact, the problem is not that young people are leaving the church. Although there may in fact be a small shift away from Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, evangelical churches are generally strong, and if they are losing members, it is due to an aging population, not disappearing youths.”¹⁴

The most recent surveys, however, paint a different picture:

White evangelical Protestants are in decline--along with white mainline Protestants and white Catholics. White evangelical Protestants were once thought to be bucking a longer trend, but over the past decade their numbers have dropped substantially. Fewer than one in five (17%) Americans are white evangelical Protestant, but they accounted for nearly one-quarter (23%) in 2006. Over the same period, white Catholics dropped five percentage points from 16% to 11%, as have white mainline Protestants, from 18% to 13%.¹⁵

According to Barna Research, Millennials show deeper problems with the Church than previous generations:

¹³ Joseph Rosell, “Why Churches Should Not Fear the “Nones”,” Juicy Ecumenism, The Institute on Religion and Democracy Blog, February 16, 2017, <https://juicyecumenism.com/2017/02/16/churches-not-fear-nones/>.

¹⁴ Moses Bratrud, “Are Young People Leaving the Church? Probably Not,” Crosspolitic, July 20, 2017, <https://crosspolitic.com/are-young-people-leaving-the-church-probably-not/>.

¹⁵ Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” PRRI, September 6, 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

Looking to future generations does not paint an optimistic picture for the importance of churchgoing. Millennials (those 30 and under) stand out as least likely to value church attendance; only two in 10 believe it is important. And more than one-third of Millennial young adults (35%) take an anti-church stance. In contrast, Elders (those over 68) are the most likely (40%) to view church attendance as "very" important, compared to one-quarter (24%) who deem it "not at all" important. Boomers (ages 49--67) and Gen Xers (ages 30--48) fall in the middle of these polar opposites. While the debate rages about what will happen to Millennials as they get older--Will they return to church attendance later in life?--they are starting at a lower baseline for church participation and commitment than previous generations of young adults.¹⁶

In my TRCs the "lower baseline for church participation" is not just coming from Millennials who don't value the Church. The impact of urbanization removes younger generations from the community. They cannot attend your church if they are living in the big city. Will there be enough Millennials who value church attendance left in the community to keep the doors of 16 churches open? The exodus of younger generations, often called brain drain, to urban centers is a fact of life. One TRC in town has the bulk of younger generations who attend church on a semi-regular basis. They draw about 10 families made up of Generation X and Millennials. Younger generations looking for a church will go to a church that has others in the same stage of life. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This does not bode well for the bulk of the churches inside the city limits of Manistique.

This dynamic changes the further out of town you happen to be. I had three churches only 15 minutes apart but each of these churches belonged to a distinct community with a long history. For a younger couple, most of whom were born and raised in their tiny hamlet, to attend church outside their community would put an strain

¹⁶ "Americans Divided On the Importance of Church," Barna Frames, March 24, 2014, <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/>.

of relationships within their rural fishbowl. They would pay a price for going to a different church and it would involve a longer drive. One researcher said this:

The problem—if it is in fact a problem—is the decline in cultural Christianity. In most western countries, there has been social and sometimes even legal pressure to be or seem to be Christian for hundreds of years. The First Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but it wasn't until the 1960s that public school prayers to the Christian God were abolished. As our society becomes more secular, and more liberal (in the sense of free or permissive), the cultural pressure to be Christian decreases. As one writer put it, "the nominals are becoming 'nones'".¹⁷

TRCs evidence the most glaring lack of involvement from younger generations because we have an older population with a shrinking base of youth. In my TRCs you sit in a sea of graying hair and a desert of youth. But demographics are not the only factor in this problem. The world "as it is becoming" has greater power over the lives of younger generations than the church-going world "as it used to be". This dissertation will examine the evidence for this claim as we move along.

Five Trends

According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, there are several reasons people attend church in rural communities:

- they meet the social needs of people,
- they are part of a habit of life (habit, custom, ritual defines rural culture)
- they manage the expectations of those in their community who expect them to go to church.¹⁸

¹⁷ Gabriel Rensch, "Are Young People Leaving the Church? Probably Not," Crosspolitic Studios, July 20, 2017, <https://crosspolitic.com/are-young-people-leaving-the-church-probably-not/>.

¹⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

As Wuthnow says, “As much as the continuity, it is the visibility of public behavior that facilitates regular participation in small-town religious activities. When people know one another in town as well as in church, churchgoing becomes part of their public reputation and this fact puts social pressure on them to be present at church services.”¹⁹ As you can see, tradition and relationships within the rural fishbowl are key drivers for church attendance.

Will younger generations value these traditions, customs, and rituals? Will they respond to this social pressure? Will they need the weekly context of gathering in church to meet their relational needs when they have social media and other amenities to occupy their time? According to Emma Green, in reference to a Pew Research survey, there are indications the influence of the church is slipping: “Fifty or 60 years ago, churches, in particular, were a center of social and cultural life in America. For many people, that’s still the case, but the survey suggests that many people may be creating their social lives outside of a religious context -- or perhaps forgoing that kind of social connection altogether.”²⁰

In my experience as a Pastor, older generations will apply social pressure on younger generations to attend church. But younger generations navigate this pressure by attending on a semi-regular basis. This might be once a month or every other month. Some will drop off their kids at the church to pacify their elders. This does not mean they value the institution in the same way as their elders; they do *enough* with the church to

¹⁹ Wuthnow, 223.

²⁰ Emma Green, “How the Percentage of Americans Who Go to Church Every Week Is Changing,” *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/religious-participation-survey/496940/>.

keep the peace within their extended family and maintain their relational ties with the congregation.

My research suggests there are five interconnected trends that threaten TRCs:

- globalization
- urbanization
- secularization
- technology
- increasing amenities (what I call amenityism)

This section will explore the relative strengths of these threatening trends.

Urbanization

The first trend impacting TRCs in my area is urbanization. Urbanization means there are fewer young people left to continue the legacy of the TRCs because they moved to urban centers.

This phenomenon (also called brain-drain) siphons off the best and the brightest from a rural community. This exile reduces an important resource and is one reason the Wall Street Journal describes rural communities as the new inner city.²¹ They trap those younger generations who remain in a lackluster economy with little opportunity.

Research has shown that with urbanization comes a societal trend toward smaller family size.²² In my context the schools have shrunk not only because the jobs are in the

²¹ Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg, "Rural America Is the New 'Inner City'," *Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rural-america-is-the-new-inner-city-1495817008>

²² J. Rank, "The Social Impacts of Urbanization - Family, Family, and Household," 2018, <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1732/Urbanization-Social-Impacts-Urbanization.html>.

city, but because families are not as large as they were in the past. The norm today (2.72) in my rural area is smaller families.²³ Part of the equation that has kept the TRCs viable are the same families worshipping in a church for generations. But what happens when urbanization breaks family lines? If you have only two kids and both move away to the city, they won't be sitting next to their grandparents and parents in the pew.

Globalization

The Business Dictionary defines Globalization as:

The worldwide movement toward economic, financial, trade, and communications integration. Globalization implies the opening of local and nationalistic perspectives to a broader outlook of interconnected and interdependent world with free transfer of capital goods and services across national frontiers. However it does not include unhindered movement of labor and, as suggested by some economists, may hurt smaller or fragile economies if applied indiscriminately.²⁴

Many rural areas like mine suffer from a small and fragile economy. This led the Wall Street Journal to call rural America the new inner city.²⁵ The Chicago Council on World Affairs wrote:

In other words, the rural economies' ability to provide well-paying jobs that attract and retain workers is highly contingent on the global economic context, and the national policy environments, in which rural areas are embedded. The strength and agency of local community remains an important determinant of social and economic sustainability, but the interaction of local and global trumps the strictly local.²⁶

²³ Quickfacts: Schoolcraft County, Michigan,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/schoolcraftcountymichigan/PST045216>

²⁴ *BusinessDictionary*, s.v. “Globalization,” <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/globalization.html>.

²⁵ Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg, “Rural America Is the New ‘Inner City’,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rural-america-is-the-new-inner-city-1495817008>.

²⁶ Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “America's Urban-Rural Divide,” 2018, <http://www.digital.thechicagocouncil.org/American-Urban-Rural-Divide>.

For generations my community depended on the local paper mill for employment. It has closed twice in the past 4 years because of the impact of globalization. Wisconsin, our landlocked cousin to the south, is a good example of the impact of globalization on the paper industry:

In Wisconsin, a state Donald Trump won in November, over 90,000 factory workers have lost jobs since 2000. That includes employees in more remote parts of the state, where legacy industries like paper have employed generations of families...Paper companies here are battling two powerful economic disruptions: cheap imports from places like China and Brazil, and the digital revolution.²⁷

In my community the paper mill used to employ 140 people but today that number has shrunk to 85.²⁸ Outside investors have saved the mill twice, but some predict the days of the small paper mill are limited:

In past decades, small struggling mills could switch to specialty papers or limited production grades and possibly find a niche for themselves, said Peter Parker, a professor of paper, printing science and engineering at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, an area hit by four mill closings in the last year. Now, technology allows larger mills to make grade and production changes easily, eliminating that niche...“I don't see good times ahead for the small one- and two-machine mills. It seems their days are numbered,” Parker said.²⁹

If the mill closes, it is just one more industry where younger generations can no longer work. The family farm, fishing, and the logging business are not significant avenues of employment in my rural area for younger generations.³⁰

²⁷ Sarah Gardner, “Is Retraining Worth It? Laid Off Paper Millworkers Weigh the Benefits,” *Marketplace*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.marketplace.org/2017/09/06/world/paper-mill-jobs-meant-comfortable-lifestyle-Wisconsin-before-globalization>.

²⁸ Mark Cowman, “How Are Things Going at Manistique's up Paper?” Upper Michigan Source.com, November 29, 2016, <https://www.uppermichigananssource.com/content/news/Manistiques-UP-Paper-is--403599796.html>.

²⁹ William Kates, “Paper Mills Disappearing, Many of Them from Small Towns,” *Herald Palladium (Saint Joseph)*, August 12, 2001, https://www.heraldpalladium.com/paper-mills-disappearing-many-of-them-from-small-towns/article_20d90892-7d91-5f9c-81ac-0cfc373435c1.html.

³⁰ Penn Wharton Public Policy Initiative, “Rural America Is Losing Young People - Consequences

In my experience as a pastor with younger adults, those young families are working hard just to survive. This impacts their level of energy they give to the church and the financial resources they can commit to the institution.

Our local economy is seeking other avenues of employment that can take advantage of tourism. An aging population represents opportunities in health care. My community built a state-of-the-art hospital that is now the largest employer in our area. These kinds of steps reduce the economic slide in our communities and can help us draw and/or retain younger generations.

Studies reveal that younger generations follow the jobs. The leading state for millennials as far as growth is North Dakota. (not a state known for its "urban" opportunities).³¹ In fact, North Dakota has the highest percentage of millennials than any other state.³² But this reflects a reversal of globalization in North Dakota. The oil industry is providing jobs and a lower cost of living for millennials.³³ Also, millennials are moving into small cities not isolated rural areas:

Surprisingly, our list of the best small areas for jobs does not include many of the scenic small communities that tend to attract affluent emigrés from large cities. Instead most of our leading areas from the last 10 years tend to be those driven by the energy industry, led by No. 1 Williston, North Dakota. With 36,000 people, Williston has been at the center of the shale oil boom in the state, growing its job count 121% since 2007. Wages have soared 47% to over \$68,000, well above the national median income of \$52,000³⁴.

and Solutions,” 2018, <http://publicpolicy.wharton.upenn.edu/live/news/2393-rural-america-is-losing-young-people>.

³¹ Janice Williams, "North Dakota Is a Land of Opportunity for Young Adults," *Newsweek*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/north-dakota-young-adults-best-state-jobs-579027>.

³² Jax, "North Dakota Has the Highest Percentage of Millennials in the U.S.," *Hot 97.5*, October 20, 2017, <http://hot975fm.com/north-dakota-has-the-highest-percentage-of-millennials-in-the-u-s/>.

³³ Joel Kotkin, "Where Small Town America Is Thriving," *Forbes*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2018/03/08/where-small-town-america-is-thriving/>.

³⁴ Julia Carmel, "Millennials (Still) Don't Want to Live in Rural Areas," *GenFKD*, July 26,

Other states in the Midwest are seeing globalization tempered when manufacturing companies set up shop in rural areas. These reversals however only show how dependent local rural economies are on large outside investors.³⁵

My rural community is not a hot prospect for these outside investors. In fact, 'hot spots' with energy and manufacturing jobs, like North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin will draw younger generations out of communities like mine, because it is another form of urbanization located in small cities.³⁶

Secularization

A study by Pew research revealed that rural America is more religious than either urban or suburban America. In part because rural America has an older demographic and older generations score the highest on the religious index. But age alone does not account for the higher levels of religion in rural areas. All generations in rural areas scored higher than suburban and urban settings.³⁷ This suggests that rural culture is more religious than urban and suburban settings and that the church exerted more influence in these settings.³⁸ Why is rural America more religious? Based on my research, there is no

2017, <http://www.genfkid.org/22691-2>.

³⁵ Kotkin.

³⁶ Kotkin,

³⁷ Gallup Inc, "Age, Religiosity, and Rural America," *Gallup.Com*, accessed December 5, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/7960/Age-Religiosity-Rural-America.aspx>.

³⁸ Gallup Inc

definitive answer on this question but it may connect to the inherent conservatism of rural culture that seeks to preserve the past and religion is an important part of that past.³⁹

Other studies show that America is becoming more secular although some doubt it will become as secular as Europe. While there are indications the United States is becoming more secular⁴⁰ there is also evidence we remain devoutly religious.⁴¹ Some argue that we will not become like a secularized Europe because of the diversity of our religious setting (as opposed to the State Churches in Europe). We are also too individualistic and entrepreneurial to become thoroughly secularized.⁴² Some suggest that what is fading is nominal Christianity not "serious" Christianity: "We are not seeing the death of Christianity in America, but we are seeing remarkable changes. Culture is shifting and the religious landscape is evolving. But, instead of the funeral of a religion, at least in part we are witnessing the demise of casual and cultural Christianity. And that is not necessarily a bad thing."⁴³

Regardless, the trends are clear that America is becoming more secular and less religious.

³⁹ David Knoke and Henry Constance, "Political Structure of Rural America," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 429 (1977): 51-62, <http://www.jstor.org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/stable/1041574>.

⁴⁰ Michael Lipka, "Are Americans Becoming Less Religious? Yes, but It's Complicated," *Pew Research Center*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/03/5-key-findings-about-religiosity-in-the-u-s-and-how-its-changing/>.

⁴¹ Dalia Fahmy, "Americans Are Far More Religious than Adults in Other Wealthy Nations," *Pew Research Center*, accessed December 5, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/31/americans-are-far-more-religious-than-adults-in-other-wealthy-nations/>.

⁴² Sacred Matters, "Understanding Why Americans Seem More Religious Than Other Western Powers," *Huffington Post*, February 15, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/15/americans-more-religious_n_4780594.html.

⁴³ Ed Stetzer Bio, "Churches in America--Part 3," *The Exchange*, July 2016, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/july/state-of-american-church-part-3.html>.

While rural America is not as secular as urban and suburban areas, it also cannot keep the forces of secularization from altering community life. We find evidence for this in the attitudes and practices of younger generations toward marriage and family in rural areas:

The difference in cohabitation rates between rural and urban children is a recent phenomenon: 'The share of rural children living in cohabiting households has nearly doubled since 2003. During the same period, the share of urban children in cohabiting households rose only slightly, from 3 percent to 4 percent. Contrary to the typical flow of social trends, which usually move from urban to rural areas, the trend toward cohabitation is more advanced in rural areas than in urban areas.⁴⁴

Secularization itself is not the sole cause of these higher rates, but it is without a doubt more acceptable in rural communities for couples to cohabit than in the not-so-distant past. In my family system in my rural area, you got married if you got pregnant (either to the man who got you pregnant or someone else.) This procedure happened with my birth, my dad's birth and the family got a revelation when 40 years later I met an Uncle my grandmother secretly put up for adoption. Shame rooted in Christian views on marriage and premarital sex played a huge role in this secrecy (along with the rural fishbowl).⁴⁵ Also, divorce, once a "sin-city" problem, is on the rise in rural communities:

Forty years ago, divorced people were more concentrated in cities and suburbs. But geographic distinctions have all but vanished, and now, for the first time, rural Americans are just as likely to be divorced as city dwellers, according to an analysis of census data by The New York Times.

"Rural families are going through this incredible transformation," said Daniel T. Lichter, a sociology professor at Cornell University. "The shifts that started in cities have spread to less populated regions -- women going to work, gaining

⁴⁴ William P O'Hare et al., "Rural Children Are More Likely to Live in Cohabiting-Couple Households" (n.d.): 6.

⁴⁵ JoNel Aleccia, "'The New Normal': Cohabitation on the Rise, Study Finds," NBC News, last modified April 4, 2013, accessed December 5, 2018, <http://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/new-normal-cohabitation-rise-study-finds-flC9208429>.

autonomy, and re-arranging the order of traditional families. Values have changed, too, easing the stigma of divorce.”⁴⁶

But other evidence of the rising tide of secularization threatening rural communities is the reactionary posture taken by rural residents to this threat. Rural communities react to change with a fight-or-flight response. People experience things changing and so they look for someone to blame (an all too human response). They experience the fabric of rural life ripping at the seams and so they voted for Trump who castigated the powers they resent.

Robert Wuthnow in his book, "The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America", argues that rural people react with fear and rage when powers outside of their community threaten rural values.⁴⁷ This includes religious values. Secularization upsets rural communities. If this were not true, we wouldn't see such a strong reaction coming from them.

Rural communities will be the slowest to embrace the changes represented by secularization. It is part of their cultural DNA to resist change but as history has shown even rural communities embrace these changes given the forces of time and tide.

This rural DNA builds a culture that is reactive because of their circular and not linear view of time. Their mission, therefore, is maintenance and not progress. In one study of rural "brain-drain" in Iowa, the researchers concluded that the main reason younger generations move away is the assumption that younger generations must move away to find employment. Rural communities reinforced a self-fulfilling

⁴⁶ Sabrina Tavernise and Robert Gebeloff, "Once Rare in Rural America, Divorce Is Changing the Face of Its Families," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/24/us/24divorce.html>.

⁴⁷ Robert Wuthnow, "The Left Behind," *Princeton University Press*, Kindle Edition.

prophecy. Rather than thinking about a solution to keep their young people (a lack of vision), they assumed things cannot be different.⁴⁸

Another reflection of this passivity is the difference between rural and urban millennials. Rural millennials disengage from the political process at higher rates than urban millennials. This is because they live in "civic desserts." Meaning they lack the practical means for political engagement.⁴⁹ Rural communities do not engage their millennials (or themselves) in political action and then point the finger at Washington for the decline of their communities. Perhaps being more proactive wouldn't change anything but they will never know until they try.

People gain a sense of relief by blaming others. It gives their discomfort and pain somewhere to land. Blaming others feels like we have taken action. But blaming others demonstrates both a failure of imagination and action. The rural mindset is, at its foundation, a reactionary posture not a proactive one.

In our community, pastors pursuing a vision beyond maintenance face a daunting challenge. They need great patience, relationship-building skills (with the power-brokers) and the capacity to celebrate the past. This gives the pastor the trust needed to make a positive change. Pastors who fail to lay this foundation can split the church or find themselves on the unemployment line.

While this recipe for "success" as a Pastor of a TRC makes sense, the continued decline of rural churches suggests that these kinds of pastors are very rare (and therefore

⁴⁸ Patrick J. Carr, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 1

⁴⁹ Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Felicia Sullivan, "How Rural Millennials Engage in Politics Differently from Those in Urban Areas," *Business Insider*, March 27, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-rural-millennials-engage-in-politics-2017-3>.

not relevant to the bulk of TRCs) or the recipe itself is not enough to reverse the decline of TRCs (some of both perhaps).

I will suggest later in this dissertation that the attempt to honor the past as a way of moving into the future is a failed recipe because the way churches operated in the past is fatally flawed from a biblical point of view. What if their recipe isn't what Jesus is cooking? I will also argue that less conventional but "in vogue" recipes for saving rural churches are also fatally flawed and miss the point. These recipes would be, in the words of Jesus, like trying to sew an old patch on a new garment (Matt.9:16) The two are not compatible and not worthy of Christ's purpose for his Church.

I trust a new church is rising not built on the sands of Christendom but the solid rock of Christ and his teachings. Christ delivered a message of judgment on the Jewish political and religious system of his day by cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:12-25). The fig tree in the Bible symbolizes the spiritual fruit of the nation of Israel.⁵⁰ Jesus looks for fruit on this tree and when he finds none he causes it too wither. One wonders if the dying of institutional Christianity across this land is akin to Christ's cursing of the fig tree? "In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once" (Matthew 21:18-19).

⁵⁰ Daniel J. R. Kirk, "Time for Figs, Temple Destruction, and Houses of Prayer in Mark 11: 12-25," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2012): 13, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/georgefox.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=9f8f8079-cf30-4a98-a6c4-775e70e0f79a%40sessionmgr102>.

Christendom, as I define it, is not the same thing as true Christianity. Whenever Christianity collapses into culture, Christendom rises and tramples on Christ. As Soren Kierkegaard lamented:

Present-day Christendom really lives as if the situation were as follows: Christ is the great hero and benefactor who has once and for all secured salvation for us; now we must merely be happy and delighted with the innocent goods of earthly life and leave the rest to Him. But Christ is essentially the exemplar that is we are to *resemble* Him, not mere profit from Him⁵¹.

The power of Christendom, especially in the rural fishbowl, could unsheathe a sword of shame on those who missed church because of the historic dominance of Christendom within the larger culture. Missing church violated a rule within Christendom and had cultural consequences. Who wants to avoid "brother so-and-so" in the market, or draw the curtains when the pastor knocks at the door? People "do their time" on Sundays just to avoid these awkward conversations.

The pain of one conversation cut me to the bone. The pastor's wife confronted me as a young person in the early 80s for missing church. In her mind, missing church was like breaking one of the Ten Commandments. I lacked the courage to tell her why I stayed away. The service offered me nothing in terms of spiritual growth and no one my age visited the church. When I did go, I heard the same salvation message and sat through the same poorly executed liturgy as my butt squirmed in that uncomfortable pew. The service was torture. I attended only out of obligation.

But what happens when the sword of shame loses its edge?

⁵¹ Jesse Carey, "15 of Soren Kierkegaard's Most Challenging Quotes," *Relevant*, November 11, 2014, <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/15-soren-kierkegaards-most-challenging-quotes>.

As Christendom loses its power to obligate people to go to church, a decline in church attendance will follow. My personal observation as a pastor for 13 years of 4 TRCs (13 x 4 = 52 years of combined observation), is that the social stigma of missing church no longer cuts like it did in the past. In my first church back in the 80's those older saints not only refused to miss church, they also wouldn't eat in a restaurant or shop on a Sunday. When I returned to pastoring in 2005 these "Sunday-rules" no longer existed. While certain people attend every Sunday, a host of others float in and out of church disappearing for months at a time. Even my most committed people missed church in the summer.

Secularization is not the only factor for declining church attendance but is an important factor. As McSwain notes: "People have more choices on weekends than going to church. Further, the feelings of shame and guilt many people used to carry, and church leaders used to promote for not attending church every week is gone."⁵²

Secularization has the greatest power with younger generations. Research shows that the older you are the more religious you are (less secular). In fact, Generation Z (the generation after the millennials) is even more irreligious than the millennial generation. They are the least religious of any generation in American history.⁵³ With each passing generation we see more people embracing "secular" attitudes and beliefs. This trend of secularization impacts the long-term viability of TRCs who need the next generations to fill the pews.

⁵² Steve McSwain, "Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore," *Huffington Post*, October 14, 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-mcswain/why-nobody-wants-to-go-to_b_4086016.html.

⁵³ Barna Research, "Gen Z Is the Least Christian Generation in American History, Barna Finds," accessed May 15, 2018, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/gen-z-is-the-least-christian-generation-in-american-history-barna-finds-214856/>.

Technology

Notwithstanding their confessional differences, Merton and Ellul proposed very similar critiques of the institutional or 'visible' church, which, they argued, was complicit, or at least acquiescent, in a more general societal capitulation to the technological mindset, which was corrupting the culture of modernity. For Merton, the problem was compounded by the Church's failure to understand or reflect upon the depth and breadth of the technological challenge. He deprecated the failure of *Inter Mirifica*, the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Means of Social Communication, to adequately address this problem, warning that 'the whole massive complex of technology, which reaches into every aspect of social life today, implies a huge organization of which no one is really in control, and which dictates its own solutions irrespective of human needs or even reason' (p. 7)

In this analysis, the modern City is the actual and symbolic apogee of technique, a place where the malign effects of alienation, massification, consumerism, and propaganda are most pronounced and, simultaneously, least perceived. The phenomenon of the modern City is, for both Ellul and Merton, one of the most important barriers to the discovery of the true self, a prerequisite for the recovery of an authentic freedom. While Ellul explicitly disavows the sort of mystic self-transcendence espoused by the contemplative cenobite Merton, Shaw persuasively demonstrates how such transcendence is, implicitly at least, presupposed in Ellul's characterization of the 'false self', which the modern person must overcome if she is to attain true freedom.⁵⁴

Technology has altered rural society. In my community we depended upon natural resources allowing farmers, loggers and fisherman to make a living. All of these occupations, before modern equipment, created space for a larger workforce. My grandfather worked as a logger with crews of men cutting down trees with handsaws and hauling them out with teams of horses. Today one piece of equipment can do the work of a team of men.

Family farms involved their children in milking the cows and working in the fields, but machinery replaced these hands-on activities. Two farming families I grew up with both produced eight children per family. There was not enough land or enough jobs

⁵⁴ Jeffrey M. Shaw, *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul On Technology and the Human Condition* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2014), 85.

to keep them on the family farm. These children, except for two, are now living somewhere else. Purdy observes that: "Sixty years ago, the typical midwestern farm ran between 80 and 300 acres--half of today's average size--and produced several kinds of grain, livestock, and hay, and a garden's worth of vegetables. Until tractors replaced them between 1920 and 1950, draft horses provided heavy labor, entire families worked the farm, and there was work to do in every season"⁵⁵

The advantage of the labor provided by large families changed because of technology. Today large families are the exception and not the rule in my community.

This has altered the experience of TRCs. In the past, parents would bring these large families to church. This was the heyday of TRCs in my area. This changed as technology gutted the need for larger pools of labor. The result today is a declining population that is aging in place.

Today, different technological forces are altering life in my community. These technologies are impacting the economic and cultural foundations of rural life especially for younger generations. TRCs built their congregations on traditions and rituals passed on from generation to generation. Technology weakens these traditions by altering what people value in a rural setting. Today's younger generations have a rural and a digital experience of the world. This makes them bi-cultural. They always have a cellphone on their person, spend lots of time playing video games, and live in a digital culture.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Jedediah Purdy, "The New Culture of Rural America," *The American Prospect*, November 14, 2001, accessed December 4, 2018, <http://prospect.org/article/new-culture-rural-america>.

⁵⁶ Jerome McGann, "Culture and Technology: The Way We Live Now, What Is to Be Done?" *New Literary History* 36, no. 1 (Nov. 29 2013): 71-82, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/030801805X25918>.

Neil Postman⁵⁷ and Christians thinkers like Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul argue that technology can become its own culture with no critical evaluation of where it might lead. I would argue that this fits the Urban linear conception of time. If a rural circular view of time has nowhere to go, then an urban linear concept of time can take you to a bad place. In fact, they name this technological culture as an Urban phenomenon. As Shaw argues:

In this analysis, the modern City is the actual and symbolic apogee of technique, a place where the malign effects of alienation, massification, consumerism, and propaganda are most pronounced and, simultaneously, least perceived. The phenomenon of the modern City is, for both Ellul and Merton, one of the most important barriers to the discovery of the true self, a prerequisite for the recovery of an authentic freedom.⁵⁸

Rural youth live in a rural culture and an urban digital culture. A Facebook friend of mine calls this "online urbanization". This digital pied piper leads them away from the "analog" traditions of their rural culture. Every day their developing brains build stronger neural pathways into the urban digital world. They might go to church once a week and perhaps an hour or two in youth group or catechism, but they spend massive amounts of time in the digital world, a world coming from Urban centers. Can TRCs with a rural analog culture compete with an urban digital world capturing the brains of younger generations?

TRCs formed their life and culture around a rural mindset in an analog world. They grew up with typewriters, encyclopedias and a few trusted experts. But the digital world has word processors, Google and thousand of online experts on every subject imaginable. As a young person in this community, we got our information about the

⁵⁷ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

⁵⁸ Shaw, 85.

world from newspapers, radio and three television stations. We trusted Walter Cronkite. Our "information technology" had severe limits. I spent massive amounts of time outside by myself or playing games with a horde of neighborhood kids. This same neighborhood today doesn't have enough kids to field one team of kickball let alone the two-and-a-half teams we assembled in a field on the edge of the woods.

I find evidence for this in the decline of our area's greatest analog experience. Previous generations passed this tradition on to their children but with each passing year fewer and fewer pick up the baton:

The recent release of the preliminary 2016 survey indicates the gloomy fact that the number of hunters -- in a steady decline for many years now -- has experienced a sharp drop-off of over 2 million hunters since the last survey in 2011.

Since 1980, the overall nationwide number of hunters has dropped from nearly 18 million to the current level of 10.5 million. That is an alarming figure, and may well be the fateful notice of a continual decrease that cannot be reversed.

The world is different from my youth, when just about everybody seemed to be a hunter, with little else to attract their attention. Now, the everyday lives of children seem to be rapidly changing, and it certainly appears as if it will continue to be that way. Hunting is losing possible participants to video games, cell phones, portable computers, TV that offers hundreds of viewing options....

It's a difficult, perhaps impossible, task for those advocating hunting to turn them away from these modern activities to find the time it would take to get them interested in hunting.

Consider also the fact that the baby-boomers who grew up as hunters will reach the end of their hunting days over the next decade or so, subtracting even more from the numbers of remaining hunting advocates. There may be no reversing this trend.⁵⁹

This sounds eerily familiar to the decline of church attendance in TRCs. An activity that may die out with the aging baby-boomers who are keeping the rural church afloat. The TRCs just like hunting are losing their future to digital technology.

⁵⁹ Ron Steffe, "Hunter Participation Numbers Continue to Drop – and It's a Sorry Situation," *Outdoor News*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.outdoornews.com/2017/09/21/hunter-participation-numbers-continue-drop-sorry-situation/>.

Amenityism

The last trend is amenityism. A dictionary defines amenities as: “any feature that provides comfort, convenience, or pleasure”⁶⁰ Deller argues that:

Rural economic structure in many parts of the United States has undergone significant changes over the past two decades. Traditional goods-producing sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing are giving way to service-producing sectors, such as those that support natural resource-based leisure activities. As America becomes more urban the resources rural areas offer, like open space, natural amenities, and "small-town values," become more valuable. Increasingly, people appear to be placing greater value on natural resource-based amenities and related attributes that contribute to regional quality of life. One behavioral manifestation has been a willingness to relocate to experience these attributes. Indeed, many researchers, such as Howe, McMahon, and Propst, conclude Americans are moving to rural areas in search of amenity attributes to improve their quality of life.⁶¹

This is good news, right? A new pool of potential church-goers who moved to “enjoy” “natural-resource based amenities” might keep the TRCs from sinking. However, in his book *Small Town America*, Robert Wuthnow concludes this:

Although school activities may pose the most common source of competition for churches, another source that townspeople sometimes mention is the availability of attractive recreational activities, such as boating, fishing, gardening, and playing golf... Average weekly church attendance is lower in areas that rank highest on the natural amenities... amenities scale than in areas that rank lowest. Generally, attendance declines as amenities scores increase... And attendance is highest in small nonurban towns located in areas with the lowest amenities scores.⁶²

The church of 50 or 60 years ago was a big fish in a small pond because it represented one of the few games in town. But there are new fish in the pond called

⁶⁰ *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “Amenities,” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/amenities>.

⁶¹ Steven C. Deller et al., *The Role of Amenities and Quality of Life In Rural Economic Growth*, USDA, 1, <https://pubag.nal.usda.gov/pubag/downloadPDF.xhtml?id=29686&content=PDF>.

⁶² Robert Wuthnow, *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), Kindle, 226-227.

"amenities" and they have diminished the power of TRCs in my area. These churches are caught on the horns of a dilemma. If their community creates an amenity-rich economy that draws people into the community, they stop coming to church, but if their community slips into decline, they lose their younger generations to urbanization and the amenities they find in urban centers.

Without the shaming aspect of Christendom, people can choose what they want to do on Sundays. It may be hard to sit for an hour every Sunday in a TRC when an empty kayak is calling your name, or a new season of "Game of Thrones" is one click away.

A Fading World of Influence

Some would argue that Christian religious commitment is not declining in this country. America is not like Europe which is now thoroughly secular. Americans are not the same as Europeans. Beth Estock suggests that:

American Christianity, as a compelling social institution, has outlived European Christianity by about half a century. We were more innovative, for one thing. And without a state church, we have typically had more church options per community than is true anywhere in Europe. Plus, for a variety of reasons, which we will address later, the social assumptions that undergirded Christendom simply lasted a bit longer on this side of the Atlantic. But, since the turn of the twenty-first century, if you have been paying any attention at all to the news about American religion, you are aware that we are becoming more like the Europeans every day. We are experiencing a vast and unprecedented exodus of Americans from organized religion."⁶³

What does this mean for the TRC's? My prediction would be the vast closure of many of them steeped in Christendom. Estock reaches the same conclusion on a much larger scale: "By the year 2050, most of "church-as-we-have-known-it" will almost certainly no longer exist. For those who are deeply invested in institutional forms of

⁶³ Beth Ann Estock, *Weird Church* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2016), Kindle, 70-71.

Christianity, this is perhaps one more reason to join the politicians and the culture warriors in their fearful stupor.⁶⁴

The way the church has organized itself in the past, just does not work for younger generations. They have a different set of priorities and pressures that make the church "as-it-used-to-be" unattractive and not relevant to the world "as-it-is-becoming." Ron Way has this to say:

Most everything about my youth suggested that church would be a large part of whatever life might bring. As was common in rural Minnesota back then, churches were the spiritual and social centers of those they served. We spent a lot of time at ours.

Midweek was Bible study; Saturday was catechism; Sunday was more study, the regular service and Methodist Youth Fellowship. There were regular "Circle" meetings and special events like ice-cream socials -- and, of course, Christmas and Easter.

I shoveled the church sidewalk in winter, mowed its lawn in summer and cleared tables at dinners. Our sparse home closets kept "for good" clothes, strictly reserved for church events.

There was supper-table chitchat about the weather, what the neighbors were up to, how the farm animals were doing and goings-on at church -- including, at times, open scorn about those Catholic "fish-eaters." Many adults, Catholic and Protestant, considered interfaith dating verboten. Catholics seemed most devout. Perhaps it was mysticism of the priest, who, our friends from St. Mary's boasted, was God's chosen emissary. The "Father" ruled the town's grandest building, wore distinctive garb, could speak Latin and was the Bible's final authority. Regardless of affiliation, church was etched into our character. Boy, things have changed.

The Star Tribune's periodic 'Test of Faith' series by Jean Hopfensperger reports that mainline churches are closing as attendance and membership plummet. Just 1 in 5 Minnesotans claim a church affiliation, a record low.

Among the many reasons are tuned-out millennials not replacing seniors and the distractions of a mobile society with jammed calendars. Who'd have thought that gathering for kids' soccer would supplant church as a social center?

Sure, folks are busy. But there's something more basic: The church, broadly, has been hijacked by TV scammers, narrow-interest evangelicals and unending sex scandal. Too, the church has largely stuck with Sunday school scripture by anecdote and has failed to remain relevant to society's altered priorities.

Frankly, the institutional church has itself to blame. In a period of social divide and gathering doubt, it's a bit puzzling why so many mainline churches

⁶⁴ Estock, 303-305.

seem mired in orthodoxy and creedal dogma that take us on Sunday morning jaunts through antiquity before sending us out and into today.

Back then, American history books and certainly the church were silent on things like the ruthless ethnic cleansing of indigenous tribes under the "divine" shroud of Manifest Destiny. Today's younger set is aware of that, as well as the church's assent to slavery and its role in the murderous Ku Klux Klan in the Jim Crow South (the so-called "Bible Belt").

That's the stuff that stokes cynicism, along with rationalization that one need not attend church to be spiritual. Whatever "being spiritual" means individually, it adds up to pew vacancies⁶⁵

Evangelical Malaise

Evangelicals in particular have fought for their vision of a Christian America. At one point in history they exercised considerable power in the society: Fitzgerald believes that:

The Second Great Awakening inaugurated a period of evangelical hegemony, or what the religious historian Martin Marty calls the Evangelical Empire. For most of the nineteenth century, in spite of increasing Catholic immigration, evangelical Protestants dominated all cultural institutions, including the public schools and the universities. In this period there was no real distinction between religion and politics.⁶⁶

From this lofty height evangelicals continue to fall even as they struggle to reclaim the summit of their former influence. And yet in the midst of their culture war, the casualties are younger generations from their own ranks.⁶⁷

In fact, evidence suggests some disillusioned younger evangelicals are defecting to mainline churches. Mark Silk writes:

⁶⁵ Ron Way, "What Churches Get Wrong (And How to Repopulate Them)," *Star Tribune*, September 22, 2018, <http://www.startribune.com/how-to-repopulate-the-churches/494003741/>.

⁶⁶ Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (n.p.: Simon & Schuster, n.d.), 4.

⁶⁷ Amanda Marcotte, "How the Religious Right Is Shrinking Itself: Overzealous Christianity Is Driving People Away," *Salon*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.salon.com/2018/05/14/how-the-religious-right-is-shrinking-itself-overzealous-christianity-is-driving-people-away/>.

For here's data point two: Among all millennials, eight percent are white mainliners, eight percent are white evangelicals, and six percent are white Catholics. By comparison, among Americans 50 and older, white evangelicals outnumber both white mainliners and white Catholics roughly three to two.

Bottom line: While mainline Protestantism continues to shed white adherents, it is doing a better job of keeping and/or attracting young white adults than either evangelicalism or Catholicism. So which is it, keeping or attracting?

As the forthcoming volume on mainline Protestantism in the Greenberg Center's series on the future of religion in America makes clear, keeping the younger generation has been a particular weakness of this tradition for half a century. Rather, what (relative) strength it shows is likely to be coming from outside -- from millennials raised Catholic or evangelical who want some other, dare I say more liberal, form of Christianity.

The other day, Rod Dreher recounted a lunch conversation with some conservative evangelical pastors lamenting the effect of support for the president and the Nashville Statement on homosexuality and transgenderism on younger members of their community.

"All they see is a bunch of leaders of a movement who voted for a sexually corrupt man like Donald Trump are now trying to take a public stand on sexual morality for gays," said one. "It's totally hypocritical to them. I don't know how the Nashville Statement drafters and signers didn't see this coming."

If I were a mainline Protestant leader, I'd be praying, "Please God, let my evangelical counterparts keep it coming."⁶⁸

TRCs, an Uncertain Future

And so, the TRCs face a pessimistic future. If the 5 trends continue unabated, then TRCs are in big trouble. With few millennials willing or even available to assume the mantle of leadership for the TRCs it seems highly improbable that these churches can survive. In the book *Weird Church* the author argues that small churches (what she calls "family chapels") are an exception:

Indeed, the Family Chapel church is not going anywhere. There are untold thousands of these small congregations across the United States. The majority of these churches are rural, often closing for lack of population. But there are so many of them to begin with, and they may exist in the city as easily as in the

⁶⁸ Mark Silk, "Stop the Presses! There's a Next Generation for Mainline Protestantism," *Religion News Services*, September 8, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/09/08/stop-the-presses-theres-a-next-generation-for-mainline-protestantism/>.

country. With so many churches shrinking in size, some larger churches may morph into Family Chapels...these churches are amazingly resilient, often hanging on for decades after the experts and ecclesiastics have written them off. Just when it looks as if they have too few people to continue, a couple of families who left another church in some sort of frustration will find them and join, putting a little church back in the game. Because they tend to be low-budget ventures, it doesn't take a lot to renew them.⁶⁹

I have my doubts about this scenario. It assumes that things will remain the same by the year 2050 except for the Church. Given the power of the trends pounding the TRCs in my area the "family chapels" may not be as hardy as the authors suggest. Will people still be "church shopping" because of their frustrations with another church? This sound like the "world -as it-used-to- be" in Christendom. I can envision non-traditional "fellowships" of various kinds taking their place but "family chapels" may have a more limited future.

If the current trends of urbanization, globalization, secularization and amenityism buttressed by technology continue as the markers of the new world then the current TRC's in my community face a bleak future:

As a sociologist of religion Mark Chaves, from Duke University, says, "The evidence for decades-long decline in American religiosity is now incontrovertible—like the evidence for global warming, it comes from multiple sources, shows up in several dimensions, and paints a consistent factual picture--the burden of proof has shifted to those who want to claim American religiosity is not declining."⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Estock, 1859-1860.

⁷⁰ Cathy Lynn Grossman, "The United States of America: One Nation Not Quite under God," *Deserte News*, March 11, 2016, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/865649878/The-United-States-of-America-One-nation-not-quite-under-God.html>.

CHAPTER THREE:
OPENING THE TRULY RURAL CHURCH TO THE GAZE OF SCRIPTURE

Oh life, it's bigger
It's bigger than you
And you are not me
The lengths that I will go to
The distance in your eyes
Oh no, I've said too much
I set it up

That's me in the corner
That's me in the spotlight
Losing my religion
Trying to keep up with you
And I don't know if I can do it
Oh no, I've said too much
I haven't said enough

I thought that I heard you laughing
I thought that I heard you sing
I think I thought I saw you try

Every whisper Of every waking hour
I'm choosing my confessions
Trying to keep an eye on you
Like a hurt, lost and blinded fool, fool
Oh no, I've said too much
I set it up

Consider this Consider this, the hint of the century
Consider this, the slip That brought me to my knees, failed
What if all these fantasies come Flailing around
Now I've said too much

I thought that I heard you laughing
I thought that I heard you sing
I think I thought I saw you try

But that was just a dream
That was just a dream
That's me in the corner¹

¹ "R.E.M, "Losing My Religion Lyrics," AZLyrics.com, accessed January 3, 2019,

Asking the Right Question

And so, the millennial question is complex. Economic, cultural, technological, theological and political forces impact the level of engagement of younger generations in a TRC. All these forces raise questions about the survival of the TRCs in my area.

But perhaps the survival of TRCs is the wrong question? Perhaps we should ask, what kind of church can equip people (especially younger generations) to reflect Christ in our urbanized, globalized, secularized, digitized and amentitized world? This is a different question than how to keep the TRCs from sinking. Perhaps the church "as-it-used -to- be" must die before the church "as- it- must- be" is raised to life?

Terry Eagleton in his book, *Culture and the Death of God*, points out that the most satisfying answers to the big questions of life are religious answers:

From Enlightenment Reason to modernist art, a whole range of phenomena therefore took on the task of providing surrogate forms of transcendence, plugging the gap where God had once been. Part of my argument is that the most resourceful of these proxies was culture, in the broad rather than narrow sense of the term. All of these stopgaps had other business in hand. They were not just displaced forms of divinity. Religion has not survived simply by assuming a number of cunning disguises, any more than it has been secularised away. Yet despite the fact that art, Reason, culture and so on all had a thriving life of their own, they were also called on from time to time to shoulder this ideological burden, one to which they invariably proved unequal. That none of these viceroys for God turned out to be very plausible is part of my story. The Almighty has proved remarkably difficult to dispose of. Indeed, this is perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the narrative the book has to tell. Again and again, at least until the advent of postmodernism, what seems like an authentic atheism turns out to be nothing of the kind.²

Younger generations know organized religion steeped in the analog "used-to- be" world has failed them (the "Dones") and did not represent the values and teachings of

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/rem/losingmyreligion.html>.

²Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), Kindle, 32.

Christ.³ Christendom's monopoly on religion with its "brick and mortar" churches finds it difficult to compete with the religious market exploding in the new realities of our digital world.⁴

"Nones" are not rejecting religious answers to the big questions but the corrupt "one-size-fits-all" contents of Christendom packaged in the world "as-it-used-to be".

Caroline Newman makes this clear when she writes:

Pew Research Center survey, published in November, revealed that millennials are less attached to organized religion than their parents or grandparents were at the same age, with only about 40 percent saying religion is very important in their lives. However, the same survey revealed that about 80 percent of millennials believe in God and increasing numbers identify with statements like "I feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being" or "I experience a deep sense of wonder about the universe. They are spiritual but not religious."⁵

I interpret this to mean they experience a spiritual reality permeating our world that organized religion (in their view) misrepresents and distorts for its own gain. The evidence suggests they want more than the institutional church can offer them.

Ironically, Jesus did not come to sponsor an individually defined spirituality, or an organized religion. He came to give us a way of living:

Therefore, Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full (John 10: 7-10).

³ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church-- and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2011).

⁴ Aleks Krotoski, "What Effect Has the Internet Had on Religion?" *The Guardian*, April 16, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/apr/17/untangling-web-aleks-krotoski-religion>.

⁵ Caroline Newman, "Why Millennials Are Leaving Religion but Embracing Spirituality," *UVAToday*, December 14, 2015, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/qa-why-millennials-are-leaving-religion-embracing-spirituality>.

The thieves and robbers of Jesus' day represent the religious establishment that stole from people the life found in Christ; this is the context of John 10.

Rather than asking how to keep enough sheep in the pens to maintain TRCs, perhaps we should ask how do we take others with us through the Christ-gate leading to the fullness of life. Not so they can be more spiritual (whatever that means) or more religious but more full of the life found in Christ. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind." John 1:4

TRCs built a counterfeit pasture for the sheep, so they could graze on a rural and cultural crop of faith seeded with an impoverished narrative. Cultural forms of Christianity worked in the old world because the old world itself was a cultural expression of Christianity. Jason Mann comments that in the old world:

Christianity is assumed and normal, making the idea of becoming Christian in America a redundant feature. To be American is to be Christian. This means that most Americans, by virtue of this sense of being American, spend very little time actually complementing and discussing amongst themselves what it means (or what it would mean) to be Christian. They don't actually consider what this identity demands of them, in both their private and public lives, what kinds of commitments follow from this claim, and what must be different about their lives and communities (in relation to others within our social world), pursuant to this claim. Without this kind of collective deliberation, individuals and communities do not practice Christianity. They ignore teaching, instruction, and formation that is so central to becoming Christian because they do not see the need for it. Love for God is wrapped up in love for country and is already present and represented in their allegiance to the values of American civic and cultural life.⁶

TRC's are a rural expression of this weakening Christendom. Both liberal and conservative churches built their lives on a matrix that cannot lead people into the fullness of life found in Christ. Fullness of life in Christ is not the same thing as the American dream. Jesus uses the same Greek words for abundance (perisso) and life (zoe)

⁶ Jason Mahn, "Becoming a Christian in Christendom," Syndicate, July 31, 2017, <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/becoming-a-christian-in-christendom/>.

in both John 10:10 and Luke 12:15⁷. Notice how similar they are: "Then he said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15) "A thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance" (John 10: 10).

It is difficult to reconcile Jesus understanding of an abundant life with the American Dream when he says: "You have to lose your life in order to find your life" (Matthew 10:39). And yet American Christians urban, suburban and rural stir the American dream into their Christianity as if the two are completely compatible.⁸

I sat in a Catholic TRC service a few months ago and this church hung a large banner with the "five loaves and two fish" hanging right over the pulpit. This banner symbolizes the universality of the Christian faith for all people everywhere.⁹ But right underneath the banner between the banner and the pulpit stood an American Flag. It appeared to me that America (signified by their placement of the flag) seems to be the mediator of the gospel of God's Kingdom.

The arrangement of sacred space communicates what is ultimate in our view of reality:

A sacred place is first of all a defined place, a space distinguished from other spaces. The rituals that a people either practice at a place or direct toward it mark its sacredness and differentiate it from other defined spaces. To understand the character of such places, Jonathan Z. Smith has suggested the helpful metaphor of sacred space as a "focusing lens." A sacred place focuses attention on the forms, objects, and actions in it and reveals them as bearers of religious meaning. These

⁷ "John 10:10," Blue Letter Bible, accessed February 2, 2019, https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/jhn/10/10/t_conc_1007010.

⁸ Brandon Peach, "The 'American Dream' Isn't the Goal of the Christian Life," Relevant, October 10, 2017, <https://relevantmagazine.com/article/the-american-dream-isnt-the-goal-of-the-christian-life/>.

⁹ Tom Mulcahy, "THE MULTIPLICATION OF THE LOAVES AND THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL," Catholic Strength, January 25, 2017, <https://catholicstrength.com/2017/01/25/the-multiplication-of-the-loaves-and-the-spread-of-the-gospel/>.

symbols describe the fundamental constituents of reality as a religious community perceives them, defines a life in accordance with that view, and provides a means of access between the human world and divine realities.¹⁰

The placement of the flag in sacred space communicates, consciously or not, an assumption about what is ultimate. This serves the myth of manifest destiny that is central to the American ethos. As Andrew Kirk explains:

Hidden behind the concept of 'manifest destiny' is the notion of a double blessing: America has been blessed by God, therefore it has an obligation to share this blessing with others. It is a kind of collective message of corporate prosperity: emulate our way of life and you too will progress and flourish. America, according to this interpretation, views itself as 'a city set on a hill,' in some sense a nation consecrated by its religious heritage and historical origins to draw all others to itself (as indeed it has done literally), so that they too may share in the blessings of the dream. The immortal words etched on a plaque within the Statue of Liberty at the entrance to New York harbor sum up the mood of an extravagant claim to a renewal of the whole earth, beginning in the 'New World'¹¹

Regardless of the specific message intended by the placement of the flag, the very presence of the flag on the altar puts the United States in the category of what is ultimate and sacred. The flag, in my opinion, undermines the essence of the gospel for all people everywhere.

TRCs love the American Flag up on the platform (if you doubt this try to have it removed!). This expresses their identity as "American Christians". In rural areas like mine, the pledge of allegiance and the apostle's creed are both confessional creeds for Christians. In an article in the Washington Post, small town pastor Chris Brauns said this: "Theologically, our people, especially our older folk, confuse Christianity and country more than I would like," he said. The confusion, he believes, is greater in rural areas than

¹⁰ *Encyclopedia.com*, s.v. "Sacred Space,"
<https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/sacred-space>.

¹¹ Andrew Kirk, "God Is On Our Side: The Anatomy of an Ideology," *Transformation* 27, no. 4 (October 2010), doi:10.1177/0265378810378304..

in urban areas. "People view the Pledge of Allegiance in an almost confessional way," Brauns said.¹² As a pastor myself in a rural area I can confirm his statement.

This poisons the purity of the gospel of the Kingdom available for all people everywhere and is therefore not authentic Christianity. Christ's sheep cannot drink from this well and eat from this pasture and experience the fullness of life found in Christ.

For most of US history, to be American was to be "Christian." National identity was conflated with religious identity in a way that produced a distorted form of Christianity, mostly about family values, Golden Rule moralism, and good citizenship. The God of this "Christianity" was first and foremost a nice guy who rewarded moral living by sanctifying the American dream: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (i.e., a substantial 401(k), a three-car garage, and as many Instagram followers as possible). This form of Christianity--prominent in twenty-first-century America--has been aptly labeled "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," a faith defined by a distant, "cosmic ATM" God who only cares that we are nice to one another and feel good about ourselves.¹³

A "cosmic ATM" counterfeit faith steals from us much of the fullness of life found in Christ. It robs us of the paradoxical, upside down, counter-intuitive fullness of life found in following the Christ. As Terry Eagleton observes:

The form of life Jesus offers his followers is not one of social integration but a scandal to the priestly and political establishment. It is a question of being homeless, propertyless, peripatetic, celibate, socially marginal, disdainful of kinsfolk, averse to material possessions, a friend of outcasts and pariahs, a thorn in the side of the Establishment and a scourge of the rich and powerful."¹⁴

In the TRCs life is about "social integration" into the rural collective under the banner of a Christian church. Swierenga agrees:

¹² Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Some Evangelicals Question Whether They Have Overlooked the Rural Church," *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/12/15/some-evangelicals-question-whether-they-have-overlooked-the-rural-church/?utm_term=.0dd47e2d68a8.

¹³ Brett McCracken, "The Dying Away of Cultural Christianity," *Crossway*, September 23, 2017, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-dying-away-of-cultural-christianity/>.

¹⁴ McCracken, "The Dying Away of Cultural Christianity."

The church was more than a religious meeting place; it was a cultural nest, integrating families, social classes, and nationality groups. It gave members a cultural identity and status and socialized them into the community. "As forces of order," said John Mack Faragher, "churches reign." They forged the basic cultural assumptions, guiding tender consciences and influencing personal behavior at home and at work.¹⁵

The first churches in the NT did not refer to themselves as Christians. Others outside the Church gave them this name:

The name which was widely used for the believers, and is most unknown to Christians today would be the title "The Way". Probably originating from Christ Himself, who called Himself "The Way" (Joh 14:6); this name was used widely in the Book of Acts. The below verses prove that they were known more widely as "the Way", than the "Christians", especially as Paul introduces himself as a follower of "the Way" to the Governor, and not as a "Christian" (Acts 24:14), even though they were known as "Christians" by Acts 11:26.¹⁶

They were members of "The Way". This designation appears for the first time in Acts 9:2. Does this mean they were "forces of order" "forging basic cultural assumptions and guiding tender consciences?"

In the book of Acts rather than the Church being a "cultural nest", others perceived them as disrupters of the peace. In fact, every time the proper title "the Way" appears in the book of Acts, you find followers of the way in trouble with the "forces of order". Paul himself before his conversion persecuted "the Way": "Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem Acts (9: 1-2).

¹⁵ Robert P. Swierenga, "The Little White Church: Religion in Rural America," *Agricultural History* 71, no. 4 (1997): 415–441.

¹⁶ Dianne St.Amand, "Sect of 'the Way,' 'the Nazarenes,'" Bible things in Bible Ways, February 1, 2015, <https://biblethingsinbibleways.wordpress.com/2013/11/21/sect-of-the-way-the-nazarenes-christians-names-given-to-the-early-church/>.

This same Paul as a follower of the Way created his own disturbances in the social order:

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."

When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Soon the whole city was in an uproar (Acts 19: 22-29) They were not "forces of order" but disrupters of the status quo.

According to the book of Acts, the upside-down world of Jesus is not a cultural nest; it shakes the cultural tree. The designation "the Way" threatened both Judaism and Roman Paganism. The Church of Christ calls people to walk in their full humanity. Instead Christendom provided the backbone of a cultural Christianity that sanctions the abuse of power at the expense of our full humanity.

Religion tends to prefer and protect the status quo or the supposedly wonderful past, yet what we now see is that religion often simply preserves its own power and privilege. God does not need our protecting. We often worship old things as substitutes for eternal things. Jesus strongly rejects this love of the past and one's private perfection, and he cleverly quotes Isaiah (29:13) to do it: "In vain do they worship me, teaching merely human precepts as if they were doctrines" (Matthew 15:9). Many of us seem to think that God really is "back there," in the good ol' days of old-time religion when God was really God, and everybody was happy and pure. This leaves the present moment empty and hopeless--not to speak of the future.¹⁷

¹⁷ Richard Rohr, "Everything Changes," Center For Action and Contemplation, January 1, 2019, <https://cac.org/everything-changes-2019-01-01/>.

Missing the Biblical Narrative

As a pastor I sought to help my congregation embrace the big story of the Bible. A story about finding our identity in Christ who embodies (incarnates) the Kingdom of God. This narrative transcends all other narratives that formed our identity in this world. Without the solid rock of Christ's story under our feet, our true humanity can get washed away (Matthew 7:24-27).

Discipleship demands a sacrifice of "worldly" narratives for the narrative of Christ. (1 John 2:15). This is the price of our transformation. The caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly happens as the caterpillar presents its body as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). She sacrifices the narrative she embodied on the ground for a new narrative she will embody in the heavens. As a caterpillar she consumed her surroundings; as a butterfly she spreads new life and beauty.

TRCs, as we have seen, build their world on the sand of rural American Christendom instead of the rock of God's kingdom incarnated in Christ. They live in one world instead of two. The Kingdom of God is "in" this world, but it is not "of" this world.¹⁸ Until they have "the eyes to see" the "other" world, they can never rise above the narratives that limit their humanity. They are to use the words of Paul "conformed to this world" instead of being transformed by a renewed mind. (Romans 12:1-2)

TRCs I pastored, did not have "the eyes to see or the ears to hear" (Matthew 13:15). The vast majority of people did not embrace the biblical narrative revealed in Christ. This biblical narrative about the Kingdom confused some of them; others chose a contented blindness; and some resisted (either actively or passively). Each of them had

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*, Reprint ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012).

"narratives" that defined their identity and their reality.¹⁹ The churches I pastored embraced a "heaven or hell" narrative. As conservative evangelicals they reduced the gospel to a narrative about getting people "saved" so they could go to heaven. God gave them their ticket to heaven when they prayed "the sinner's prayer". These TRCs acted as "salvation stations".

Others loved the nostalgic narrative created by their traditions as summed up in the words of a classic hymn:

Come to the church by the wildwood
 Oh, come to the church in the vale
 No spot is so dear to my childhood
 As the little brown church in the vale
 How sweet on a clear Sabbath morning
 To listen to the clear ringing bells
 Its tones so sweetly are calling
 Oh, come to the church in the vale
 Come to the church by the wildwood
 Oh, come to the church in the vale
 No spot is so dear to my childhood
 As the little brown church in the vale.²⁰

The rural American narrative dominates the specifics of their theology (evangelical, Catholic or mainline) and their reality. Jennifer Sherman in her study of rural residents describe rural attitudes toward church this way:

But the bulk of Golden Valley residents look to their churches for a combination of social support and spiritual guidance that can be called upon or ignored according to their own time constraints, personal needs, life cycles, and seasonal rhythms. Moreover, the churches' spiritual influences are often surprisingly absent from the residents' day-to-day moral judgments and declarations, particularly with regard to the ways in which they separate and distinguish themselves from others.²¹

¹⁹ Peter L Berger, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 157.

²⁰ Hymnlyrics.org, accessed January 10, 2019, https://www.hymnlyrics.org/newlyrics_t/the_church_in_the_wildwood.php.

²¹ Jennifer Sherman, *Those Who Work, Those Who Don't: Poverty, Morality, and Family in Rural*

Walk into a TRC regardless of their liturgy, or the specifics of their theology, and the values of rurality will wash over you.²² People spend a lot more time bathing in the American rural culture during the week than they do getting sprinkled with church teachings on Sunday. Therefore mainline, catholic and evangelical/fundamental churches are not that different in terms of congregational culture.²³

The reactions of rural Midwest congregations to Hispanics immigrating into their rural communities makes this point. All of these groups responded with either passive or aggressive resistance to sharing "their" church. Rehwaldt, in reference to Hispanic immigration into his rural community, said this:

Despite the range of perspectives and expressions of support from some congregation members, nearly every Protestant leader with whom I spoke saw outreach efforts as fraught with conflict and resistance. Pastor Chris noted, after learning of resistance at other congregations, "I had to be even more cautious...So I moved very slowly and gently." Pastor Joseph commented, "You are engaging in a risk-taking mission, so you need to know that with your eyes wide open. It is a risk for the pastor...I said [to the church leadership], it's a risk to move us out of our comfort zone, so you need to do this with your eyes open."²⁴

They remained congregational caterpillars and not transformed followers of Christ.

The pastor on Sunday spoons the gravy of "growth in Christ "on to the meat of the TRC experience but the gravy is not the main course. The main course is the quality of life they enjoy at the table of rural culture seasoned with religion. Gravy is optional. People want it (the preaching) to be good gravy but the substance of the meal has little to

America (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) Kindle Edition.

²² Sherman, 11.

²³ Jung and Agria, *Rural Congregational Studies*.

²⁴ Jeremy Rehwaldt, "Responses by White Christians to Recent Latino Immigration in the Rural U.S. Midwest," *Religions* 6, no. 2 (June 2015): 686–711.

do with discipleship. In my experience, woe to the pastor who messes with the meat of this experience. His/her preaching/teaching is fine as long as it doesn't disturb those gathered around the table.

For a TRC pastor with a Kingdom of God mindset, the challenge of making disciples is difficult. They must build a metaphorical altar in the church (Romans 12:1-2) where people can sacrifice their embodied narratives in this world for the narrative of Christ's Kingdom. Until this happens their capacity to embrace "God's perfect and pleasing will" (Romans 12:2) remains outside of their consciousness. They remain caterpillars instead of transformed disciples.

The narratives of "heaven and hell" and "little brown church in the vale", within the container of rurality require no true discipleship at the altar of Christ's Kingdom.

The whole thrust of Christ centered on the Kingdom of God. His teaching revolved around this theme.²⁵ But a show of hands and subsequent teaching and preaching in the "Bible-believing" churches I pastored, revealed an almost total ignorance of this theme. The main message of Christ remained hidden in plain sight because it existed outside of the rural American Christendom narratives. We cannot see what we are not looking for.

Until the biblical narrative consummating in Christ seizes the church, the church will remain in the grips of a false narrative. As Leonard Sweet says:

The crisis of the church today has little to do with dwindling numbers, aging congregations, outdated facilities, financial crises, and lace-by-day/leather-by-night priests. Today's church crisis stems from one thing: Jesus Deficit Disorder. The church's narrative is biblically, theologically, and spiritually bankrupt. The

²⁵ Wright, *How God Became King*.

church has been busy telling stories other than God's story, dreaming other dreams than God's dream as revealed by Jesus.²⁶

Cultural Christianity

Because TRCS enjoy the meat of their narrative within the walls of a church building, the church building gives flesh to their narrative. The building is the receptacle and signifier of all they value. The church can become a god. This is especially true for TRCs who have a long history in their communities.

If they lose their building, they stop being a church. A TRC will fight to stay open because of the huge investments made in the church. They locate their history, traditions, memories, purpose, blood, sweat and tears in this "little brown church on the vale."²⁷ This narrative dominates their perspective. Any shifting of this narrative doesn't "feel" like church. Jean Hopfensperger, writing about the closing of a rural Lutheran church in Minnesota, noted this attitude:

When La Salle Lutheran locks its doors in August, it will become the latest casualty among fragile Minnesota churches either closing, merging or praying for a miracle. Steep drops in church attendance, aging congregations, and cultural shifts away from organized religion have left most of Minnesota's mainline Christian denominations facing unprecedented declines. "Sunday used to be set aside for church: that's what families did," said Donna Schultz, 74, a church member since grade school at La Salle, in southwest Minnesota. "Now our children have moved away. The grandkids have volleyball, dance on weekends. People are busy with other things." "I'm really going to miss this," she added quietly, gesturing to her friends in the lobby. "We're like family." The rising toll is evident in rural, urban and suburban churches across the state.²⁸

²⁶ Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), Kindle Edition, 22.

²⁷ Jung and Agria, *Rural Congregational Studies*.

²⁸ Jean Hopfensperger, "As Churches Close, a Way of Life Fades," *Star Tribune*, July 8, 2018, <http://www.startribune.com/as-minnesota-churches-close-a-way-of-life-fades/486037461/>.

In the New Testament the Church is never a building:

In the Bible the word church is a translation of the Greek word ekklesia, meaning "a calling out." It never refers to a building or meeting place, but always to people, the ones "called out" of the world's society by God calling them into His service. The Church of the Bible is not a cold, stone building, but a group of warm and loving people specially chosen by God.²⁹

TRC's serve an important role in rural life as a cultural expression of Christendom and a witness to their narratives about Christ. But there is a difference between a culturally conditioned form of Christendom and a culturally sensitive Christianity. Christendom provided a nest for life in rural communities. Today, however, this nest is too limited for younger generations.³⁰ Joshua Packard's study of those who are done with the Church details the nature of their discontent within Christendom:

While everyone's story is unique, there are some common tensions that emerge among the dechurched:

- They wanted community . . . and got judgment.
- They wanted to affect the life of the church. . . and got bureaucracy.
- They wanted conversation . . . and got doctrine.
- They wanted meaningful engagement with the world . . . and got moral prescription.

Although our interview guide was crafted to allow for as much open conversation as possible while still staying on topic, these four contradictions came through time and again when we analyzed the data.³¹

The "Dones" (those who were active but have left the church) were looking for a faith that can fly in the "world-as-it-is-becoming." Instead, the Church insisted they remain in the nest of Christendom.³² In a rural setting the rural matrix conditions a TRC

²⁹ UCG.org, "The Church Is Not the Building," *Beyond Today*, 2017, <https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/bible-study-course/bible-study-course-lesson-10/the-church-is-not-the-building>.

³⁰ Joshua Packard, "Meet the Dones," *CT Pastors*, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/summer-2015/meet-dones.html>.

³¹ Packard, *Church Refugees*, 450-451.

³² David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), Kindle Edition.

with a culturally defined faith. We will look at the characteristics of this matrix in the next section.

A Circular View of Time

Rural culture has a circular view of time.³³ A circular view of time embraces certain predictable patterns in life. In rural communities the predictability of the seasons and certain events are part of the circle that forms the substance of life. For people who attend church week after week, this is part of the circle they enjoy. A circular view of time may reflect the lack of opportunity and social mobility found in rural places. The phrase "climbing the corporate ladder" applies primarily to a corporate culture in an urban setting. This metaphor signifies a linear conception of time as one ascends a vertical axis.

But in a rural context with no ladder to climb your focus becomes what is in front of you. If you have nowhere to go you stay within the circle of your circumstances. Rural cultures like mine live by the seasons.³⁴ In the fall, we watch the colors change and we prepare for deer season. When winter arrives, we break out the snowmobile or brave blizzards to play cards at the Moose lodge. After the snow melts in the spring, we scout for mushrooms and plant gardens. And in the summer, we go camping, take family vacations and head for the lake. We live from season to season and the predictable markers they represent. This reminds me of the book of Ecclesiastes: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is

³³ Jung and Agria, *Rural Congregational Studies*.

³⁴ Jung and Agria, *Rural Congregational Studies*.

there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time (Ecclesiastes 1:9-11). While this author bemoans this fate, rural culture and rural churches depend upon it.

Rural people "work to live" and not (as in urban centers) "live to work."³⁵ This is the opposite of climbing the corporate ladder. Work allows them to live in an area where they can enjoy the predictability of people and place. TRCs offer people the space for this every week.

This is both the opportunity and the bane of the TRC. If they are not careful, the church becomes a shrine dedicated to rurality more than true Christianity. This potential idolatry uses God to baptize their way of life in the rural fishbowl. Maintenance of the church is a sacred activity that preserves what they value the most. When this happens, a TRC will value maintenance more than mission. Maintenance drives the church while mission takes a back seat.

A team of mine in the TRCs I pastored developed a mission statement we hung on the wall and inserted in the bulletins. This statement read: "We exist to grow fully formed followers of Jesus Christ." It generated no real enthusiasm. The real mission statement would have read: "We exist to preserve what matter to us."

After I resigned, the mission statement on the wall came down and they eliminated a benevolent fund I established. This fund gave away 60,000 dollars for people with needs in our community. They did this to help cover the costs of an improved fellowship hall.

Every year at our annual business meetings I would rally the troops around a vision for the New Year. Every year my presentation bombed. Their body language said,

³⁵ Jung and Agria, *Rural Congregational Studies*.

"When he finishes, we can get to the real business of the church." They humored me because mission takes a backseat to maintenance. Behind maintenance is a circular view of time.

Does the bible support a circular view of time? God created us with a need for rhythm. We work for 6 days and rest on the sabbath. God gave us the Garden of Eden so we could learn how to care for creation as we learned how to care for ourselves. But God never intended us to stay in the fishbowl of Eden as a means of maintenance. He intended us to take our apprenticeship in the Garden of Eden out in the entire world (maintenance and mission). To make the whole planet a Garden of Eden where humanity and creation thrived under the stewardship of those created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28) ³⁶ In Christian theology this covenant was broken by sin. Jesus starts the process of putting this Humpty Dumpty covenant back together again in the space called the Kingdom of God.

The Jewish Jesus' concept of time is not strictly circular or linear but covenantal.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains:

Atonement and forgiveness are the supreme expressions of human freedom – the freedom to act differently in the future than one did in the past, and the freedom not to be trapped in a cycle of vengeance and retaliation. Only those who can forgive can be free. Only a civilization based on forgiveness can construct a future that is not an endless repetition of the past. That, surely, is why Judaism is the only civilization whose golden age is in the future.

It was this revolutionary concept of time – based on human freedom – that Judaism contributed to the world. Many ancient cultures believed in cyclical time, in which all things return to their beginning. The Greeks developed a sense of tragic time, in which the ship of dreams is destined to founder on the hard rocks of reality. Europe of the Enlightenment introduced the idea of linear time, with its close cousin, progress. Judaism believes in covenantal time, well described by

³⁶ William Brown, "The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology," *Interpretation* 4, no. 66 (2012): 466-67, <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/docview/1350378738?accountid=11085>.

Harold Fisch: “The covenant is a condition of our existence in time . . . We cooperate with its purposes never quite knowing where it will take us, for ‘the readiness is all’.” In a lovely phrase, he speaks of the Jewish imagination as shaped by “the unappeased memory of a future still to be fulfilled”.

Tragedy gives rise to pessimism. Cyclical time leads to acceptance. Linear time begets optimism. Covenantal time gives birth to hope. These are not just different emotions. They are radically different ways of relating to life and the universe. They are expressed in the different kinds of story people tell. Jewish time always faces an open future. The last chapter is not yet written.³⁷

The space of our true potential is found in the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ. His atonement and forgiveness as Rabbi Sacks says, “are the supreme expressions of human freedom – the freedom to act differently in the future than one did in the past, and the freedom not to be trapped in a cycle of vengeance and retaliation. Only those who can forgive can be free. Only a civilization based on forgiveness can construct a future that is not an endless repetition of the past.”³⁸

Covenant time is the harmony of mission and maintenance made possible by the Christ. Jesus always took time for maintenance. He set this example for his followers by withdrawing to solitary places for renewal after expending himself in mission to the masses. He did not spin his wheels or burn himself out. He lived in covenant time.

In his ministry he took circular paths around rural Galilee.³⁹ Along the way, he blew up the idols carved out by their traditions.⁴⁰ After this, he took a linear path to urban Jerusalem,⁴¹ where those at the top of the “corporate ladder” crucified him.⁴² The ministry

³⁷ Jonathan Sacks, “Jewish Time,” Orthodox Union, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.ou.org/torah/parsha/rabbi-sacks-on-parsha/jewish-time/>.

³⁸ Sacks.

³⁹ Bible History Online, “Chart - The Life of Jesus in Chronological Order,” accessed January 3, 2019, https://www.bible-history.com/Chart_Jesus_Chronology/.

⁴⁰ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

⁴¹ Bible History Online, “Chart - The Life of Jesus in Chronological Order.”

of Jesus indicts both urban and rural ways of living that are not open to Christs' re-formation of humanities true potential.

He is the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 22:13). Christ contains the summation of time. These titles communicate both the completeness of Christ (as in a circle) with the mission of Christ (as in a line).

The bible presents a corkscrew vision of time. A corkscrew has circles that travel along a linear axis. We need habitual practices (circles) as a source of renewal and connection, but we cannot stay in the circle with no clear mission. God's history is going somewhere, and we are to represent the Kingdom of God by following the pattern of Christ. Christ's pattern involved mission to the masses and then maintenance in private prayer: "Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5: 15-16).

Christ is the mandorla of circular and linear time. The space where two opposites intersect is called a mandorla⁴³: "The mandorla begins the healing of the split. The overlap is very thin at first, only a sliver of a new moon, but it is a beginning. As time passes, the greater the overlap, the greater and more complete is the healing. The mandorla binds together that which was torn apart and made unwhole-unholy."⁴⁴

⁴² Myers

⁴³ Rostislava Todorova, "The Aureole and the Mandorla: Aspects of the Symbol of the Sacral from Ancient Cultures to Christianity," Research Gate, accessed March 6, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313297237_The_Aureole_and_the_Mandorla_Aspects_of_the_Symbol_of_the_Sacral_from_Ancient_Cultures_to_Christianity.

⁴⁴ "New Earth - Tree of Life," Tattfoo, accessed January 9, 2019, http://www.tattfoo.com/new_earth/NewEarthTreeOfLife.html.

When a TRC reduces time to a circle, they make time unholy. The mission becomes maintenance. This is not a "set apart" use of the time God gave us. The bible chides the people of God for standing still and refusing to trust where God wants to take them: "When the Lord heard what you said, he was angry and solemnly swore: "No one from this evil generation shall see the good land I swore to give your ancestors, except Caleb son of Jephunneh. He will see it, and I will give him and his descendants the land he set his feet on, because he followed the Lord wholeheartedly" (Deut 1:35-36). They spent the next 40 years wandering in circles.

The book of Hebrews picks up this paradoxical corkscrew view of time by telling us to keep moving forward into the rest found in Christ. This is not a passive rest but an active rest free from our conformity to this world:

Therefore, since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it 'Today.' This he did when a long time later he spoke through David as in the passage already quoted: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.' For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:6-11).

This verse contains a mandorla (the intersection of opposites): "make every effort to enter that rest."

The issue for TRCs is contentment and/or passive acceptance of life in the wilderness of rurality. They won't leave their rural rest for the rest of Christ found in the promised land of God's Kingdom.

The Dominance of Tradition

It is easy to see why custom, ritual and traditions have power in a circular view of time. Rural people value these things because they form the contents of a circular path. In fact, if you encounter something new in the circle it disrupts the enjoyment of the flow (especially if it makes waves in the congregation). Or as Jesus would say: "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, it will spill, and the skins will be ruined. But new wine should be put into fresh wineskins. And no one, after drinking old wine, wants new, because he says, 'The old is better.'" (Luke 5: 37-39)

I encountered this whenever we altered anything about the service. When we added a screen and a projector to display the lyrics a power-broker in the church said, "We don't need that". She associated staring into the pages of the hymnal as more sacred than a digitally projected image on the wall. Even though she still had the option of using the hymnal, (you could do either) it didn't feel sacred. I imagine it felt like serving pizza at Thanksgiving. Her old wine had no room for something new because "the old is better."

Another man in his 50s came to church every Sunday not because he wanted to grow in his faith or learn more about the bible. He liked the Sunday morning routine and seeing people he knew. He felt better after going to church. He was a church-goer and not a Christian. I saw this story repeatedly in my role as a pastor.

Again, the Bible is not against custom, ritual and tradition. We can find many examples of this in both testaments. The Passover meal is a powerful ritual that tells a story of God's redemption of his people. Jesus builds upon and re-frames this ritual in

what we call the Lord's Supper. This is a powerful ritual if we appreciate how it brings us to the table of God's great redemption narrative, still working itself out in history through us. Traditions tell a story. If we get the story correct, we understand our place in the God's story and can move the story forward through our traditions. But if we get the story wrong, it shows up in how we see our traditions. Traditions, habits and rituals make a wonderful servant but a lousy master.

Jesus had issues with the Pharisees and scribes because their customs and traditions blocked as Paul Harvey would say "the rest of the story". Jesus is the rest of the story. Their customs and traditions had taken on a life of their own that corrupted their good intentions and justified injustice. This gave them the illusion of sanctity but not its substance.

This is the seductive danger of TRC customs and habits. They create the illusion of sanctity. Without a linear conception of time the rituals can only bring the past into the present. This represents 50% of a traditions power. This half truth kills mission and sanctifies maintenance. This is exactly the issue Christ had with the traditions of the pharisees and scribes. They could not embrace the future he represented because it threatened what they valued about the past (Mark 7:5). TRCs struggle with the same issue.

In Christ we find the past and the future converging in one person in our present. Christ fulfills the promise of the past by offering us a present/future Kingdom. The kingdom is present but has not fully arrived. We seek to bring more of God's future into the present. This is the mission of Christ's body the Church.

The best example of this is the Lord's supper. This meal rooted in the passover (past) allows us to feed on Christ (present) as a foretaste of the marriage banquet of the Lamb (future):

And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover (past) with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God (future). After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes (future). And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you (present); do this in remembrance of me (past) (Luke 22:15-19).

The true follower of Christ inhabits a mandorla of past and future overlapping in the present. Without the future linear perspective of Christ, TRC's languish in a circle instead of the circle of rituals wheeling them forward through the engine of Christ's Kingdom narrative

The Demise of Self Reflection

For rural folk introspection is unnecessary. When you have a circular view of time, you lean on customs, habits and rituals as the best way to live. Jung suggests that: "Little value is placed on introspection or self-analysis, since custom, habit and ritual is accepted dogmatically as the best way to live"⁴⁵

As this quote points out, "little value is placed on introspection or self-analysis". But how can someone grow in Christ without an evaluation of where they are at, compared to where Christ can take them? "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you?--unless indeed you fail to meet the test!"(2 Corinthians 13:5).

⁴⁵ Jung and Agria, *Rural Congregational Studies*, 31.

This is not “about the gospel of sin management” where we obsess over every impure motivation, thought or action. Martin Luther flagellated himself before his conversion and well-meaning Christians beat themselves psychologically after their conversion. There is even a disorder for those who take this to the extreme. It is a form of OCD called “religious scrupulosity”.⁴⁶

The NT describes personal growth in Christ. Just one example would be 2 Peter 1: 3-11:

His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. By these He has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. The person who lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten the cleansing from his past sins.

Therefore, brothers, make every effort to confirm your calling and election, because if you do these things you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly supplied to you.”

On Peter's storyboard, he plots for the Church the growth of true followers through their potential stages of development:

⁴⁶ “Living with Religious Ocd (Scrupulosity) What’s Going On?,” Intrusive Thoughts, accessed January 9, 2019, <https://www.intrusivethoughts.org/ocd-symptoms/scrupulosity-religious-ocd/>.



We keep ascending this stairway until we reach our true potential as human beings created in the image of God. Love is the summit of our potential.

This trip is possible says Peter because "he has given us everything we need" to reach our true potential. With this faith pumping through our bodies we climb from one stage to another. TRCs struggle with discipleship because the rural mindset undermines the faith that pushes us forward.

The desire to grow in Christ is not absent from TRCs. The more serious believers within a TRC will attend bible studies, read books and practice spiritual disciplines. But the stones of rurality, the sandy soil of non-kingdom narratives, and the weeds of Christendom strip the Kingdom nutrients needed to grow fully formed followers of Christ. These believers can never reach the height of their potential because the soil of the church is not fertilized with the teachings of Christ. Often this lack of maturity shows up in fights over absurd issues like the color of the walls or the temperature in the

sanctuary.⁴⁷ Church fights in particular are a major turnoff for younger generations.

Thom Rainer makes this point:

My son, Jess Rainer, and I did a massive research project interviewing 1,200 Millennials. We shared our research in a book called The Millennials. While the interviews were done by a large team, we did get to speak to many in this generation. And we did look at all the interview results. Keep in mind that this generation is the largest in the history of the United States, almost 80 million in number. They were born between 1980 and 2000. Kevin is one of those Millennials.

But this generation is rejecting Christianity in large numbers. They are also rejecting churches in large numbers, particularly divisive and fighting churches.⁴⁸

Until the Kingdom narrative of Christ defines the faith of TRCs, they will stomp on Christ's definition of virtue even as they do good things in his name. Younger generations are exiting the church because of the lack of Christ's "virtue" present in the church. Meaning they don't see the values of Christ operating in the Church. This is the point researcher David Kinnaman makes:

Most people in America, when they are exposed to the Christian faith, are not being transformed. They take one step into the door, and the journey ends. They are not being allowed, encouraged, or equipped to love or to think like Christ. Yet in many ways a focus on spiritual formation fits what a new generation is really seeking. Transformation is a process, a journey, not a one-time decision.⁴⁹

With the Kingdom narrative under our feet and the push of God's spirit we are ready to climb into our full humanity. We "have everything we need" and we "share in the divine nature". To take our first step (we won't go through all the steps) we add to our

⁴⁷ Thom Rainer, "25 Silly Things Church Members Fight Over," *The Christian Post*, November 28, 2015, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/25-silly-things-church-members-fight-over.html>.

⁴⁸ Thom Rainer, "The Millennials Are Rejecting Fighting Churches and Christians," ThomRainer.com, last modified October 21, 2013, <https://thomrainer.com/2013/10/the-millennials-are-rejecting-fighting-churches-and-christians/>.

⁴⁹ David Kinnaman, "Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... And Why It Matters," Goodreads, last modified March 7, 2019, <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1041281>.

faith the pursuit of virtue. Introspection is necessary in order to evaluate areas of growth. TRCs however are content with their traditions in their circular view of time, and therefore fail to create a church culture focused on the pursuit of excellence as a Christian virtue. This is not to say that individual believers are not interested in growth but that the TRC culture stunts this opportunity through rural values and false Christian narratives that reduce the faith to a one time decision or the performance of religious rituals. Richard Rohr makes this point: “Without transformation, you can assume you're at a high moral, spiritual level just because you call yourself Lutheran or Methodist or Catholic. I think my great disappointment as a priest has been to see how little actual spiritual curiosity there is in so many people.”⁵⁰ He goes on to say:

Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else. We often given a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self; and the result has been the spiritual disaster of "Christian" countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive as everybody else-and often more so, I'm afraid.⁵¹

The rich young ruler is a good example of someone who lacked "virtue", even though he followed all the rules of his cultural/religious conditioning:

As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, “DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.” And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” But at these words he was

⁵⁰ Richard Rohr, “Richard Rohr Quotes,” BrainyQuote, last modified March 7, 2019, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/richard_rohr_527276.

⁵¹ Richard Rohr, “Richard Rohr Quotes and Sayings - Page 1,” AZ Quotes, March 7, 2019, <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/477766>.

saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property (Mark 10: 17-27).

When Jesus invited him into the true "virtue", he turned him down because he invested his heart in his religious culture and personal wealth. The rich young ruler already owned what he considered virtuous and so he refused to take his first step into the virtue defined by Christ.

TRCs content with their way of life in the rural fishbowl struggle to embrace Jesus' definition of virtue and thus do not develop what they need to move up Peter's ladder of potentiality. The satisfaction they find in their customs, habits, and rituals is all the virtue they need.

Introspection is necessary to test where our lives are "conformed" to the pattern of this world. Jesus plodded the rich young ruler to look inside when he advised him to sell his property and follow him. He learned his heart was a slave to what possessed him.

Introspection is not absent from all TRCs. TRCs with a "heaven or hell" narrative add a certain form of introspection to their list of customs, habits, and rituals. This kind of introspection supports the "heaven or hell" narrative that gives the congregation an identity in rural areas. In these TRCs, introspection demands that people admit they are sinners. This is foundational to their definition of the gospel. After we "get saved" we continue this narrative by managing our sinfulness. This can produce a legalistic stream in "heaven-or-hell" churches. It becomes part of their specific culture within the culture of rurality they embrace.

This is not the narrative we find in the Kingdom's gospel. Introspection in this matrix moves us beyond "the gospel of sin management" and into a revolution called "the gospel of the Kingdom of God."⁵²

TRCs are not introspective in this sense because true introspection confronts our dependence upon customs, habits and rituals that pull our hearts out of Christ's narrative.

The Possession of Creation

For my rural community a big part of what they depend upon and enjoy is the natural world. This world has sustained them for generations and forms the context for the rhythms in their circular view of time.⁵³

As powerful as the natural world is for rural people this does not mean they are environmentalists in the strict sense of the word. While slightly over 50% of rural residents believe climate change has affected their communities, they may not connect it to man-made practices. In fact, only 8% of farmers in rural areas believe it has.⁵⁴ This study shows there is an almost equal number of rural residents who don't believe climate change is real.

But neither are they uncaring capitalists who rape the natural world. If your grandfather planted an oak tree next to church, and you have watched it grow to maturity your whole life; you have different reasons to resist the chainsaw than either an environmentalist or a capitalist.

⁵² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

⁵³ Jung and Agria, *Rural Congregational Studies*.

⁵⁴ Bryce Oates, "In Farm Country, Grappling With the Taboo of Talking about Climate Change," *Civil Eats*, last modified July 11, 2018, <https://civileats.com/2018/07/11/in-farm-country-grappling-with-the-taboo-of-talking-about-climate-change/>.

Rural people in my community see the local natural world around them as "theirs". They have worked the land, manage the forests and fished the waters for generations. And many who move here have done so to enjoy the beauty of the natural world.

In my rural "environment" people resist and resent those from "outside" the community altering how they relate to "their" environment. I had a conversation with a Conservation officer who described how hard it is to live in our area. People directed their issues with the DNR (Department of Natural Resources) in her direction. They blame the DNR for introducing threats to their quality of life.

Recently the DNR reintroduced wolves into our forests and many blame lackluster deer hunting seasons on this decision. Deer season is an important ritual enjoyed by locals and it brings lots of outside money into the area. One estimate is that deer hunting produces 2.3 billion dollars every year to the state of Michigan.⁵⁵

The presence of wind farms is another issue dividing my community. Those with wind farms on their property (or those who want wind farms on their property) see it as a way to make money from their property. Others see them as a detriment to the quality of life they enjoy. In their opinion they are noisy ugly contraptions contaminating the skyline. One side will argue that we need wind farms as an environmental issue, and other will argue that this is just corporate greed sponsored by Washington.

One wonders, however if the real issue is not environmental responsibility or corporate greed but life "here and now" in the rural fishbowl as each side fights for what they want.

⁵⁵ Brad Champion, "Hunting Has \$2.3 Billion Economic Impact On Michigan," Mitel, November 10, 2016, <https://www.mlive.com/news/2019/03/900-volunteers-needed-for-meijer-lpga-classic.html>.

People in the TRCs I pastored stopped attending church if someone with an opposing viewpoint on the Windfarm also attended church. Whatever happened to loving our enemies (Mat 5:43)? The reconciling power of the gospel had not penetrated their hearts because they live by a different "meaning-making-story."

As a pastor I sought to transcend both parties by talking about how Christ is "the thing" that is more important than any other "thing" and when we experience this together "no-thing" can separate us. Both accused me of taking sides with their enemy.

Lost in this fight inside the fishbowl is a discussion about a biblical ecology. As we have seen "what would Jesus want" is secondary to church-as-part-of-the life-we-enjoy-in-rural-fishbowl. It would also assume that Jesus has something to say.

For those with "heaven-or-hell" narrative the discussion is either mute because it will "all burn" when we get a new heaven and a new earth, or it is dangerous because they associate environmentalism with "loose-moral" liberalism. Tiensay back this up when he says:

But many evangelicals are skeptical of the idea of Christian environmentalists. "Outside" says that for some Christians, environmentalism "still carries the taint of loose-moral liberalism. There's a suspicion that Illyn's message could be the thin end of the wedge: tree-hugging today; gay marriage tomorrow. Lions may one day lie down with the lambs, but can the beef-eating, pro-life, Jesus-is-Lord soul savers lie down with the tofu-frying, pro-choice, proudly pagan flower children long enough to save the earth?"

Gary Phillips, a Methodist minister and environmentalist in Chatham County, N.C., says that non-Christian conservationists are also leery of evangelical environmentalists. "I try to get them to look at the full breadth of spirit as part of their work and overcome their resentments against the right-wing Christian church. Environmental people are scared to death of religious people."⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Eric Tiensay, "Christian Environmentalists Are Out to Save the Earth," *CBN.Com - The Christian Broadcasting Network*, last modified September 25, 2013, <http://www1.cbn.com/spirituallife/christian-environmentalists-are-out-to-save-the-earth>.

In the TRCs I pastored the discussion never ventured into the larger mission of Christ for the planet. The Bible calls us to steward the "goodness" of creation for the benefit of humanity (Genesis 1:26-28). This vision brings mission and maintenance together under Christ. We are neither strict environmentalists who make a god out of the natural world, nor capitalists who have no end-game in mind except the consumption of resources.

TRCs are not approaching life from the biblical narrative consummating in Christ. They are busy protecting and fighting about life in the rural fishbowl or limited to their inadequate theological narratives.

Theological Misgivings

And so, when one compares the values of TRCs with the biblical values consummating in Christ they are missing the boat and missing it in big ways. They serve the reign of rurality from within an inadequate biblical narrative from within the walls of a TRC. This matrix cannot make disciples who fulfill the Great Commission. This matrix may not produce fully formed followers of Christ but has done a lot of good within rural communities and provided a center for rural communities in the world "as it used to be".

But this world is under siege and the vandals are at the gates. As the walls crumble, the value of the TRC shrinks. Into these gaps the forces of secularization, urbanization, globalization, and technology (digital) and amenityism carry off younger generations into an urban captivity. The future of TRCs as "it-used-to-be" gets smaller as these trends get stronger.

We will examine the current approaches of TRCs as they seek to stem the tide.

CHAPTER FOUR

TESTING SOLUTIONS FOR A TRULY RURAL CHURCH

"Maybe it's time to let the old ways die
Maybe it's time to let the old ways die
It takes a lot to change a man Hell,
it takes a lot to try
Maybe it's time to let the old ways die

I'm glad I can't go back to where I came from
I'm glad those days are gone, gone for good
But if I could take spirits from my past and bring 'em here
You know I would
Know I would.¹"

¹ "Bradley Cooper, "Maybe It's Time Lyrics | Genius Lyrics," accessed January 4, 2019, <https://genius.com/Bradley-cooper-maybe-its-time-lyrics>.

TRC Approaches

What approaches are TRCs using to address the problem? My own observations of the churches in my area reveals no weekly youth groups. Some churches plan events for youth on a monthly or seasonal basis, but the churches are not reaching middle school through college-age young people. TRCs offer Sunday school and/or children's church but these are sparsely populated. Again, young people under the age of 30 are the exception and not the rule.

Based on my observations, those who filter back into the church (and they are small) appreciate the traditional rural mindset and/or theological narrative. They mirror the values of older generations in this respect. But they are a minority.

The bulk of the TRCs are doing "business as usual". In my judgment they avoid the seriousness of the problems they face in the next twenty years. They hope that younger generations will respond to the approaches that worked with older generations. So far there is little evidence that they will return.

Get Them Involved

One of the "tried and true" strategies TRCs use is to involve newcomers in the church's life as soon as possible. To use a fishing analogy "once you get them on the hook you want no slack in the line." Normally this means asking them to do something on Sunday mornings, but it might also mean serving on a committee. This gets them engaged and committed and makes it harder for them to leave. This has worked with older generations but seems to have the opposite effect with most Gen-X and Millennials. Millennials look for inclusion and hunger for community, but they are not interested in

serving the institution.² Young parents strapped with activities and interests outside of the church don't see the need to serve on a committee.

This strategy backfires when younger generations experience someone (given a job in the church to "make them stick") who is a horrible teacher or a lousy piano player just because the TRC gave them that role. While everyone "gets to play" in small rural churches this often means not doing due diligence in terms of their ability or evidence of Christian character (or even being converted at all).

This can make it hard for the next pastor saddled with the wrong people in the wrong positions.

Be More Relevant

Some churches try to be more "relevant." "Maybe if we added praise music in the service then they would come?" We tried this in two of the churches and it did not produce. A few Boomers already in church liked the music but younger generations did not come to church because we added new music. Admittedly, we did not do it well and there was tension in the air coming from older generations. All this screamed inauthenticity. It had no effect on those outside the church. Rachel Held Evans describes the frustration of getting churches to embrace the deep problems they create for younger generations:

Despite having one foot in Generation X, I tend to identify most strongly with the attitudes and the ethos of the millennial generation, and because of this, I'm often asked to speak to my fellow evangelical leaders about why millennials are leaving the church.

² Randall Reed, "Millennials and the Problem of Institution" (paper presented at Emerging Church and Religion Research Seminar AAR, San Antonio, TX, 2016).

Armed with the **latest surveys**, along with personal testimonies from friends and readers, I explain how young adults perceive evangelical Christianity to be too political, too exclusive, old-fashioned, unconcerned with social justice and hostile to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

I point to research that shows young evangelicals often feel they have to choose between their intellectual integrity and their faith, between science and Christianity, between compassion and holiness.

I talk about how the evangelical obsession with sex can make Christian living seem like little more than sticking to a list of rules, and how millennials long for faith communities in which they are safe asking tough questions and wrestling with doubt.

Invariably, after I've finished my presentation and opened the floor to questions, a pastor raises his hand and says, "So what you're saying is we need hipper worship bands. ..."

And I proceed to bang my head against the podium.

Time and again, the assumption among Christian leaders, and evangelical leaders in particular, is that the key to drawing twenty-somethings back to church is simply to make a few style updates - edgier music, more casual services, a coffee shop in the fellowship hall, a pastor who wears skinny jeans, an updated Web site that includes online giving.

But here's the thing: Having been advertised to our whole lives, we millennials have highly sensitive BS meters, and we're not easily impressed with consumerism or performances.

In fact, I would argue that church-as-performance is just one more thing driving us away from the church, and evangelicalism in particular.³

When I pastored we also tried being "relevant" to younger generations by providing events and programs outside of the church. My wife worked hard creating events and small groups to build relationships with younger families in the area. In this sense, she was successful. She got to know them and helped their families on various levels, but this did not translate into church attendance. They ended up appreciating us, but the church turned them off.

Being "more relevant" did not work in our case. Rachel Held Evans summarizes the problem this way: "What Millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance."⁴

³ Rachel Held Evans, "Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church," *Q Articles*, accessed January 9, 2019, <http://qideas.org/articles/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/>.

Indoctrination

Others, like Franklin Graham and Child Evangelism Fellowship don't see the church as the problem but the culture.⁵ The culture is the enemy of the truth that corrupts our young people. They go to college and lose their faith, or they fall into the sins of this world. Several of our fundamentalist churches championed this message. I had these folks in 3 of my churches.

It is difficult however to indoctrinate young people that aren't there to begin with. Fundamentalist opinions on evolution, women's equality, LBGQT, and the literal, inerrant reading of the bible seem more and more untenable with each passing year. Younger generations have access to so much credible information that punches holes in this indoctrination.

In fact, evidence suggests that the more churches attempt to indoctrinate young people the more it pushes them away. Barna Research comes to this conclusion:

A few of the defining characteristics of today's teens and young adults are their unprecedented access to ideas and worldviews as well as their prodigious consumption of popular culture. As Christians, they express the desire for their faith in Christ to connect to the world they live in. However, much of their experience of Christianity feels stifling, fear-based and risk-averse. One-quarter of 18- to 29-year-olds said "Christians demonize everything outside of the church" (23% indicated this "completely" or "mostly" describes their experience). Other perceptions in this category include "church ignoring the problems of the real world" (22%) and "my church is too concerned that movies, music, and video games are harmful" (18%)."⁶

⁴ Antonia Blumberg, "A Millennial's Open Letter to Faith Leaders," *HuffPost*, accessed January 5, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/antonia-blumberg/millennial-letter-faith-leaders_b_5868294.html.

⁵ J.A. Cuevas, "A Reflection On Belief," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 11, no. 3 (2013): 338-361, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/276908414_THE_PSYCHOLOGICAL_PROCESSES_AND_CONSEQUENCES_OF_FUNDAMENTALIST_INDOCTRINATION.

⁶ Barna Group, "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," accessed January 5, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

The same study revealed this:

One of the reasons young adults feel disconnected from church or from faith is the tension they feel between Christianity and science. The most common of the perceptions in this arena is "Christians are too confident they know all the answers" (35%). Three out of ten young adults with a Christian background feel that "churches are out of step with the scientific world we live in" (29%). Another one-quarter embrace the perception that "Christianity is anti-science" (25%). And nearly the same proportion (23%) said they have "been turned off by the creation-versus-evolution debate." Furthermore, the research shows that many science-minded young Christians are struggling to find ways of staying faithful to their beliefs and to their professional calling in science-related industries.⁷

Multisites

Another proposed solution from outside the rural community is the multisite movement. Urban, suburban and larger churches provide a digital preacher and other outside resources for struggling rural churches.

Shannon O'Dell wrote a book in 2010 about the application of multisite churches in a rural context.⁸ This approach was successful in multiplying churches in rural areas. He advocates the use of technology, and a church structure that sets the Pastor free to implement his vision. According to his website:

Brand New Church has grown from 31 to 2000 members with 8 campuses, 2 satellite house churches, 4 start-up/initiating remotes, and an online campus under Shannon's leadership. The Southern Baptist-affiliated church has reported the 2nd most baptisms in the Arkansas convention in previous years. Today there are a growing number of multisite churches in rural areas.

Another big surprise of the survey was how many churches (47%) have a campus in a small town or rural area. A Montana church opened its first multisite location in a rural location instead of in a larger city. A Texas congregation is

⁷ Barna Group, "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," accessed January 5, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

⁸ Shannon O'Dell, *Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking All the Rurals* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 2010).

reaching into multiple small towns, because there aren't any large cities within a three-hour drive. A North Carolina multisite leader notes: 'We are reaching people in smaller markets and rural areas outside large cities.'⁹

According to Stetzer the multisite is not a fad:

In the United States alone, 5 million people worshipped at one of 8,000 multisite churches last weekend.

- That's 9% of all Protestant churchgoers and 3% of all Protestant churches, respectively.
- If multisite churches were a Protestant denomination, they'd be the fourth largest.¹⁰

The multisite model offers several advantages for struggling rural churches: "As we look ahead, we believe that the multisite church is here to stay. In some cases, it will enable strong and culturally adaptive churches to pick up closed church properties and reopen them with a renewed ministry-- in some cases preventing a community from losing its last viable house of worship."¹¹

This model may "pick up the pieces" as TRCs crumble and offer a church experience for younger generations interested in the church not controlled by the world "as it used to be" (pre-digital). The Pastor of the multisite also fits our cultures love affair with celebrity.¹² But celebrity also has it downside:

Multi-site churches are the current trend in evangelicalism. The great question is, will they be able to make a generational transition? Will they be able to hold together when the main preaching pastor--who is usually in himself the center of gravity for the whole enterprise--goes off the scene? And how much institutional and spiritual fall-out will occur when he does? The only examples of "multi-site

⁹ Dave Travis, "10 Trends of the Multisite Church Movement," Aspen Group, accessed January 6, 2019, <https://www.aspengroup.com/blog/10-trends-of-the-multisite-church-movement>.

¹⁰ Ed Stetzer, "Multisite Churches Are Here, and Here, and Here to Stay," The Exchange, February 2014, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/multisite-churches-are-here-to-stay.html>.

¹¹ Stetzer, *Multisite Churches*.

¹² Donna Rockwell, "Celebrity Worship And The American Mind," Huffington Post, January 9, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/donna-rockwell-psyd/celebrity-worship-and-the_b_13794782.html.

churches" that have survived trans-generationally are those which invest a particular office with theological significance, as in, "The man who holds this office is the Successor of Peter, the Vicar of Christ on Earth, the Supreme Pontiff of the Church, and you owe him your allegiance regardless of whether or not you like his preaching." Whether our own evangelical brand of "multi-site churches" can make this transition without that kind of absolute claim seems unlikely".¹³

But there may be more downsides of the multisite approach in rural areas. This model baptizes an urban corporate mindset with digital technology and an evangelical narrative and justifies it with the "numbers game" built into much of Evangelical Christianity.¹⁴ This is the latest form of what Leonard Sweet calls APC Christianity. It is attractional, propositional, and colonial as opposed to the Christological model of missional, relational and incarnational. In her review of Sweet's book, *So Beautiful*, Pat Hannon writes:

In *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, Leonard Sweet enters the missional Church discussion. While numerous authors are calling for a dechurching of Christianity, Sweet rather suggests that God is in the process of "re-Christianizing the church." This calls for a fundamental shift in the understanding and practice of church, from attractional, propositional, and colonial (APC) to missional, relational, and incarnational (MRI).

The shift from APC church to MRI church is a change from merely growing larger churches to joining in the mission of God, no matter the size of our church. Attractional church creates members; missional church creates missionaries. Propositional church creates believers; relational church creates disciples. Colonial church creates consumers; incarnational church creates world changers.¹⁵

We will go into greater detail on MRI church later in this paper.

¹³ Jonathan Leeman, "Twenty-Two Problems with Multi-Site Churches," 9Marks, accessed January 6, 2019, <https://www.9marks.org/article/twenty-two-problems-with-multi-site-churches/>.

¹⁴ Justin Taylor, "Packer: Too Many Churches in North America Are Playing the Number Game," *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed January 6, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/packer-too-many-churches-in-north-america-are-playing-the-number-game/>.

¹⁵ Pat Hannon, "Book Review: *So Beautiful* by Leonard Sweet," *Embrace the God Life*, August 12, 2009, <http://embracethegodlife.com/book-review-so-beautiful-by-leonard-sweet/>.

Multisites may reflect the most current model of what some call the
McDonaldization of the Church:

The issue of power and control is at the heart of all the other factors that are at work in a McDonaldized style of being. Numbers become all-important to church leaders, especially in the American context where churches are self-consciously competing with one another for market share...¹⁶

The digital aspects of multisite and the formation of true partnerships by themselves show great potential but the multisite model may be just more of the same failing American-style Christendom. TRCs built their churches on rural values steeped in Christendom. And multisites build their congregations on urban/corporate values steeped in Christendom. Neither of these mediums can carry the message of Christ in its fulness because Christendom itself is a false biblical narrative. As Leonard Sweet says:

The crisis of the church today has little to do with dwindling numbers, aging congregations, outdated facilities, financial crises, and lace-by-day/leather-by-night priests. Today's church crisis stems from one thing: Jesus Deficit Disorder. The church's narrative is biblically, theologically, and spiritually bankrupt. The church has been busy telling stories other than God's story, dreaming other dreams than God's dream as revealed by Jesus.¹⁷

Just Wait

TRCs have no real strategy for addressing the millennial problem. Most of them are counting on the pattern of young families coming back to church while they continue with "business-as-usual". As we have seen, it is not in their nature to be proactive or looking ahead.

¹⁶ Slow Church, "Book Recommendation: The McDonaldization of the Church," *Slow Church*, October 4, 2011, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/slowchurch/2011/10/04/book-recommendation-the-mcdonaldization-of-the-church/>.

¹⁷ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 22.

Revivalism

The bulk of the TRCs are the product of the revivals that swept this nation in the 1800s. Missionary societies and methodist circuit riders worked to gather and provide pastors for the fruit of these revivals into congregations. But the word "revival" assumes a neglected standard that people accepted as true:

In early America, around the year 1700, Baptists boasted 24 churches. After revival swept the land, Baptists became the largest denomination on the continent.

Now, nearly a century later, some Baptist historians are spelling the end of revivalism. Revivalism is waning because a large part of our society is no longer Christian. In fact, nearly 80% of people ages 18 to 35 have never stepped foot in a church. What's there to revive when people have never even heard the Gospel in the first place?¹⁸

Old style revivalism is gasping for air. Perhaps a new style will emerge from the ashes of the world "as-it-used-to-be". But will this "awakening" "revive" the heritage of evangelicalism? John B. Carpenter makes the case that after each historical awakening an apostasy follows that further weakens the evangelical heritage: "... evangelicalism appears to be spiraling downwards. Rather than growing stronger through awakenings, it appears that evangelicalism in America experiences a falling away around the turn of each century. Each falling away, though met by an awakening, leaves evangelicalism weaker than before."¹⁹

Like a great boxing match, evangelicals rally and land a few punches on the jaw of secularization, but as the rounds go on, the punches lose their power as the enemy

¹⁸ Baptist Spirituality, "The Death of Revivalism in Baptist Life? (Part 2)," Baptist Spirituality, January 14, 2011, <https://baptistspirituality.org/2011/01/14/the-death-of-revivalism-in-baptist-life-part-2/>.

¹⁹ John Carpenter, "The Fourth Great Awakening or Apostasy: Is American Evangelicalism Cycling Upwards or Spiraling Downwards?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 4 (December 2011), https://www.etsjets.org/JETS/44_4.

grows stronger. Revivalism rooted in the world "as-it-used-to-be" does not appear to offer a realistic solution for TRCs.

TRC Scenarios

Assuming these trends makes the future of the TRCs untenable and that the current approaches rooted in the world "as-it-used-to-be" do not address the problem how might things look with the demise of TRCs?

While predicting the future is always an uncertain enterprise, it seems likely that we will see one or two congregations within the circle of TRCs consolidate the available churchgoers from those congregations that have closed their doors.

Another likely scenario is the emergence of "family chapels". Family chapels are small, independent churches dominated by one or two families who have a long history, few expenses and a strong sense of ownership for their little church. It doesn't take much new blood to keep them afloat. Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon explain:

Indeed, the Family Chapel church is not going anywhere. There are untold thousands of these small congregations across the United States. The majority of these churches are rural, often closing for lack of population. But there are so many of them to begin with, and they may exist in the city as easily as in the country. With so many churches shrinking in size, some larger churches may morph into "family chapels.

Just when it looks as if they have too few people to continue, a couple of families who left another church in some sort of frustration will find them and join, putting a little church back in the game. Because they tend to be low-budget ventures, it doesn't take a lot to renew them.²⁰

The third scenario that is already occurring in rural areas is the multisite church.

Eddie Gibbs says this:

²⁰ Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon, *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2016), 1859-66.

A **multisite church** is one church that meets at multiple locations. Today's approach ranges from transmitting a sermon by satellite to multiple locations, to creating a number of worship opportunities within the same congregation at multiple times and sites.

According to Todd Rhoades of Monday Morning Insight, an October 2005 US multisite church conference released statistics regarding growth in the number of churches in the United States operating as multisite:

- In 1990, there were 10 multisite churches.
- In 1998, that number had expanded to about 100.
- In late 2005, there were more than 1,500 multisite churches in the United States.[1]
- In mid-2008, there are an estimated 2,000 multisite churches across the US. Multisite church pioneer Jim Tomberlin of MultiSite Solutions predicts that every major city and large community in America will have many multi-campus churches by 2010.
- By August 2012, there are more than 5,000 multisite churches in North America.²¹

This list includes rural churches.

There are no "dinner church" or "house church" models operating in our community.

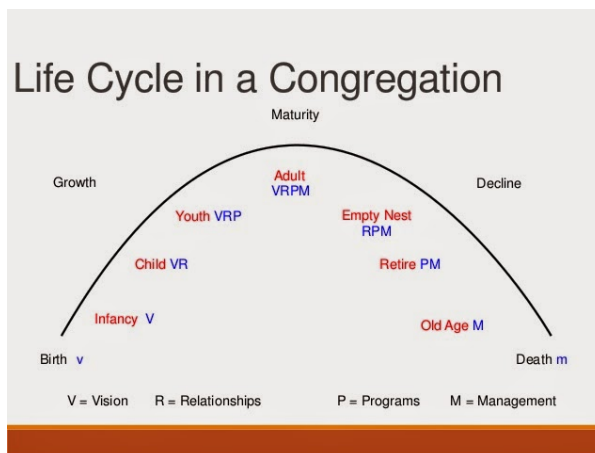
A Good Death

And so rather than trying to keep the TRCs afloat in a sea of change beyond their control, capacity or willingness to change, why not allow these churches the dignity of having a good death? Is this a fight worth having?

The bulk of the TRCs in my area are at the end of their life cycle. The abundance of gray hair dominating the pews makes this clear. They gather and talk about their grandchildren and the aches and pains of being old. Their stage of life mirrors the life cycle of the church.²²

²¹ Eddie Gibbs, *Churchmorph: How Megatrends Are Reshaping Christian Communities*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 169.

²² Sherry Parker-Lewis, "Life Cycle of the Church," Brighten First Updates, April 21, 2015, <http://brightonfume.blogspot.com/2015/04/life-cycle-of-church.html>.



On this chart the bulk of the people in the TRC congregations in my area are in the last third of life. This should not surprise us when the largest segment of the population in my area are those over the age of 65.²³ Most of them are in the retired, old age categories on this chart.

And so, we need to ask why? Why seek to reverse the tide of something deficient in the objectives of Christ to begin with?

Maybe the resurrection of an authentic Christianity follows the death of Christendom? Perhaps Christendom has reached the end of its life cycle and Christ has something better?

Author and scholar Phyllis Tickle described this new reformation as “post-denominational.” Old structures will either disappear or adapt to changing times. “The Great Emergence that Christianity is undergoing is a massive upheaval as part of a pattern that occurs every 500 years, in which old ideas are rejected and new ones emerge.”²⁴

²³ “Quickfacts: Schoolcraft County, Michigan,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed November 28, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/schoolcraftcountymichigan/PST045216>.

²⁴ Karen Hilfman Millson, “Interview with Phyllis Tickle,” *UCObserver*, December 2012, https://www.ucobserver.org/interviews/2012/12/interview_phyllis_tickle/.

She is not alone in her assessment that Christianity is undergoing a massive reformation in our day. Brian McLaren describes it as a great spiritual migration away from how things used to be: "They invite us on a great spiritual migration--not out of our religions, but out of our cages and ruts, not as jaded ex-members, but as hopeful pilgrims moving forward in the journey of faith."²⁵

There comes a point with end-of-life issues whether it is worth continuing the fight. How much would the fight for survival harm the quality of life given the time they have left? Sometimes it makes more sense to let nature take its course.

The majority of the TRCs lack the will to make this fight and they don't have the leadership they would need to transition into the world "as-it-is-becoming". TRCs like things the way they are. One of my big mistakes as a naïve pastor was that they would want "the new wine" if given the chance to sample it. They did not. They preferred keeping things the way they had always been.

Would it not be better to shake the dust off one's feet and build from scratch a community of faith open to learning and living the true story of Christ not obscured by the rubble of Christendom?

While people debate about how to keep the churches of Christendom alive, they often assume this is the only option. What if it is time for them to die? What is something better could take its place? When you reach the end of the life cycle, you need a chaplain. This is the pastor that TRCs dominated by older generations are seeking. Someone who will be with them as they journey around the circle of time. This is a noble calling from God to love people where they are at and not where we think they should be. Yes, the

²⁵ Brian D McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (New York: The Crown Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2016), 3.

theology and the narrative they have lived by is less than biblical but we can still love them and they can still love in the best way they know how. Brad Roth believes we need to know how to help rural churches die: “Yet I’m convinced that in order to live fully and vibrantly in the rural church, we must also learn to face congregational death faithfully, hopefully, and lovingly. In order to tend the living promise of the rural church, we also must learn to find meaning in death. In order to learn to live, we must learn to die.”²⁶

²⁶ Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), 2623.

CHAPTER FIVE:
DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR THE TRULY RURAL CHURCH

Till with sound of trumpet,
Far, far off the day-break call--hark!
how loud and clear I hear it wind;
Swift! to the head of the army!--swift!
spring to your places, Pioneers! O pioneers.¹

¹ Walt Whitman, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" The Art of Manliness, accessed January 7, 2019, <https://www.artofmanliness.com/pioneers-o-pioneers-walt-whitman/>.

A Kingdom Heartbeat

There is a new Christian struggling to emerge from within the culturally defined womb of Christendom:

But in the end you cannot serve two masters, Theos and Elohim, the god of the Greco-Roman philosophers and Caesars and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the violent god of profit proclaimed by the empire and the compassionate God of justice proclaimed by the prophets. You can try to hybridize them and compromise them for centuries, but like oil and water they eventually separate and prove incompatible. They refuse to alloy. They produce irreconcilable narratives and create different worlds.²

There is a host of voices for this new form of Christianity. Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, "The Liturgists", Rachel Held Evans and a host of others represent those on the cusp of this movement.³ They are seeking new categories for defining the faith more congruent with the teachings and example of Jesus. A massive deconstruction is underway for those raised in the Church.⁴

A new matrix based not on rural-American Christendom but on the Kingdom of God present within a rural American context will need to emerge. Not to maintain the survival of the current TRC's in my area, but to birth a better way of making disciples in the world "as-it- is becoming."

There have been two visions (narratives) of America struggling for dominance. Two founding fathers that fought for their visions of American greatness. Thomas

² "A New Kind of Christianity Quotes," Goodreads, accessed January 10, 2019, <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/6908366-a-new-kind-of-christianity-ten-questions-that-are-transforming-the-fait>.

³ Josiah Hesse, "'Exvangelicals': Why More Religious People Are Rejecting the Evangelical Label," *The Guardian*, November 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/03/evangelical-christians-religion-politics-trump>.

⁴ Hesse.

Jefferson championed a rural agrarian view of America with little commerce and Alexander Hamilton an urban commercial view of America.⁵ The rural view represents a conservative mindset reflected in the Republican party of today and the Urban the progressive or liberal mindset represented by today's Democratic party: "Jefferson famously idealized the virtue of the 'yeoman farmer' as the backbone of American democracy. Jefferson wrote in his Notes on the State of Virginia that 'those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people.' That Jeffersonian agrarian ideal is still out there."⁶

But the Hamilton view of urban centers of commerce is where things have gone (the rise of the suburbs is a compromise on these two visions). But these founding fathers for the Christian should take a back seat to the Father of Christ. The Christian has a Father founded by Jesus. We find the space of the Father's blessing in the Kingdom of God. Christ's vision transcends all other ways of living in this world. All discipleship must be about this vision or it misses the point. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), is not a narrative of who is in and who is out, "when we all get to heaven". In the context of this verse, Jesus describes his "way" of life with the Father and what it means for his disciples to follow his example. It is a path where we find our true humanity. Jesus is the incarnation of this "way" of being in the world: "If you have seen me you have seen the Father" (John 14:9).

⁵ National Humanities Center, "Hamilton's America-Jefferson's America | An AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Seminar," *National Humanities Center*, accessed January 6, 2019, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminars/revolution/hamiltonjefferson/index.htm>.

⁶ Brad Roth, 150-152.

And so, the rural church in my area needs a model that can fulfill the Great Commission by making disciples of Christ. What might this model not based on rurality or Christendom look like? How can we make culturally sensitive Christians and not just culturally defined Christians? This new model will need an operating system capable of producing this fruit.

The Operating System

What kind of rural church matrix would produce this kind of Christian? Leonard Sweet identifies three components that comprise the "operating system" of the true Church. The three components are the missional, the relational, and the incarnational (MRI):⁷

- Missional - Mission is not an activity of the church but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God, Jesus is a missionary Messiah, and the Spirit is a missionary Spirit. Missions is the family business. God doesn't so much have a singular "plan" for your life as God has made you for a mission and has a design whereby you can accomplish who you were born to be. God doesn't just have an agenda for you to do; God has a mission for you to live.⁸
- Relational - The meaning of Christianity does not come from allegiance to complex theological doctrines but a passionate love for a way of living in the world that revolves around following Jesus, who taught that love, is what makes life a success: not wealth or health or anything else. Only love.⁹
- Incarnational - God wants to get under the skin of God's creatures, which is why Christianity is a religion "always in search of a body," working for God's wisdom to be "fleshed," God's holiness "housed" in bone and blood. The doctrine of the incarnation reveals a God who is a sucker for skin ... for me and for you, and for me and for you not having to struggle free of

⁷ Sweet, *So Beautiful*.

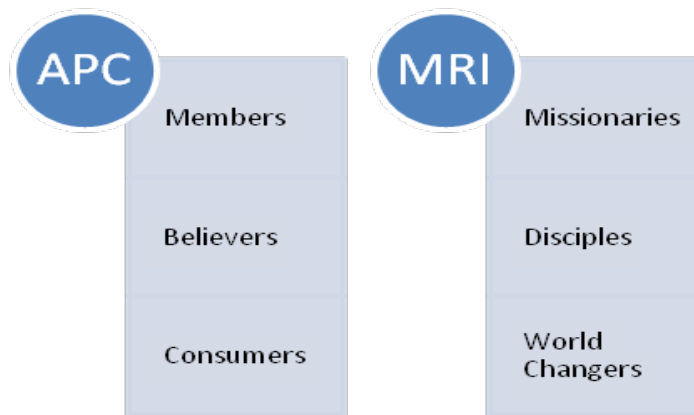
⁸ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 55.

⁹ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 110.

our own skin or put on second skins of pious garb and purification rituals.¹⁰

He describes the current church as APC meaning attractional (as opposed to missional), propositional (as opposed to relational), and colonial (as opposed to incarnational):¹¹ "Just as a pastor can falsify Christ to a congregation, so can a church falsify Christ to the world. APC Christianity falsifies both Christ and the church to the world."¹²

Anyone who has visited an urban or suburban church has sat under an APC operating system. The goal has been to get as many as possible in the church (attractional) where they can learn the right truths (propositional) and behave like proper Christians (colonial). The following chart compares the differences.¹³



¹⁰ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 163.

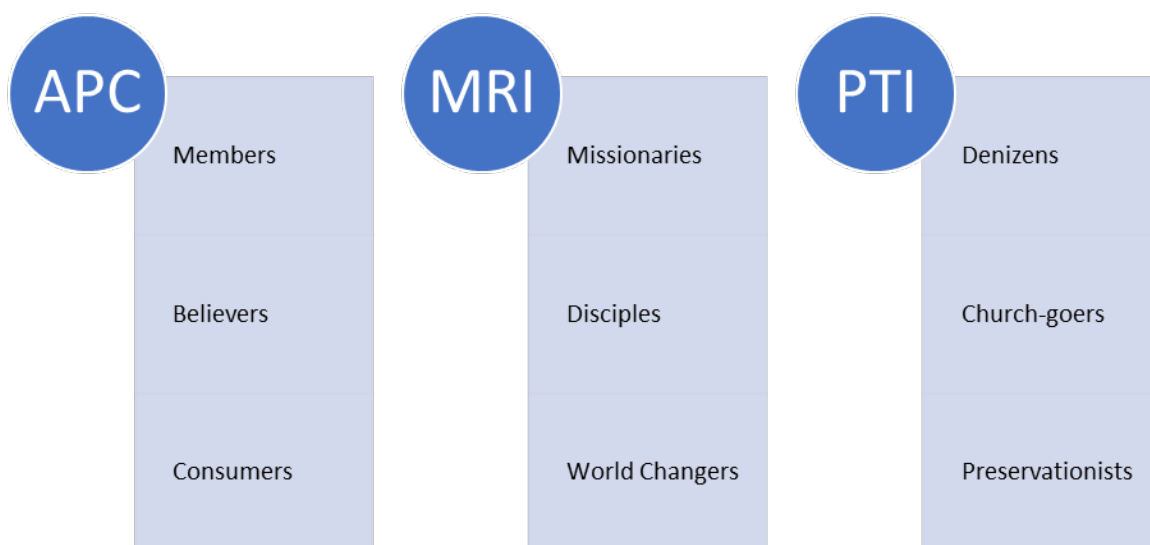
¹¹ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 18.

¹² Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 19.

¹³ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 19.

I would argue that TRCs are not APC or MRI but something else. The APC is an urban and suburban operating system for doing church. In an urban setting, with a linear concept of time and expanding resources, growing bigger is the sign of success. APC churches love the numbers game.

This urban mindset however is foreign to TRCs. They are not APC but PTI. They exist to PRESERVE the TRADITIONS so they can IDOLIZE their way of life. If we to add a third component to the chart it would like this:



God works within the flawed systems of APC and PTI and the occasional good fruit drops from these trees. There are sincere people in TRCs who want to grow in Christ just as there are in APC churches. But these systems of APC and PTI do not optimize their potential to grow. Willow Creek Community Church one of the original megachurches in this country, built its life around the APC model with a “seeker-

sensitive” approach.¹⁴ But when it did a study of how many were growing in Christ in active discipleship the results were dismal. And it wasn’t just their church: “To those who think Reveal is just a study of Willow, you need to listen more carefully. They have now studied — get this — more than 230 churches, more than 75,000 surveys, and studied churches all across the map. This doesn’t reveal just what is going on at Willow but what is going on all around the USA.”¹⁵

Both of these operating systems are not built to make disciples. APCs increase the number of believers as the sign of success and PTIs the maintenance of denizens (a person who regularly frequents a place; habitue¹⁶) who value the traditions. These operating systems are not designed to open the software of discipleship. Bill Hybels the founder and pastor of Willow Creek confessed that people had become too dependent upon the church because the church had not equipped them with the tools for spiritual growth. Most of the fruit produced by TRCs are "denizens" (a person who regularly frequents a place; habitue).¹⁷ Once they form this habit these TRC "denizens" will resist changes that threaten what they expect to expect to experience in their circular experience of time. Spiritual growth takes a backseat to keeping the denizens ‘coming back’ to church so that the church remains viable.

The bulk of the fruit produced by these systems (APC and PTI) bruises our capacity to become true disciples of Christ and produces rotten forms of Christianity.

¹⁴ Michael S Hamilton, “Willow Creek's Place in History,” *Christianity Today*, November 13, 2000, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/november13/5.62.html>.

¹⁵ Scot McKnight, “Willow’s Reveal Study,” *Jesus Creed*, December 10, 2007, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2007/12/10/willows-reveal-study/>.

¹⁶ Dictionary.com, “The Definition of Denizen,” *Dictionary.Com*, accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/denizen>.

¹⁷ Dictionary.com, “The Definition of Denizen.”

Sweet argues that: "First, in a system that isn't as healthy as it should or could be, the body is more susceptible to toxins, light fights, jealousies, doctrinal disputes, bad attitudes, etc. The APC is not that healthy of a system, so the APC life and church get infected more easily, require high maintenance, and demand constant APC injections to keep it going."¹⁸ PTI like APC is not healthy and is therefore infected with many of the same issues as APC.

These systems are a major turnoff for younger generations who see the fruit that contradicts what they sense about Jesus.

The mission of TRCs is maintenance.(preservation). This connects back to their circular view of time. They live to re-enjoy what they enjoy. For this to happen they need to preserve traditions. Those who threaten these traditions will find themselves on the outside looking in. While TRCs are friendly and "relational", it is a clique or clubbish mentality. TRCs have a stunted form of relationality. They exist to protect the traditions that keep the "denizens" of the church happy. Keeping these "denizens" happy preserves the institution that houses what they value. They are friendly toward those who respect the rules inside the fishbowl. In this sense TRCs are not relational in the deeper sense of Gospel inclusiveness.

Finally, TRCs are not incarnational in the sense of bringing the meat of Christ into their culture. Rather, they idolize the culture and church adds to this experience.

What happens outside the church in another community is a secondary concern for TRCs. Their primary mission is the preservation of the church. TRC's are not immune from the influences of APC (pastors may seek to implement this operating system) nor

¹⁸ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 19.

are they insensitive to MRI, but when the rubber hits the road and the need for harmony in the fishbowl surfaces, they fall back to what they value, PTI.

Both PTI and APC are shrinking forms of culturally embedded forms of Christendom:

For most of US history, to be American was to be "Christian." National identity was conflated with religious identity in a way that produced a distorted form of Christianity, mostly about family values, Golden Rule moralism, and good citizenship. The God of this "Christianity" was first and foremost a nice guy who rewarded moral living by sanctifying the American dream: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (i.e., a substantial 401(k), a three-car garage, and as many Instagram followers as possible). This form of Christianity--prominent in twenty-first-century America--has been aptly labeled "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," a faith defined by a distant, "cosmic ATM" God who only cares that we are nice to one another and feel good about ourselves.¹⁹

Perhaps the best metaphor for TRCs is the fishbowl. If you live in a fishbowl, then this is all you have. The rural perspective on life comes from their isolation and lack of opportunity. The overwhelming majority of the books I have read on the small rural congregation give one standard piece of advice for pastors... 'Learn to work within the system', ²⁰ But what if that system is fatally flawed? What if younger generations cannot breathe inside the TRC fishbowl?

I observed PTI at work in all three churches I pastored:

- One church collected tens of thousands of dollars for a rainy-day fund designated to keep the Church from closing. This same church got 50% of its yearly budget through a fundraiser that targeted people outside their

¹⁹ "The Dying Away of Cultural Christianity," Crossway, accessed January 7, 2019, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-dying-away-of-cultural-christianity/>.

²⁰ Roth, 40-41.

fellowship. It reduced by 50% the amount of money the "denizens" provided to maintain the church.

- The second church closed down their benevolence fund and food pantry to pay off a building project.
- And the third church refused to start a small benevolence fund because they feared people in the church would cut back on their regular offerings.

Younger generations want their time and money to go toward a worthwhile cause. Institutions invested only in themselves are a major turnoff.²¹ The body of Christ in a rural context will need a new plausibility structure, (narrative) where our love for Christ can grow stronger than any other love. Stronger than culture, stronger than country, stronger than the good life in a country setting, stronger than the rural fishbowl: "Large crowds were now traveling with Jesus and he turned and said to them. 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters—yes even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be my disciple'" (Luke 14:26).

The core of this new plausibility structure is love for Christ as the world's messiah. Jesus goes to the core of our previous plausibility structure when he identifies the family system as the basis of our identity in this world. Our new identity as "Abba's" children allows us to progressively "get outside" of our conditioning in this world. Armed with a love for Christ as the world's messiah, we can then "eat the meat and spit out the bones" of our conditioning in this world. This is the process of becoming a disciple of Christ and is the work of the Holy Spirit.

²¹ Foundation Center, "Millennials Support Causes, Not Institutions, Survey Finds," *Philanthropy News Digest (PND)*, accessed January 7, 2019, <http://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/millennials-support-causes-not-institutions-survey-finds>.

The Plausibility Structure

Both APC and PTI have not built their systems around the Kingdom of God as their "plausibility structure". Jesus deconstructed the "plausibility structures" of his day to build the Kingdom of God. He may be doing the same thing in our day. Steiner utilizes a lecture by N.T. Wright to point out how radical the Kingdom of God should be for the follower of Christ.

As (N.T.) Wright sees it, the problem of misunderstanding Jesus' life is not limited to one sect or denomination. Orthodox theologians focus on Jesus' divinity to combat liberal theology, and liberal theologians focus on Jesus' humanity to combat orthodox theology; meanwhile, neither grasp the larger narrative. The creeds themselves fail to address it.

More than providing a moral example or a means of salvation, Wright argued, Jesus' earthly life was nothing less than the reestablishment of God's kingship over the earth. Unlike the empire of Caesar or the kingdom of Herod, Wright said, God's kingdom was not established through force.

“When God wants to take his power and reign, putting the world to rights as he'd always promised, he doesn't send in the tanks. He sends in the meek, the broken-hearted, the crushed in spirit.

The Christian's central purpose, therefore, is not to become personally saved but instead to be laborers in the construction of that kingdom until God finally completes it. And the deepest purpose of the Christian church is not to pursue converts but to pursue justice.”²²

The Gospels and Acts shows Jesus bankrupting the religious systems of his day to create space for the gospel of the Kingdom:²³ “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Luke 1:14).

Because of their conditioning, his followers are slow to adopt this new "plausibility structure." Their vision of a conquering political and military messiah must

²² Andrew Steiner, "N.T. Wright's Lecture on Jesus and Kingdom Concludes Calvin January Series," The Rapidian, accessed January 7, 2019, <http://therapidian.org/nt-wrights-lecture-jesus-and-kingdom-concludes-calvin-january-series>.

²³ Myers.

give way to a messiah who conquers by hanging on a cross and being raised from the dead. To be his followers means to live by the same set of principles:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.'" (Mark 8:31-35)

The Kingdom of God incarnates itself by following King Jesus. Jesus built the Kingdom with a missional, relational and incarnational²⁴ operating system. The "body of Christ" can give flesh to the Kingdom of God by "living" his example.

A necessary first step for the Kingdom of God to take on flesh in my community is the deconstruction of the TRC perspective based in American Christendom and a rural culture. How can this happen?

Leadership

Is a new model for church possible in a rural culture like mine? Can this new model maximize the opportunities to make disciples? In his book, "The Social Construction of Reality, sociologist Peter Berger describes what it takes to move a group of people into a new matrix of reality. Here is their recipe for transformation:

A recipe for successful alternation has to include both social and conceptual conditions, the social, of course, serving as the matrix of the conceptual. The most important social condition is the availability of an effective plausibility structure, that is, a social base serving as the "laboratory" of transformation. This plausibility structure will be mediated to the individual by means of significant

²⁴ Sweet, *So Beautiful*.

others, with whom he must establish strongly affective identification. No radical transformation of subjective reality (including, of course, identity) is possible without such identification, which inevitably replicates childhood experiences of emotional dependency on significant others.²⁵

Real growth is not propositional but relational. Jesus formed relationships with a small group of disciples both men and women.²⁶ In this relational context, and with a great deal of 3 steps forward and two steps back, he moved them away from a transactional Jewish view of reality, to life found in the grace of God. One example of this pattern is found in the context of the Lord's prayer:.

And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew: 6:5-6).

In Matthew 6, Jesus re-frames the God we sing to through prayer. Jesus moves his Jewish disciples out of an "American Idol" performance of piety as the basis of their reward. The Jews were looking to gather more reward by performing religious actions. Jesus says their only reward is with their audience but not with God.

A prayer that harmonizes with God must be true to God's deepest nature. The religions of Judaism and Christianity have a transactional god where we feed God the meat of his expectations. For the Jews, this was the Law and the oral traditions. For Christians, setting aside a "quiet time" every day, or engaging in acts of social justice or avoiding alcohol are just a few of the transactions that give God what he wants. For those

²⁵ Berger, 157.

²⁶ David C Sim, "The Women Followers of Jesus 1-3: The Implications of Luke 8," *Heythrop Journal* 30, no. 1 (January 1989): 51-62.

in the prosperity gospel, our faith is the transaction that forces God to give us health and wealth. All of these are part of our inheritance in a transactional theology.²⁷

Jesus, however, starves our transactional view of the divine and replaces it with a God who feeds us what we need to grow into our full humanity (2 Peter 1:2-4). In the OT God is always being fed.²⁸ In the temple, the priests serve God 24/7 with the bread of presence (showbread) and the sacrifices of animals. The priests serve this transactional God who lives behind the curtain. They keep God happy.

But in the NT, God, in the person of Christ, serves humanity. He offers himself.²⁹ He is the true bread that came down out of heaven and into our lives (John 6:32-33). This non-transactional God serves us by washing our feet (John 13:1-17) and giving us his broken body. He allows his blood to be shed for us (1 Corinthians 11:23-24). He comes out from behind the curtain and serves us (Matthew 27:51). This is the deepest nature of God made visible through the incarnation of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:19).

He predicts the destruction of the Jewish temple (Mark 13) and re-signs his people as the actual temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16). We now have direct fellowship with God.

He gave them a mission that was relational and incarnational instead of a transactional view of the world dependent upon the religious traditions and rules that excluded everyone who did not fulfill the terms of the Jewish contract (the book of Galatians).

²⁷ Ralph Enlow, "From Gospel Transaction to Gospel Transformation," Association for Biblical Higher Education, November 1, 2015, <https://www.abhe.org/11115-transactional-vs-transformational/>.

²⁸ Richard Rohr, "Who Eats Whom?," Center For Action And Contemplation, August 5, 2018, <https://cac.org/who-eats-whom/>.

²⁹ Rohr.

When we created an intimate weekly experience focused on an alternative plausibility structure, we saw people "alternating". This experience allowed them to see "beyond" the gods of rural culture and institutional Christianity. It re-framed previous theological assumptions that limited our growth as followers of Christ. We have taken this journey together and "alternated" through "strongly affective identification". This is the relational aspect of MRI

This experience was a slow and difficult climb because we carried the church along for the ride. Creating a new space outside of their normal context (a home instead of a church building or other venue) will enhance the possibilities of a new plausibility structure blossoming in their perspective. Without this separation the power of the old plausibility structure often overwhelms the new perspective.³⁰ We discovered that those who stuck with our Kingdom experiment were willing to "step outside" of their normal comforting context.

The church planting strategy of the Apostle Paul started in the synagogue. He would draw off a group of people interested in the new plausibility structure of the crucified and resurrected Messiah, and this would become the nucleus of a new church.(Acts 13: 42-51,Acts 18:4-7). At some point Paul would "shake the dust off his feet" and move out of the synagogue to form an "ecclesia" of Christ.³¹ In order for this new church to take root, it had to separate itself from the old plausibility structure. Paul gave those in the synagogue every opportunity to move beyond their plausibility structure but when it became clear, they could not or would not alternate, he moved out (Act 18:4-7).

³⁰ Berger, 158.

³¹ Anonymous Author, "St. Paul's Church Planting Strategies as Revealed in Selected Passages in the Book of Acts," *Global Missiology English* 2, no. 9 (March 1, 2012), accessed January 7, 2019, <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/714>.

TRCs built its life around the old plausibility structures native to older generations; the rural church of the future may need to "shake the dust off its feet" before it can embrace a Kingdom fellowship.

A new plausibility structure (Kingdom of God) needs to recapture and re-frame the biblical story. It will be an apprenticeship in biblical semiotics (how the Bible constructs meaning and tells the story through signs, symbols, metaphors and narratives) that embraces the biblical story as "our" primary identity in this world. The statue of liberty (a meaning-making symbol) cannot compete with the cross of Christ (a meaning-making symbol) but as a cultural symbol ("Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...") it reflects a core value of the gospel of the Kingdom (Luke 4:18-19). The goal is not cultural rejection but re-signing culture with Christ's perspective:

Biblical semiotics also examines what our interpretations have done to the biblical narrative and proposes a way forward. Jesus did this often in his ministry:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. (Matthew 15:1-7).

Jesus also did this with the woman at the well in John 4:19-21: "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." "Woman," Jesus

replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

Biblical semiotics continues this practice of Christ. As Crystal Downing has stated:

Deconstruction, then, might be seen as the effort to rip away aluminum that shields us from irritating ideas outside our system, or structure, of truth. It tears down signs of belief we feel most passionately about in order to inspect them, to consider where they came from, how they block our vision and hence our understanding of people and ideas outside our house of faith. Sometimes, after such an inspection, a sign-board will be nailed back up as important to our house. But in the process of taking it down, we can-in fact, we must-look through the gap in the wall that the sign once covered up in order to understand what is outside our structure of belief³²

Brain Science

Finally, the new model would need to be sensitive to the findings of brain science. One cannot challenge the old plausibility structure and expect results. This is especially true in rural culture where the status quo is central to their identity and security. You cannot threaten what is important to people. Their amygdala will hijack their brain and they will go into "fight or flight" mode and a fresh perspective will not boot up. They become even more entrenched in their position.³³ I experienced this whenever I *directly* challenged their plausibility structure from behind the pulpit. Research on the brain proves that using narratives and metaphors has the power to generate new plausibility structures because it bypasses our fear based response and opens up our capacity to

³² Crystal L. Downing. *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, Kindle, 2012, 1694-1696.

³³ Arlin Cunic, “Amygdala Hijack and the Fight or Flight Response,” verywellmind, October 26, 2018, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-happens-during-an-amygdala-hijack-4165944>.

empathize with other points of view.³⁴ This helps us appreciate why Jesus told parables as his primary teaching method. As Robert Perez and Justin Adams explain: “The Parable Effect is the magical quality that allows a reader or listener to be transported into the mind of the story’s protagonist—essentially turning on the empathy switch in our brains. Jesus understood the power of parable to change the minds of those who feared change. There’s been significant research in the last decade to prove what Jesus seemed to know intuitively.”³⁵

An important part of the new model is training people how to access those parts of the brain where they can experience something "beyond" the old plausibility structure. One cannot expect people to appreciate something they have never tasted. The new plausibility structure rather than attacking the old perspective directly will allow people to have a prolonged conversation in relationship. This gives them space to consider what is "outside" their old matrix. The proof will be in the pudding. And the best context for this to happen is not listening to a monologue in a pew but around a meal at the table.³⁶

A careful approach that avoids a fight-or-flight response is optimal. This means creating safe places for people to explore, at their own pace, a new plausibility structure. You cannot force people down the path toward Christ. Our job is too "nudge" them down this path: As Sweet says: "Sometimes a nudge will lead to conversion, but most often it

³⁴ Melanie C Green and Timothy C Brock, “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000): 701-21, <https://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/quillin/green%20brock%20role%20of%20transportation%202000.pdf>.

³⁵ Robert Perez and Justin Adams, “The Power of Parable,” Fenton, January 31, 2011, <https://fenton.com/the-power-of-parable/>.

³⁶ Leonard I. Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014).

will lead to a conversation, a confession, a connection, maybe a germination, but always a blessing.”³⁷

Brain science confirms the validity of this approach. It lays out spiritual practices that expand our capacity for spiritual experiences. These experiences reinforce a new plausibility structure. In particular, the practice of meditation has a powerful impact on the brain's capacity for calming anxiety and opening the experience of empathy, perspective and union with God. As Newberg writes in his book, *How God Changes Your Brain*:

Meditation is good for your brain, and it can bring you closer to God. But we discovered that it can also be used to rapidly establish intimacy with others. "Intimacy," as we are using it here, does not refer to sexual closeness, but to those qualities associated with friendship, trust, and compassion. When we feel intimate toward another, we willingly suspend self-protective attitudes that we normally use when closely interacting with others. Intimacy fosters acceptance, and greater degrees of intimacy are correlated with greater personal health.³⁸

In a rural culture with such "self-protective attitudes" the practice of meditation gives one a discipline that transcends the gods of rural life.

The leadership seeking to sow a new plausibility structure must keep the conversation going. There can be no successful alternation without a regular context to work through questions and objection. As Berger writes: “Thus the subjective reality of something that is never talked about comes to be shaky. It is one thing to engage in an embarrassing sexual act. It is quite another to talk about it beforehand or afterwards.

³⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), Kindle, 30.

³⁸ Andrew Newberg M.D., *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, Kindle, 2009, 214.

Conversely, conversation gives firm contours to items previously apprehended in a fleeting and unclear manner.”³⁹

Conversion and conversation are closely linked in the formation of new plausibility structure. It frustrates younger generations when churches do not encourage them to ask questions. It is not a surprise they are turning away from Christendom when they can't get answers to their questions. Leadership in the new model will need to be good listeners, secure about the process and not defensive about their propositions.

Deconstruction

And so, what is a Kingdom plausibility structure? When Jesus told Pilate his "kingdom was not of this world", he was speaking not of its location but its nature. How could the Kingdom "come near" (Mark 1:15) if God kept it outside this world? Jesus meant it does not have the same "qualities" as the Kingdoms of this world. If it was says Jesus "My servants would fight to prevent My arrest by the Jews" (John 18:36). The Kingdom of God does not use violence. It loves its enemies.⁴⁰

And so, we can define the Kingdom of God as the reign of Jesus present on this planet through those who live the way of King Jesus. They mirror through their own personality, culture and community the transfiguring power of Christ. Jesus intended the Church to be the primary incarnation of his servant authority in this world. As N.T.

³⁹ Berger, *The Social Construct of Reality*, 153.

⁴⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007).

Wright reminds us: "The point is that the Spirit is given so that through the work of the church the kingdom may indeed come on earth as in heaven."⁴¹

For the "way" of King Jesus to take root in our lives, he must deconstruct the alternative "worldly" plausibility structures we smuggled into our faith. This includes the religious and cultural plausibility structures contrary to the teachings and "way" of Jesus. Today, when I walk into a church, I look for the "signs" of a compromised Kingdom. If I see an American Flag in the sanctuary, this is a powerful indication that a church may not understand the Kingdom of God. Flags are the norm in TRCs. I attended a Missouri synod Lutheran church in my area that had three flags. The most prominent flag stood right behind the pulpit. This is not the only "sign" that gives shape to their reality, but it signifies a potentially compromised faith.

In the Old Testament when Israel synchronized their faith with idolatry, they witnessed the exile of their future. The book of Daniel records how the best and brightest ended up serving the Babylonian empire because of this syncretism (Daniel 1:3-4). One wonders if the exile of our youthful "Dones" from the church is the logical consequence of Christendom's unholy alliance?

It is not the urban/christian American matrix or the rural/christian American matrix but the Kingdom of God incarnating itself in urban and rural America through those who "get" the Kingdom.

In contrast to APC who seem obsessed with numbers as a sign of success and the PTI who may be small because of demographics, the MRI rural church will be small because of the difficulty of "alternating" to a Kingdom perspective. It seems MRI works

⁴¹ N. T. Wright, "On Earth as in Heaven," May 20, 2007, <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/30/on-earth-as-in-heaven/>.

better in small settings. You need to form strong emotional ties with regular conversations for people to make the switch. One person can only do this with so many people. The goal of the MRI is quality over quantity. The Great Commission is about quality..."teaching them to obey everything I have taught" (Matthew 28:20) takes time. But, in the long run it produces the most fruit because we are following the pattern of Christ.

A pastor (s) in an MRI fellowship in a rural context will need to adjust their expectations from the numbers game of APC and the maintenance game of PTI to an almost singular focus on discipleship in MRI. The smallness of the enterprise may demand they be bi-vocational and meet in a home or other small venue.

But the smallness of the enterprise is a cause for celebration: "Regarding the issue of renewal, Paul M. Miller speaks in unequivocal words. 'Every lasting surge of renewal during the history of the church was carried forward in small class meetings or other primary groups and it must be so now. No....hearty backslapping or experiences in the mass meeting can be substituted for this.'"⁴²

Cultural Appropriation

Of the cultural strengths that may work in favor of the MRI church are the relational opportunities found in rural culture. In the rural fishbowl you keep bumping into the same faces in familiar places. Forming relationships with people would be central to the missional aspect of an MRI church to nudge people into the Kingdom of God.

⁴² Del Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Pr, 1988), 83-84.

Those drawn to Christ through MRI would form the nucleus of a fellowship seeking what it means to be MRI Christ followers.

MRI pastors set free from the demands of PTI expectations and distorted theology could focus on building relationships as a way of nudging people toward a Kingdom mindset. The goal would have them coming to a regular gathering where a new plausibility structure focused on Christ and his Kingdom would transform their lives.

The model we implement in rural places must be able to bring people into a Kingdom mindset that can see outside of the culture that conditioned them but still work within its culture. We are not to be like the Amish who separate themselves and establish their own culture, nor like those who conflate Christianity with their culture.

Church Metaphors

The word "church" conjures up images of white buildings with stain glassed windows and towering steeples. This architecture fills the landscape and the imaginations of people wherever Christendom has put down roots. *The building is the church.* I dare say the first thing that pops into someone's head at the mention of the word "church" is a building. This is the determinative metaphor for the ecclesia in Christendom. You travel to this building to receive your religious APC or PTI goods and services. As Frank Viola argues: "Many contemporary Christians have a love affair with brick and mortar. The edifice complex is so ingrained in our thinking that if a group of believers begins to meet together, their first thoughts are toward securing a building. How can a group of Christians rightfully claim to be a church without a building? (So, the thinking goes.)"⁴³

⁴³ Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2008), Kindle, 10.

Is it possible to create a Kingdom plausibility structure when Christendom builds its story around a distorted semiotic metaphor for ecclesia? The church had no "official" buildings until after it became the religion of the Roman Empire. Viola observes that:

Christians did not erect special buildings for worship until the Constantinian era in the fourth century. New Testament scholar Graydon F. Snyder states, 'There is no literary evidence nor archaeological indication that any such home was converted into an extant church building. Nor is there any extant church that certainly was built prior to Constantine.' In another work he writes, 'The first churches consistently met in homes. Until the year 300 we know of no buildings first built as churches.'⁴⁴

And yet these semiotic church steeples towering over much of Church history are foreign to the "church" of the New Testament. Author Frank Viola declares that the NT church had no concept of the church as a building: "to call the church a building would be like calling your mother a skyscraper."⁴⁵

APC Christendom tends to define success on how many people you can fit in your building. The biggest building is the marker of success. Multisite churches are franchises of this perspective.⁴⁶

PTI Christendom defines success as the building "preserved". It houses the traditions and customs that give meaning to their communal lives in their circular view of time. One example of this is the refusal to merge with other congregations of the same denomination even though they are in close proximity to each other. I pastored three congregational churches within 15 minutes of each other who refused to merge even

⁴⁴ Viola, *Pagan Christianity*, 12.

⁴⁵ Viola, *Pagan Christianity*, 11.

⁴⁶ Tim Brister, "Franchising Church: The Latest Greatest Trend of the Megachurch Movement," Timmy Brister, August 25, 2005, <http://timmybrister.com/2005/08/franchising-church-the-latest-greatest-trend-of-the-megachurch-movement/>.

though they had less than 30 people in attendance every Sunday, and two of the buildings could easily seat everyone from all three congregations. This is not about mission or wise stewardship it is about something else. Kelley, in her report on this struggle within the United Methodist denomination, summarized the issue with these words:

It is not mission but personal attachment (be it sentiment, pride, or power) that keeps many struggling churches from merging. Stories abound in clergy conversations about tiny congregations that refuse to merge for various reasons: *Our building is prettier. My parents got married here. They use praise songs. They use NIV. We've always started worship at 10:45...* Traditions and preferences matter, no doubt, but struggling to sustain an entire organization—however small—for the sake of our own likes and dislikes, comfort, feelings of ownership, or nostalgia is making ourselves an idol in place of God and our calling to serve, welcome, and reach out in his name.⁴⁷

The spread of multisite takeovers of existing rural churches suggests these rural churches prefer this to merging with their neighbors. They get to keep “their church”.⁴⁸

It is difficult to appreciate what the church means outside of building-centered Christendom because our imaginations (and our attachments) are captive to the Church as a building. It doesn't end there, but it begins there.

A new plausibility structure rooted in MRI will need to deconstruct this metaphor for Church and re-sign it with other metaphors that do justice to the biblical narrative in a rural culture. Just as Jesus re-signed the temple of God as embodied in his people.(1 Peter 2:4-5, 1 Corinthians 3:16) so too we must re-sign the Church as something other than a building.

The apostle Paul developed metaphors to help people appreciate what it meant to be the Church of Christ. His metaphors enabled the people of God from different cultures

⁴⁷ Jessica Miller Kelley, “Merging Perishing Parishes? Perish the Thought!” *MM Ministry Matters*, August 15, 2013, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/4160/merging-perishing-parishes-perish-the-thought>.

⁴⁸ Kelley.

and different religions, different genders, and social classes to find their unity in the midst of diversity. The family of God, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ are some of the dominant metaphors he used to bring people together around Christ and form a new reality called the Church⁴⁹. George Lakeoff describes the power of new metaphors: “New metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and, therefore, new realities.”⁵⁰ Leonard Sweet describes why metaphors are so powerful: "I can't say it enough, metaphor is metamorphosis. Change your metaphor and you change your world. Change your metaphor and you change your body. Change your metaphor and you change your mind. Everyone has the choice of what metaphors to build life around.”⁵¹

Unfortunately the old metaphors used by Paul may have lost their luster after centuries of use and abuse. How can we speak of the bride of Christ with thousands of years of patriarchy attached to it? The same holds true for the metaphor of the church as the family of God. These metaphors carry a lot of baggage in today’s world.⁵²

We need new metaphors or neglected biblical metaphors that reinvigorate the biblical truth about the church in our day. These metaphors can get us outside the limits of APC and PTI operating systems centered on the false metaphor of Church as a building. This is already under way. We have house churches, dinner churches, Brew

⁴⁹ Paul Sevier Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 1.

⁵⁰ George Lakeoff, “Metaphors We Live by Quotes,” Goodreads, <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/34433-metaphors-we-live-by>.

⁵¹ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 157.

⁵² Crystal Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

Pubs, even wild churches (churches that meet in the wild). All of these are exploring new ways of doing church.⁵³ But I found none of these in the TRCs in my area.

So what are the essential truths about the Church that we need to “metaphorize” in our day that could produce an MRI church in a rural setting?

The new rural church must move from PTI to MRI to fulfill the Great Commission and embody the Kingdom of God. The idolatry of a circular view of time captured in the metaphor of the rural fishbowl must give way to a metaphor that is not static. Church buildings are static metaphors; they don’t have wheels. They sit and demand maintenance. What happens inside the church is what matters because the church is a building. In my experience maintenance of the building took precedence over mission. Rural churches suffer from “the-garden-of-eden-idis”. God never intended humanity to stay within the boundaries of the garden (maintenance) but to cultivate the entire world (mission). We are trustees of the entire planet (Genesis 1:26-28).

So what metaphors might move the rural church from PTI to MRI? Christ calls churches to develop followers who are missional, relational and incarnational. This happens as the Church “logs in” to the resources of an invisible God. Can you imagine being able to realize your potential in today’s world without the technology to access the content found in the digital heavens here in “Screenland.”⁵⁴? Even rural areas and rural people (especially youth) depend on digital technology. These digital gods provide information, entertainment, connections and productivity when we click on their icons.

⁵³ Kara Faris, “Divergent Churches’ Are Exploring Innovative Ways of Congregational Life,” Faith and Leadership, November 14, 2017, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/kara-faris-divergent-churches-are-exploring-innovative-ways-congregational-life>.

⁵⁴ Rob Bell, “The Robcast,” accessed March 15, 2019, <https://robbell.com/portfolio/robcast/>.

The god we call Google opens a digital heaven through the Google icon on our interface here in Screenland.

Paul in Colossians 1: 9-22 gives us a litany of personal and corporate potentialities made possible by Christ including:

- Knowledge of God's will (vs. 9)
- A life that pleases God. (vs.10)
- Wisdom (vs. 10)
- A fruitful life. (vs.10)
- Endurance and patience. (vs. 11)
- Joy (vs. 12)
- Deliverance from oppression (vs. 13)
- Redemption (vs. 14.)
- Forgiveness (vs. 14)

All of this becomes a possibility when we connect to the source of all being and potentiality (vs. 15-22). If we log in to Christ we gain access to the divine and his resources manifesting themselves in the created order. A resource that will reconcile all things in the end.(vs. 20)⁵⁵ He will reconcile rural and urban, black and white, male and female, rich and poor, and we can join this movement now. To access this resource, we need an icon.⁵⁶ A physical, visible sign that connects us to the source of experiences like forgiveness, joy, wisdom and the invisible God.

⁵⁵ N.T. Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1. 15–20," *New Testament Studies* 36, no. 3 (February 5, 2009): 444-68, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002868850001585X>.

⁵⁶ "Jesus Christ / Icon of God," A Readers Guide to Orthodox Icons, July 5, 2010, <https://iconreader.wordpress.com/2010/07/05/jesus-christ-the-icon-of-the-father/>.

We find this icon in verse 15. “The Son is the image(icon) of the invisible God.” The Greek word for image is εἰκών (icon).⁵⁷ Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the icon of God. When by faith we click on him we can download the divine into our lives (Romans 8:15). God makes visible his will through the icon of Jesus (1Cor:18:24). We see in him the way, the truth and the life.(John 14:6) His life, teachings, death and resurrection become our model for living and not just an escape hatch into heaven.⁵⁸ As we download the substance of Christ into our lives, we can offer what we have received to the world (Matthew 10:8). The Church of Christ is a demonstration of the icon’s power. In this sense we are the “body of Christ”. We embody the power of the icon in our community (1Cor.12:21). The infinite terabytes of God are open to us through this icon because God has poured all his resources into Christ.⁵⁹

Christ is the icon of missional, relational and incarnational Christianity. A rural or urban church not manifesting MRI has broken links to Christ caused by their PTI and APC operating systems.⁶⁰ They can only access portions of what Christ can offer. These broken links are icons the Bible calls idols (1 Samuel 12:21). A church that makes an idol out of the bible or the church or the size of its ministry or its nation has broken links to Christ.⁶¹ They cannot get the full benefit found in God’s icon and therefore do not

⁵⁷ "Colossians 1:15 (NIV) - The Son is the Image," Blue Letter Bible, accessed March 15, 2019, https://www.blueletterbible.org/niv/col/1/15/t_conc_1108015.

⁵⁸ N.T. Wright, “On Earth as in Heaven,” May 20, 2007, <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/30/on-earth-as-in-heaven/>.

⁵⁹ Richard Rohr, “The Cosmic Christ,” The Center For Contemplation and Action, November 5, 2015, <https://cac.org/the-cosmic-christ-2015-11-05/>.

⁶⁰ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 28.

⁶¹ Ed Stetzer, “Idolatry Is Alive Today: Why Modern Church Leaders Still Fight an Old Battle,” *Christianity Today*, October 8, 2014,

represent the depth of substance found in the icon of Christ. APC and PTI operating systems have broken links to Christ.

If Christ is the icon of an invisible God, then the Holy Spirit *streams* the content into our lives and followers funnel it into this world like the banks of a river (John 7:37-39, Revelation 22:2). Biblical imagery uses the metaphor of a river to describe the flow streaming from the overflow of a great sea at the feet of God's throne.(Revelation 15:2) A digital way of picturing this would be a sea of servers feeding the digital stream we access through an icon on our electronic devices. We step into this digital stream and get soaked with content. Likewise people can soak in the divine flow emanating from a limitless God through the icon of Christ.(Colossians 1:9-22) When this happens the divine content grows them into their full humanity as creatures created in God's image (Eph 4:11-13).

The Bible pictures this as becoming like a strong fruit bearing tree planted on the edge of God's river The fruit of this tree provides healing for the nations (people groups) (Revelation 22:2-3). These people groups ingest the water of life through the fruit of God's people planted on the banks of the divine flow. The bible uses the metaphor of a river, therefore, as part of this ecosystem of grace.. The opening pages of the Bible begin with a river (Genesis 2:10-14) the pages in between expand on this metaphor (Psalm 1:3, Jeremiah 17:8, John 7:37-39) and the last pages of the bible climax with a river (Revelation 22:1-5).

So how would this metaphor serve the issues of a TRC? How would it move them from PTI to MRI and break the stranglehold of the church-as-a-building metaphor?

The church-as-a-building metaphor is static. It encourages maintenance not mission because buildings don't have wheels and they demand maintenance. In our community we have sloughs. Sloughs are arms of a river that have no outlet. They form stagnant ponds filled with rotting stumps. Churches that lose their mission have no outlet. They become stagnant and die.⁶² The river metaphor reminds us that churches are not sloughs, but a community fed by the living waters of Christ (John 7:38). Rivers are not stagnant; step into a river and you cannot touch the same water twice. It remains the same river but it never stops moving because it is always flowing from an overflowing source. It is a picture of unity in diversity. A picture of our Triune God and the Church (Eph. 4:1-10). We dare not trust in the stagnant water of maintenance but in the divine flow of Christ at work in the world. The metaphor of the river could give the Church a sense of mission. We can look upstream and appreciate where we have come from (the past) and we can look downstream and see where the divine flow is leading (the future) and in the moment (the present) celebrate the flow of grace in our lives.

My family and I visited a church in Denver. Nadia Bolz-Weber a heavily tattooed, foul-mouthed, LGBTQ affirming Pastor led the service. The church was diverse with a multigenerational congregation. We did the traditional Lutheran Liturgy. They arranged the chairs in concentric circles so we could see each other and in the center was a table. She preached from the center. When it came time to celebrate the Lord's supper, we flowed with all our differences toward the center. It was a powerful experience because we were taking part in a Gospel that continues to reach outside the limits of what divides us. I felt I was participating in an ancient and progressive move of God's spirit flowing

⁶² Thom Rainer, "Autopsy of a Deceased Church," April 24, 2013, <https://thomrainer.com/2013/04/autopsy-of-a-deceased-church-11-things-i-learned/>.

through time. This is the “tradition” that younger generations are looking for. I felt like I was standing in the divine flow of history, coming out of the past and into the future. The river metaphor invites churches to be missional as they channel the flow of grace into the lives of others. We cannot bottle up the grace of God behind the four walls because rivers are not meant to be contained.

But the river metaphor is also relational: “On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2). In the symbolic imagery of Revelation 22, we see the river of God flowing with the tree of life growing on both sides of the river. It delivers fruit 12 times a year without end. Its leaves are always green and provide healing for the people groups (nations) of this world. This imagery may represent the future destiny and present calling of the people of God signified by the number 12.⁶³ Christ plants the church in a particular place and culture to sustain and heal the people of this world. The river carries the water to the church supplying what it needs to minister in its culture. While this imagery applies to future realities it also represents present dynamics.⁶⁴

But the culture does not define us. We offer something distinctive to the culture that the culture itself does not possess.⁶⁵ Jesus proclaimed this to his own culture and people: “On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice,

⁶³ *Smith's Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “7.5.3.7. Twelve Jewish Tribes, Completeness,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/revelation/introduction/twelve-jewish-tribes-completeness.html>.

⁶⁴ Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 420-21.

⁶⁵ Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 1.

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them” (John 7:37-38).

This distinctive offering occurs as we root our identity in the divine flow watering our lives more than the cultural soil that formed us. But we stay anchored in this cultural soil. Without the water the tree cannot produce fruit and leaves. Without the soil the tree has no place to stand. As the river of living water grows who we are, we can offer healthy relationship to those who share our cultural landscape.

APC offers people propositions and colonial practices and PTI offers traditions that idolize their way of life, but MRI offers people the overflow of their relationship with Christ.⁶⁶ People need to be so close they can pick our fruit and our leaves and this assumes a connection that goes beyond propositions and traditions. The river metaphor invites us to be relational. As Richard Rohr says: “The definition of a Christian is someone who has met one.”⁶⁷

But it also invites us to be incarnational. The following is my semiotic exegetical application of Revelation 22: 1-3. The river of living water feeds the roots anchored in the soil and the tree produces fruit and leaves.(Revelation 22:2) It then travels through the tree so it can clothe itself in the flesh of fruit and of leaves. The cultural soil of the people groups (nations) amplifies the tastiness and healing power of this relationship. When the people of that culture eat the fruit or the leaves they are consuming the water of life incarnated in the fruit and the leaves. When the rivers of living water flow within us we

⁶⁶ Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 28.

⁶⁷ Richard Rohr, “Contemplative Prayer” (lecture, Center For Action And Contemplation, Albuquerque, NM, January 21, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPb3Z51gLcY>.

produce the fruits of the Spirit (Gal.5:22-23). These fruits are present within the flesh of our personality and those inhabiting the same cultural soil are blessed by it.

With these missional, relational and incarnational metaphors in place we are ready to move into a new matrix for *ecclesia* (Church). This new matrix must work with younger generations if the rural church is to have a future. And it must transcend the Christendom of the past. As Brian McLaren writes:

Today, millions of us--Catholics, Evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Orthodox Christians--share something that we seldom verbalize: we're worried that the "brand" of Christianity has been so compromised that many of us are barely able to use the label anymore. Whether we lean conservative, progressive, or moderate, whether we're clergy or laypeople, old or young, more and more of us feel that there must be a better way to be Christian.⁶⁸

EPIC

How would a rural church function differently in today's world with younger generations involving a fresh set of metaphors not based on APC or PTI but MRI? What are the components of this new matrix? The MRI church in a rural setting will implement an EPIC matrix: Tim Elmore describes what EPIC means:

For years, I have been teaching and writing that students today are from an EPIC generation. Dr. Leonard Sweet is the first person I heard suggest this, and it isn't merely because students today love the word "epic." It's because the letters of that word aptly describe who they are and how they best learn.

E – Experiential

Students today love to learn from experiences. They are not looking for a sage on the stage...with a lecture. They're looking for a guide on the side with an experience. The more we can create environments and experiences from which we can pass on life lessons, the more we'll engage them.

P- Participatory

By this I mean, they've been conditioned to participate in the outcomes of almost everything in their life. What they eat, where the family goes on

⁶⁸ McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, 3.

vacation, who stays on that reality TV show, you name it. So, adults who find ways to let them "vote" or participate in outcomes and direction, see those students take ownership of the task. Students support what they help create.

I- Image Rich

Young people today have grown up in a world filled with images. Think for a minute. I grew up with TV. They grew up with MTV. Videos. Websites. Digital cameras. DVDs. Images really are the language of the 21st century, not words. This is a right-brain generation.

C- Connective

Finally, students today are connected--both technologically and socially. So, the more we can provide opportunities to "stop the lecture" and let them connect with each other and talk, the better chance we have of reaching them.⁶⁹

The PTI church has struggled to reach young people because they are anti-EPIC.

While it may look at first glance that TRC's provide at least some EPIC components to the service, the passive participation mutes this experience. TRCs are not EPIC they are SAMO as in the "same ole, same ole." Mostly you sit passively in rows where you listen to one person behind a pulpit and recite the same things Sunday after Sunday. These rituals can comfort but they rarely bring much light nor are they epic in the normal sense of the word.

So what about preaching? Is there still a place for preaching? How would it work in the "world-as-it-is-becoming"? Protestant churches put preaching at the center of the service. Why else would the pulpit in most protestant churches be in the center of the platform? So how would preaching be different in an MRI church? The EPIC approach gives us a way forward. Preaching is part of an *overall* experience crafted in a gathering that allows people to participate in the river of life. It exegetes not just words but images and stories that belong to us as the people of God. These are our words, images, and

⁶⁹ Tim Elmore, "Four Ideas to Lead This EPIC Generation of Students," *Psychology Today*, accessed January 7, 2019, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/artificial-maturity/201310/four-ideas-lead-epic-generation-students-1>.

stories. This produces the awareness that we are connected to the movement of God in history through Christ.⁷⁰

When I was in seminary a favorite teacher of students explored the image of water in the bible with us. He explained the sacramental nature of water in the bible. He exegeted the image in the Bible and then we discussed it together, finally we prayed and then touched the water symbolizing our baptism into Christ in a bowl he had next to him. We felt deeply connected to God and to each other. The next week he did the same with bread and we had communion together. They were both EPIC experiences. As Sweet says: "...EPIC preaching is a communal experience of the Word created by participation in an image-rich narrative or sequence of stories."⁷¹

Learning Community

With the icon of Christ as our entrance into the river of life, the MRI would organize its time together as a place to ask questions without judgment. This is part of the P (participative) aspect of the EPIC experience rooted in MRI theology. It also addresses the complaints of younger generations that they are not allowed to ask tough questions.⁷² They want to click on the icon of Christ and step into this data stream. What does Christ say about politics, gender, the bible and sexuality?

⁷⁰ Leonard I. Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 22.

⁷¹ Leonard Sweet, "E.P.I.C.," *Apostolic Information Service*, January 10, 2008, <https://www.apostolic.edu/>.

⁷² "Don't Get the Answers Wrong on Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church," Welch College, July 24, 2018, <https://welch.edu/dont-get-the-answers-wrong-on-why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/>.

While TRCs engage certain people in running the show, or filling committees, that doesn't mean there is space to ask questions about issues that might disrupt the harmony of the church or raise uncomfortable theological questions.

The opinion of a pastor with the backing of a church institution is not enough for younger generations. They want to check things out and wrestle with what they believe about a subject.⁷³ They live in a Google world. The pastor (s) guides the discussion in a space that encourages participation. They sit at the table instead of being the expert behind the pulpit.

They function more like guides than authority figures. As guides they will need to have an observable authentic journey with Christ and not just ecclesial authority.⁷⁴ Younger generations need to see that they have the river of life flowing in them.

How would you do EPIC in my rural setting? In my experience as a pastor of 3 TRCs trying to convert those within a PTI form of Christendom would be ineffective unless they have real issues with the Church or have not grown up in the Church. The attempt to create an EPIC approach in an established TRC could be divisive and painful especially in such small, tightly knit fishbowls of faith hooked on the maintenance of their rituals.

Our experiments with EPIC inside the church created suspicion, resistance and apathy for the majority of those in the pews comprised of older adults. In a bible study I led for older adults, I used a participatory approach and after two weeks I was informed they prefer I just tell them what the Bible is saying. This reflects a mindset rooted in the

⁷³ Derek Rishmawy, "Ministering to Millennials in a Secular Age," The Gospel Coalition, January 23, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ministering-to-millennials-in-a-secular-age/>.

⁷⁴ Thom Rainer, "What Millennials Want in Leaders," August 2, 2010, https://thomrainer.com/2010/08/what_millennials_want_in_leaders/.

world” as-it -used- to- be” that trusts and looks to authorities.⁷⁵ Their time in the church conditioned them to be passive and insecure about their capacity to contribute to the discussion.

A did another bible study over a period of 9 years where certain people did alternate away from a Christendom mindset rooted in PTI toward a Kingdom mindset rooted in MRI. They appreciated the participatory aspect of EPIC. These people shared six common characteristics: They were not “from around here “(both geographically and in mindset) had a hunger to grow in their faith, shared an emotional connection with my wife and I, were not from the Silent generation (with one notable exception) and they were women. These characteristics comprised the recipe for successful alternation to a Kingdom of God perspective. Looking back, anyone missing these ingredients did not alternate to a Kingdom plausibility structure.

But we gave people every opportunity for this to happen. My team and I created EPIC seminars. We found creative ways for people to engage with the content and then share with the larger group. This was an EPIC form of doing church (although we didn’t have this language at the time). In one seminar, we had them break into small groups that taught them how to use a bible concordance, and a bible dictionary in relation to a specific passage of Scripture. This gave them tools for inductive bible studies. They then shared what they learned with the rest of us.

In another seminar, we gave them a devotional guide and then sent them off for 15 minutes to interact with God.

⁷⁵Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, 1101.

In another seminar we all took the Clifton strengths test⁷⁶ and then broke into different groups that shared our strengths. I then led a discussion/teaching on how this applies to the life of the body in the church.

While these seminars were EPIC what they lacked was the ongoing conversation people needed to alternate to a new plausibility structure. Most of them fell back into church as usual as they navigated life from within the rural mindset. One EPIC weekend is not enough.

Early on in my pastoral work, I created an alternative worship experience with a team of millennials that met on Thursday nights. In this service we created “spaces” that people could visit during the worship segment. In the aisle we unfurled brown butcher paper where people could write or draw their prayers or expressions of worship. We set up a communion station for people to celebrate the Lord’s supper at any time during the service. We left a space in the back for people to dance. In one service we filled helium balloons that represented our sins and then released them into the heavens. The Millennials loved it but the older adults did not.

EPIC requires a liturgical imagination that involves the whole person in sensory experiences that engage people with God and the Bible in safe relationships.

What I learned is that having an EPIC experience is only an experiment if it doesn’t have regularity. A new plausibility structure is not a one-shot deal.

So, what about the space needed to ask questions that churches avoid like evolution, sex, gay rights, and the bible’s apparent support of genocide(1 Samuel 15:3)? I have a small group in my rural community that has been meeting for 10 years. When we

⁷⁶ “Clifton Strengths Assessment,” Gallup Strengths Center, accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/home/en-us/cliftonstrengths-how-it-works>.

first started, we were not ready for these questions. But as we engaged with Scripture together, a different hermeneutic emerged. We started reading the bible from a Christological point of view.⁷⁷ This gave prominence to the teachings of Christ and the spirit of Christ and moved us away from feeling the need to defend or depend upon a literal reading of the bible that attempted to harmonize, as an example, the angry God of the Old Testament with the loving God of Jesus. In Jesus we see the true nature of God in the flesh. As Jesus said to Phillip, “If you have seen me you have seen the Father (John 14:9).

Phyllis Tickle argues that a new reformation is underway and all reformations deal with the question of authority⁷⁸. Today’s reformation seems to be moving away from sola scriptura as the basis of its authority.⁷⁹ In today’s world, it is hard to find answers for tough questions in the literal reading of the Bible.⁸⁰ This is the part of Pete Enns argument:

As is well known, the trend among young people raised in conservative churches is to leave their Bible, and often their faith, behind. In my experience, one big reason (not the only reason) behind this trend has to do with the Bible—not the bible itself but how they are implicitly taught to read it...

But as they grow older, especially when they enter high school or college, they find that their structured world supported by Bible verses is not adequate for providing a compelling explanation for the complex world around them and how the Bible can continue functioning as the anchor it once was.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Jens Zimmermann, “Reading the Book of the Church: Bonhoeffer’s Christological Hermeneutics,” in *Heaven on Earth?* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/9781118553909.ch10>.

⁷⁸ Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, 2151.

⁷⁹ Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*, 1768.

⁸⁰ Pete Enns, “One Big Reason Why so Many Young People Are Giving up On the Bible—and Their Faith,” March 18, 2015, <https://peteenns.com/one-big-reason-why-so-many-young-people-are-giving-up-on-the-bible-and-their-faith/>.

⁸¹ Enns.

Answers may be more accessible in the culmination of Scripture; the Word made flesh (John 1:1, Hebrews 1:1). Many see in Christ a model of compassion, sacrifice and inclusiveness that provides a model for the needs of this world.⁸² An MRI church in a rural context that can work in the "world-as-it-is-becoming" could utilize a Christological reading of the bible.

According to Sharon Norton the old paradigm used to be: "believe-behave-belong". This was Christendom in both Catholic and historic Protestantism (others have called this "bounded-set" Christianity⁸³). A more workable solution in a collapsing Christendom might be a new paradigm of "belong-believe-behave" (also called "centered-set" Christianity⁸⁴). Norton describes it this way:

Briefly, the bounded-set focuses on the boundaries, on defining who is in and who is out, and what people must exhibit in their behavior and beliefs in order to belong to any given group. Typically, there is an emphasis on holiness and purity. The centered-set defines a few characteristics that are central and does not focus on the boundaries. People can be any distance from the center and still belong to centered-set group, as long as they are facing the center. We were taught that the center is Jesus and that there are multitudes of ways to experience Jesus, while growing in faith that may look very different, depending on a whole variety of factors, such as upbringing, the surrounding culture and sub-cultures or the religious background of a person. Instead of defining the boundaries, the centered-set focuses on Jesus as the center of our faith and our relationship with him.⁸⁵

⁸² David Kinneman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

⁸³ Tim Harmon, "Who's in and Who's Out? Christianity and Bounded Sets Vs. Centered Sets," *Transformed Living The Gospel In An Everyday World*, January 17, 2014, <https://www.westernseminary.edu/transformedblog/2014/01/17/whos-in-and-whos-out-christianity-and-bounded-sets-vs-centered-sets/>.

⁸⁴ Harmon.

⁸⁵ Sharon Norton, "Belong, Believe, Behave Reflections On Church Planting in Germany," *About Anabaptist Witness*, accessed January 24, 2019, http://www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal_entry/belong-believe-behave-reflections-on-church-planting-in-germany/.

I had a man outside the church who looked to me for help in his marriage. My wife and I had a relationship with this couple outside of the church. One of the first things he told me was how much he liked pornography (I think he was testing me). I made sure my face registered no reaction. I did not seek to “fix” his behavior or correct his beliefs. He “belonged”. Instead, I “suggested” practical tools to work on his marriage and prayer as a way of managing his reactionary posture. A few weeks later he came back and told me this prayer stuff “really works”. He and his family came to church, and he is now a believer. This is an example of “belong-believe- behave” in a learning community. He got to “participate” not just in the asking of questions but in the doing of life under the orbit of Christ.

Analog Experience

MRI communities of faith should seek to leverage the strengths of their community. In a rural community like mine, we can provide people with an "analog" experience because of the abundance of natural resources. The natural world is under-utilized as part of our church experience even in my rural area. As much as the digital world invades my rural community, it cannot push out the “analog” context. And there is a movement toward the analog. Bob Donnell has researched this comeback: “Many people are rediscovering and resurrecting older analog technologies — printed books, vinyl records, musical instruments — that provide some kind of tactile physical experience that a purely digital world has started to remove.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Bob O'Donnell, “We’re Living in a Digital World, but Analog Is Making a Comeback,” *Recode*, last modified May 2, 2017, <https://www.recode.net/2017/5/2/15518900/digital-analog-rediscover-tactile-physical-experiences-vinyl-print>.

There is a growing organization called “Wild Church Network”. This is what they had to say:

There is a movement happening. From isolation to connection. From detachment to immersion. From dualism to integration. Spiritual leaders from a wide range of denominations are beginning to question the wisdom and consequences of regarding "church" as a building where you gather away from the rest of the world for a couple hours on Sundays.

We are a growing network of pastors and spiritual leaders, who have made bold moves to launch new expressions of church outside to re-acquaint, re-cover, and re-member our congregations as loving participants of a larger community. In this age of mass extinctions, we feel burdened by the love of Christ to invite people into direct relationship with some of the most vulnerable victims of our destructive culture: our land, our waters, the creatures with whom we share our homes.

And, there, people remember that they belong to a larger beloved community. Along the way, we have remembered that our Christian tradition of spiritual transformation has always been rooted in the actual local wilderness.⁸⁷

If you are looking to create EPIC experiences, why not spend more time as a community of faith in God's great "analog" creation. This year (2018) has seen a resurgence of people getting "real" Christmas trees. Millennials are leading the charge:

According to financial services and mobile payment company Square Inc., the number of Christmas trees sold this year is up about 10 percent compared to 2017, based on over 1,000 Christmas tree sellers who use the company's payment technology.

Why have businesses seen an increase? The main answer lies with one age group: Millennials.

Though often mocked, the generation of people born between 1981 and 1996 are helping Christmas tree businesses thrive, said Tim O'Connor, executive director of the National Christmas Tree Association."⁸⁸

It is easy to see why Millennials would lead this resurgence. They hunger for authentic experiences that serve a social good. Fake plastic trees filling landfills do not

⁸⁷ “Re-connecting People with an Untamed God in our Wild Homes,” Wild Church Network, accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.wildchurchnetwork.com/>.

⁸⁸ Ben Tobin, “Christmas Tree Sales Are up This Year – Thanks to Millennials,” *U.S.A. Today*, December 21, 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2018/12/21/christmas-tree-sales-rose-year-mainly-thanks-millennials/2386577002/>.

match their values.⁸⁹ A TRC that demonstrates a concern for the natural world and provides “back to nature” experiences may find an audience with younger generations.

In particular, the experience of the natural world could be a ministry that MRIs could offer Millennials (and anyone else). MRIs could organize camping and retreat type ministries where urban Millennials could experience God through creation and around the table of fellowship in a natural setting. I am an avid backpacker. One ministry I would like to start is to act as a guide into the wilds of the Hiawatha National Forest in my area. In this context I would also serve as a spiritual guide teaching them how to meditate and having “deep” discussions around the campfire. It would be EPIC. For those less inclined for such primitive camping, there are a number of campgrounds and a low-cost Catholic Retreat center.

One of the annual traditions of the Parish I pastored was the yearly picnic hosted at a State Park picnic area. This was one event that young families participated in, because the kids got to enjoy an egg toss with the adults and swim and play after the service. It was also the sight for our annual baptisms. Given the fact that a future EPIC MRI church in a rural setting would likely be small, I can see no barriers to having this experience more frequently.

Life Together

Rural people do life together. The common life they share in the fishbowl connects them. But this connection in the church is often limited to those who appreciate

⁸⁹ Tobin.

the traditions and rituals they serve up every Sunday. For some TRCs, your theology and ability to keep the religious rules also determines the strength of your connection.

Rural people go the extra mile to help people. They help people with external problems but are ill-equipped to help people with their internal world. Again, rural people lean on custom, habit and ritual which are all external sources of support to help them deal with life.

As important as these things are for rural people, it does not equip them to deal with the internal struggles they have or how to support others with their internal struggles. The rural fishbowl encourages people to keep their internal issues a secret. Who wants everyone to know what your problems are? Gossip travels fast in the rural fishbowl.

The MRI church needs to provide a place for healing with confidentiality. People have issues and problems no matter where you live. Leadership in an MRI church needs healing skills or has access to those who do. When I was a pastor of a TRC, my wife and I spent significant amounts of time counseling others, and we barely scratched the surface of the problems people carry in a rural community. In cases beyond your capacity, we referred them to licensed counselors.

We used Theophostic Prayer Ministry (TPM) as our “go-to” approach to helping people. We found it an effective tool against the “lies” people internalize about themselves, God or others:

The results of this study, added with the results of previous TPM effectiveness research, seem to be suggesting that the academic and professional community should not be so dismissive towards TPM, that clinicians should perhaps become more open to become trained in TPM, and that academicians should do further investigative research of TPM (see Recommendations below). With research

support developing, TPM may become an increasingly viable option as another tool for the Christian psychotherapist's tool chest.⁹⁰

My wife and I experienced this form of healing ministry and others trained us in its application when we were in Chicago. Laymen can use this tool when they themselves have gone through this process and trained in how to do it.

This is not the only tool. We referred people occasionally to a good life coach. Other tools like spiritual direction and plain old good listening skills bring healing and comfort to those struggling in the dark.

Teaching people how to listen creates empathy, and this empathy provides an antidote to the shame people carry in their lives. This is a major conclusion of shame researcher Brené Brown: "If you put shame in a Petri dish, it needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence and judgment. If you put the same amount of shame in a Petri dish and douse it with empathy, it can't survive,"⁹¹

Doing life together transcends custom, habits and rituals. We share a much deeper connection when we "carry one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). This sharing of pain binds us to people because we know who they are beyond the rural church facade.

Jesus was not just a savior and a teacher; he was a healer.⁹² The inner suffering and bondage of people matters to God. An MRI church trained in healing incarnates an important aspect of Jesus' ministry

⁹⁰ Brigitte Ritchey, "An Effectiveness Survey Study of Theophostic Prayer Ministry" (DPHIL diss., Liberty University, 2013), 143, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=2349&context=doctoral>.

⁹¹ "What's the Most Powerful Antidote to Shame?" Happify Daily, accessed January 25, 2019, <https://www.happify.com/hd/powerful-antidote-to-shame-brene-brown/>.

⁹² Edna Mouton, "Jesus as Healer in the Gospel of Matthew: In Conversation with Alan Culpepper," *In die Skriflig* 50, no. 1 (November 2016): 2143, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i1.2143>.

CONCLUSION

“My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” (Jeremiah 2:13)

According to my research, the trends predict the closure of the bulk of TRCs.

With almost 1/3 of the churches in America being rural, this represents a serious problem not only for the witness of the church but also the health of the community because the rural church has been a central institution in rural communities for generations.

Is there hope? While it seems unlikely that these trends will reverse themselves, they might burn themselves out. Could a massive revolt against the digitization of human experience and a return to an “analog” world occur in the next twenty years? Might the trends create a catastrophe forcing people back to the sanctuary of rural life? Or perhaps technology itself might save rural communities? More and more people can commute to work via a “digital” highway. As long as rural communities offer high speed internet people can work anywhere. Technology creates longer life spans with longer retirements which might move people toward rural lifestyles instead of urban frenzy.

Should the trends reverse themselves and people moved back into rural areas the future might change for TRCs because of a larger pool of people from which to draw congregants. Rural communities would return to the “boom” times of western settlement. But would TRCs based in the “world-as-it-used-to-be” find these burgeoning rural residents from urban areas interested in what they offer? If the answer is “yes”, then TRCs stick people with a false biblical narrative and the Great Commission suffers. If

“no”, reversing the trends will not return them to the center of rural life and their decline will follow.

From a biblical perspective I would argue these questions are a distraction. Church survival is not the same thing as the Kingdom’s arrival. We need fresh metaphors and a new matrix for the rural church that invites us to abandon the “broken cisterns” of a culturally defined Christianity in the dried-up well of Christendom. The old metaphor of church-as a-building is an idol of culturally defined Christianity in a rural context.

The rural community needs those who can carry Christ’s story and birth disciples. This shapes a deeper form of humanity than either a rural church PTI “denizen” or an urban APC “believer.” The depth of our humanity rises the more we click on the icon of Christ because it connects us to a river of living water. This connection creates a Holy Spirit data stream that gives us access to the way, the truth and the life.

The rural church free of broken cisterns could then develop a new matrix focused around MRI and provide an EPIC format. How would this new matrix do life together?

Imagine a church that varied where it met. They might meet in a home one week, or gather at a pub, or have an EPIC experience outside next to a river. When they met, they wouldn’t do the same thing every time but be liturgically creative offering people opportunities to express themselves in different ways while engaging in ancient practices like the Lord’s Supper.

The preaching/teaching would adopt the strategy of a learning community and explore difficult questions in a safe community.

The rural church would focus on its strengths and capitalize on the natural world. It would offer stressed out urbanites opportunities to connect with God through creation.

Like people who fled to wilderness to experience the ministry of John the Baptist, people could come to repent from the domination of Screenland and experience God in the natural world. The creative rural church could offer all kinds of analog experiences.

There is hope for the future of the rural church if it can get the biblical story correct, connect with Christ and work with fresh metaphors and a matrix that works with younger generations in the new world.

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