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A New Rural Missiology: Bringing Hope to Forgotten People in Forgotten Places

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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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DEDICATION

To all the rural, remote, and small-town pastors who have felt isolated and unseen: this is for you. I know what it feels like to be overlooked and undervalued by your denomination because you serve in a small place. May you know that God sees you and that your ministry matters. Jesus is using you to bring hope and grace to the forgotten people and places of rural America. God has called you to make a large impact in a small place. The truth is that God delights to start big things in small places. Continue to plant the seeds of faith in the soil of sacrifice; God will be faithful to make the seeds grow.

I have written this dissertation with my local colleagues in mind. Our Castle Country Christian Pastors gatherings have provided me with inspiration, ideas, and feedback along the way. I am grateful for my fellow pastors and the fellowship we have together. My fellow co-workers in rural Utah, this is for you also. May you continue to run the race and persevere in the faith.

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Third, I want to thank my church, Price Chapel, and our leadership team for supporting me in this journey. Our governing board was supportive of me from the first time I mentioned the possibility of pursuing a Doctor of Ministry degree. The people of Price Chapel have prayed for me and encouraged me along the way. I am grateful for their patience with me and for giving me the opportunity to serve in a rural setting. Special thanks to Craig Foote who asked me almost every Sunday how my doctoral work was going and prayed for me often.

Lastly, thanks to Phil Carnes, my dissertation advisor, and Len Sweet, my lead mentor, for guiding me, inspiring me, and challenging me to greater levels of creativity. Thanks to the Sweet family for hosting our cohort at their home on Orcas Island. I am grateful for the Portland Seminary team and the privilege of being part of the tribe they are creating. Our DMin cohort has provided me a safe place to belong and discuss the challenges of life and ministry in the 21st century. I am forever grateful.

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PREFACE

In the spring of 2013, God began calling me to rural Utah. During a time of prayer I felt led by the holy spirit that I would soon be moving to Price, Utah in order to become the next lead pastor of Price Chapel. I grew up visiting Price Chapel as a kid during the summers when I would visit my grandparents. The church was started in 1944, and six of the charter members were my great-grandparents and great-great grandparents. However, I spent most of my growing-up years in San Jose, California, a diverse city of one million people. Price was always a place to visit but not a place I ever thought to which I would move. When God began to speak to me about Price Chapel that spring I ignored him. There was no way God was calling me to a small church in a small town in the middle of the desert.

Finally, on September 17, 2013, I relented to the pressure God had been placing on me. I called the district superintendent for the Central Pacific District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in order to inquire about what Price Chapel needed in their next pastor. Over the next several months God confirmed to both my wife and me that our next place of ministry would be Carbon County, Utah.

I began to research the area to which we would be moving to. I discovered that the coal mines were in decline, the economic situation was stagnant, population growth was non-existent, and the opioid epidemic was wreaking havoc. My heart began to break for what was happening not only in this rural community but in rural communities across America. This dissertation is a result of God calling me to rural America and giving me a burden for the rural church. I truly believe that the best days of the rural church are in

front of us, not behind us. My desire is to bring the hope of Jesus to the forgotten people and places of rural America.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NIV – New International Version. All scripture passages are from the NIV version of the Holy Bible.

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics

U.S. – United States of America

ABSTRACT

The social, economic, and religious landscape of rural America has changed. Rural America is experiencing brokenness and misplaced hope, yet rural churches are often ignored in terms of missional priority and resources by the Protestant church. However, the biblical story shows that God cares for rural people, and they have not been forgotten by him. A new rural missiology must be developed in order to do for rural ministry what Tim Keller and other urban theologians have done for city ministry in the 21st century. A new rural missiology will motivate Protestant churches to resource rural churches, dignify the call to rural ministry, and bring hope in the midst of brokenness. The new rural missiology will provide biblical weight and practical motivation to make the forgotten people in the forgotten places of America a priority for the church.

Chapter one examines the current reality of rural America due to globalization, economic changes, and the opioid epidemic. Chapter two chronicles the neglect of the small-town church and its struggle in the 21st century and then offers four purposes of a new rural missiology. Chapter three develops a theology for the rural mission throughout the Old Testament narrative. Chapter four further demonstrates the biblical basis for a new rural missiology by looking at the story of Jesus, the commandments given in the Great Commission, the scattering of the Jerusalem church in Acts 8, the example of the Pauline ministry to Colossae, and the future marriage of urban and rural in Revelation. Chapter five studies the work done in rural education pertaining to teacher retention and recruitment in order to find solutions that can be adopted to retain and recruit rural pastors. The conclusion, chapter six, includes practical ministry applications,

recommendations for future research, and ends with a new metaphor to fuel the rural mission.

CHAPTER 1:

RURAL CRISIS

A shift has been taking place in rural America in the 21st century. What was once a place of wide open spaces, boundless optimism, strong families, and resilient faith has now become a place defined by brokenness and hopelessness. In 2017, *The Wall Street Journal* published a research-based article titled "Rural America Is The New Inner City."[1] Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg demonstrated that "in terms of poverty, college attainment, teenage births, divorce, death rates from heart disease and cancer, reliance on federal disability insurance and male labor-force participation, rural counties now rank the worst among the four major U.S. population groupings."[2] In their article they summarized research which painted a picture of a cracked and crumbling rural landscape.

Imagine living in a small town of 8,500 people in the high desert of Utah where historically coal mining was king. The town at one time was booming, but now the coal mines slowly close, the coal-fired power plants are decommissioned one by one, and hope slowly drains from the community. The best and brightest young adults move away for work, the opioid crisis is leaving a wake of destruction, and the suicide rate is one of the highest in the nation. The population slowly declines and ages. Many of the civic organizations struggle to recruit volunteers and stay open.

Countless people look to Christian churches for help. One church opens a food bank, another church starts a drug recovery ministry, and other churches are bombarded

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[1] Janey 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.

[2] Ibid.

with requests for help with housing. Yet, the church is struggling too. The baby boomer generation raised their kids in the church, but now most of their kids have moved away for better economic opportunities. Many of the young adults who are left have struggled with addiction to prescription opioids, heroin, or meth. The churches struggle to pay a pastor and struggle even more to find a pastor. The truth is that not many pastors want to go to a declining small town, let alone one in the middle of Utah. Many of these churches feel overlooked by their denominations and wonder if anyone cares about their predicament. This story is unique to the author, but it is not a unique story. It is the story of many churches in rural America.

Richard E. Wood writes in *The Survival of Rural America* that urban and suburban Americans have a nostalgic view of what rural America is today:

> And if they were asked to imagine rural towns, they would probably picture a relatively stable little place with a church, some barns, and modest, well-tended houses with white siding and a front porch, and perhaps there would be a "downtown" café with people wearing overalls and John Deer baseball caps and drinking Maxwell House coffee. That's how I – as a representative of urban America – probably would have imagined rural America a couple of years ago.[3]

This dissertation will show that suburban and urban church leaders today have an outdated, nostalgic view of rural America as well. Like many Americans they are not aware of the rapid changes that have taken place in the 21st century in the rural landscape.

Although rural America is experiencing brokenness and misplaced hope, rural churches are often ignored in terms of missional priority and resources by Protestant churches. They are not seen as worthy of investment because they are small and lack the same potential for growth as churches in suburban or urban settings. Small-town

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[3] Richard E. Wood, *Survival Of Rural America: Small Victories And Bitter Harvests* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), xii.

churches have been overlooked and undervalued. As a result, the rural church "is in the middle of a massive drought caused by a lack of vision, attitude, and leadership."[4] However, if urban and suburban churches will come to see rural America as a missional priority, then there is hope not only for the rural church but also for the broken people in these forgotten places.

Ultimately, this dissertation will argue for the need to develop a new rural missiology in order to compel Protestant churches to devote people and resources to bring the hope of Jesus to rural areas.[5] In the 18th and 19th centuries there was missional momentum for reaching rural America. Preachers during the Great Awakening and the circuit riders of the Methodist movement saw small towns and remote areas as opportunities for ministry. Sadly, that missional momentum has expired. The landscape and of rural America has changed. The 21st century church needs a new rural missiology. This new missiology will be outlined in chapters two through five. Research was conducted through surveying academic articles, books, conferences, podcasts, and articles related to rural America and the rural church. Additionally, biblical study was conducted through a comprehensive examination of the rural mission found in both the Old Testament and New Testament.

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[4] Shannon O'Dell, *Transforming Church In Rural America* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Publishing Group, 2010), 102.

[5] I use the phrase "new rural missiology" instead of "rural missiology" to delinate a missiology that is unique to 21st century North America. In recent years a comprephesive biblical missiology for rural America has not been developed. 100 years ago, rural communites made up half the population of America. Today, rural communities make up less than 20 percent of America. Rural Americans are now an overwhelming minorty in the United States. Therefore, what is being accomplished in this dissertation is the development of something "new." A comparison would be the "new urban missiology" that has been developed in recent years by people like Tim Keller in New York City.

Before the scriptural investigation can begin, first the current state of rural communities and rural churches and why they need the attention of Protestant denominations and leaders must be understood. In the next section, evidence will be given for the pain rural Americans are experiencing because of globalization, economic changes, and the opioid epidemic.

Defining Rural

In order to understand the crisis that rural America faces today Christians first must understand a basic definition of "rural." When people think of rural America they often imagine rolling hills and wide-open spaces. Yet, what makes an area "rural" is difficult to define. The United States government uses two different methods to define whether an area qualifies as rural or urban. The first method, urban versus rural, is used by the United States Census Bureau. The second method, metropolitan versus nonmetropolitan, is used by the United States Office of Budget and Management.[6] The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban populations as either urbanized areas of 50,000 or more people, or urban clusters of at least 2,500 but no more than 50,000 people.[7] Anything outside of an urbanized area or urban cluster is then defined as rural. The U.S. Office of Budget and Management defines metropolitan areas as "urban regions comprised of a central county, plus adjacent counties that are highly integrated with the center."[8] Non-metropolitan areas are delineated as "counties that neither have an

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[6] David L. Brown and Kai A. Schafft, *Rural People & Communities In The 21st Century: Resilience & Transformation* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 18.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

urbanized area of 50,000 people nor are integrated by workforce community with a metropolitan central county."[9]

Further research uncovers that social scientists and government administrators often have different opinions of what makes an area rural.[10] For the purposes of this work, rural will be defined as non-metropolitan counties of less than 50,000 people. However, rural is also defined by the people who live in the community viewing themselves as being rural with respect to culture, values, and ways of living.[11]

The percentage of people living in rural America has radically changed in the last 200 years. According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow's extensive research, "in 1810, 95 percent of the U.S. population was rural; in 1910, 55 percent was; and in 2010, the number declined to only 20 percent."[12] As of 2017, about 60 million people or one in five Americans live in rural America.[13] To better explain the population breakdown of these roughly sixty million people, Wuthnow writes,

> Most Americans who live in small towns, though, live in the larger of these communities. Twenty-nine percent live in towns of 10,000 to 25,000 residents. Twenty-three percent live in towns of 5,000 to 10,000 residents. Another 24 percent live in communities of 2,000 to 5,000 residents. Twelve percent live in towns with populations between 1,000 and 2,000. And only 11 percent live in towns with populations under 1,000.[14]

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Brown and Schafft, *Rural People & Communities*, 4.

[11] Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, And The Future Of The Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, VI: Herald Press, 2017), 31.

[12] Robert Wuthnow, *Left Behind: Decline And Rage In Rural America* (n.p.: Amazon Digital Services, 2018), loc. 598, Kindle.

[13] United States Census Bureau, "One In Five Americans Live In Rural Areas," August 9, 2017, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html.

[14] Robert Wuthnow, *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Unversity Press, 2013), 8.

The experience in a town of 25,000 residents is much different than living in a town of less than 1,000 residents. A small city of 25,000 is likely to have multiple restaurants, schools, and entertainment options. A small town of 1,000 residents may only have one small store, a gas station, and one elementary school. Nonetheless, what they have in common is decline. The trend is that more people are moving to urban areas and less people are living in rural communities. Not only is rural America different today than it used to be, the United States has also undergone significant changes in the last few decades. These changes have come as a result of globalization, changes in the economy, the opioid epidemic. Globalization has had overwhelming influence not only on rural America but on the entire globe.[15]

Globalization

Before globalization rural areas were often isolated from outside influences and disconnected from urban centers. Globalization has increased the interconnectedness of both social and economic life and has resulted in massive changes in information and transportation technologies.[16] High speed internet has transformed the way that rural youth are able to communicate with the culture outside of their small communities. The result is that rural communities have less control over their own destinies. Globalization has resulted in "a globally organized and managed free trade, free enterprise economy

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[15] Conner Bailey, Leif Jensen and Elizabeth Ransom, *Rural America In A Globalizing World: Problems and Prospects for the 2010s* (Morgantown, WV: West Virgina University Press, 2014), xiv.

[16] Ibid.

pursued by largely unaccountable political and economic elites."[17] This has caused many rural Americans to fear "that small-town ways of life are disappearing."[18]

Government policies have made it much easier for corporations to move their production offshore, thus leaving many rural communities deprived of the non-farm jobs that allowed them to thrive.[19] Robert L. Thompson from the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago explains that "the liberalization of international trade, which has resulted from progressive reductions in manufacturing tariff barriers in the post-World War II era, has facilitated globalization."[20] These policies have resulted in anxiety and rage in many rural communities about jobs being shifted overseas.[21] To many rural Americans, "the social contract between citizens, corporations and the government has been breached. Small-town workers see their morals as being superior to those of outsourcing companies."[22] As a result of this change rural people often look for someone else to blame and leaders who promise to restore the glory of the past.[23]

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[17] Brown and Schafft, *Rural People & Communities*, 157.

[18] Wuthnow, *Left Behind*, loc. 105.

[19] Peter Cole, "A Tale Of Two Towns: Gobalization And Rural Deindustrialization In The U.S.," *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* 12, no. 4 (2009): 541, https://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-4580.2009.00259.x.

[20] Robert L. Thompson, "Globalization And Rural America," *Chicago Fed Letter* no. 239 (2007), https://www.chicagofed.org/publications/chicago-fed-letter/2007/june-239.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Cole, "A Tale Of Two Towns," 555.

[23] Lon Hilder, "A Story, Metaphor, And A Matrix For The Truly Rural Church That Grows Christ Followers In An Uncertain Future," (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2019), 36, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.ed/314.

In the 2016 U.S. Presidential election this attitude of looking for someone to bring back the past was revealed.[24] The candidate who seemed most against free trade agreements and the outsourcing of manufacturing plants won the rural vote by a large margin. Wuthnow reports, "Exit polls showed that 62 percent of the rural vote went to Donald Trump, compared with 50 percent of the suburban vote and only 35 percent of the urban vote."[25] Adamy and Overberg believe the reason rural areas voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump was because he "pledged to revive forgotten towns by scaling back regulations, trade agreements and illegal immigration and encouraging manufacturing companies to hire more American workers."[26] Others would argue that rural Americans were ready to speak up to the rapidly changing culture and found their voice in Donald Trump. Wuthnow says, "Small towns are stereotypically associated with conservative moral and political outlooks. They differ from cities in factors that further shape beliefs and attitudes, such as racial and ethnic diversity."[27] Rural residents often are filled with anger towards Washington D.C. Wuthnow writes:

> The frustration is deepened by the sense that Washington is all talk and no action, wasteful and impersonal, a place inhabited by highfalutin ideas and smooth rhetoric but ignorant of the common person. Residents are angry that Washington seems run by special interests that do nothing but cater to lobbyists and partisan politics. Common sense, they think, suggests that Washington has become so irresponsible, so unresponsive to grassroots ideas, that it is high time to clean house.[28]

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[24] Stephen Witmer makes the point in his book *A Big Gospel in Small Places* that increased attention has been paid to rural America since the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Stephen Witmer, *A Big Gospel In Small Places* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 19-20.

[25] Wuthnow, *Left Behind*, loc. 33.

[26] Adamy and Overberg, "Rural America Is."

[27] Wuthnow, *Small-Town America*, 6.

[28] Wuthnow, *Left Behind*, loc. 145.

Rural Americans realize that they are in the minority and that many of the politicians in Washington do not understand their reality. How does this shape their outlook? How many feel left behind, forgotten, or discounted?

Stephen Witmer, pastor of Pepperell Christian Fellowship and adjunct professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, writes, "What happens when a dominant population (in this case rural residents, many of them farmers) is so rapidly reduced to minority status? There's often a deep sense of loss among those who remain."[29] Rural communities are marked by this sense of loss. They have lost residents, but they have also lost influence in the culture. Rural Americans are experiencing what it feels like to be left out and left behind. Witmer points out, "Their desire to be remembered was so powerful that they gave their votes to a fabulously wealthy urbanite who promised to give them a voice."[30] When a population group feels overlooked they often try to gain power back through anyone who will give them a voice.

What is clear is globalization that has been driven by many of the urban elite has not only impacted the culture of rural counties, it has impacted the politics of rural counties. The result has been a widening divide politically between rural America and the rest of the nation. Increasingly, rural Americans are skeptical of the global elite and upset about the impact globalization is having on their communities.

While one can argue the negative impact of globalization on rural Americans, they would be remiss to skip over its benefits. Globalization has increased the agricultural market worldwide and has reduced the cost and increased the access of many goods to

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[29] Witmer, *A Big Gospel*, 30.

[30] Ibid., 31.

rural communities.[31] Rural farmers have access to markets they did not have access to in previous decades because of fair trade deals. Rural Americans can now purchase any item they desire online through Amazon, Wal-Mart, or countless other retailers and receive them in just a few days. Regrettably, this has impacted the ability of local retailers to offer goods at competitive prices. There are strong movements in rural communities to purchase items and services locally and prohibit the online shopping world from devastating local establishments.

Economic Changes

Globalization has given rise to a cultural, political, and economic shift in rural America. As the United States has moved away from agriculture, manufacturing, and mining as the backbone of the economy, rural America has been left with a fractured economy.[32] Although, much of the country has been booming in the post-recession recovery, rural communities have struggled to keep up. In 2015, metropolitan incomes grew by six percent, while non-metropolitan incomes only rose by three percent.[33] The lack of high-paying jobs in rural America has meant that many rural workers "must either move to the city to find a good job that is matched to their education and experience, or commute long distances to urban opportunities."[34] The result has been twofold: the brain drain of rural communities and the aging of rural demographics. Adamy and Overberg

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[31] Thompson, "Globalization And Rural America."

[32] Bailey, Jensen and Ransom, *Rural America,* xiii-xxx.

[33] Wuthnow, *Left Behind*, loc. 44.

[34] Brown and Schafft, *Rural People & Communities*, 12.

have postulated that "as employers left small towns, many of the most ambitious young residents packed up and left too."[35]

In 1980, the median age of people in small towns and big cities almost matched. Today, the median age in a small town is about 41 years – five years above the median in big cities."[36] In the 21st century rural America is aging. Young people are moving away from rural communities for education and economic opportunities. Nevertheless, just because many young residents move away does not mean that a rural community is experiencing a significant brain drain. Brown and Schafft argue that "brain drain is more correctly conceptualized as the inability to replace out-migrants, not out-migration in and of itself."[37] However, many rural communities are experiencing just that. They are "faced with a substantial challenge when overall migration loss occurs simultaneously with a net loss of the best prepared youth."[38] Those young people who do stay endure a depressed economy with little opportunity.[39]

Rural America is facing a population crisis that has been driven by economic decline. According to recent research done by Adamy and Overberg, "the total rural population – accounting for births, death and migration – has declined for five straight years."[40] Further research reveals that during the past two decades, rural communities

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[35] Adamy and Overberg, "Rural America Is."

[36] Adamy and Overberg, "Rural America Is."

[37] Brown and Schafft, *Rural People & Communities*, 114.

[38] Ibid., 115.

[39] Hilder, "Truly Rural Church," 29.

[40] Adamy and Overberg, "Rural America Is."

have experienced an out-migration of their young adults.[41] Such an exodus has an overwhelming impact on the level of hope and optimism in a small town. As the best and brightest move away the dream of tomorrow being better than today fades with their departure. This decline is concerning enough that Wood writes:

> Unless something can be done to stabilize rural population trends it is quite likely that by the twenty-second century most of small-town rural America–and all that it connotes-will have disappeared. By the next century, rural American may survive only as a theme park along an interstate highway: Six Flags over FarmWorld, taking its place alongside Williamsburg and the Alamo as reminders of another era.[42]

Wood is probably being overly dramatic, yet the trends are concerning. Rural communities will continue to decline unless they are willing to fight for their future. New businesses can be started, and the abundance of natural resources and beauty in many rural areas gives hope for economic development and tourism.[43] A major hurdle for the flourishing of economic development in these communities is the decline in rural lending and the lack of access to capital. Ruth Simon and Coulter Jones of the *Wall Street Journal* performed research into the scarcity of credit in rural America. They discovered

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[41] Katherine M, Keyes, Joanne E. Brady, Jennifer R. Havens and Sandar Galea, "Understanding The Rural – Urban Differences In Nonmedical Prescription Opioid Use And Abuse In The United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 2 (2014), 52, https://doi.org/10.2105%2FAJPH.2013.301709.

[42] Wood, *Survival of Rural America*, xvi-xvii.

[43] There are rural areas of the country that are booming because of tourism. The small towns outside of many of the National Parks are examples. One such town is Moab, UT. Moab is host to tourists headed to Arches and Canyonlands National Parks. The town of around 6,000 is packed with tourists on the weekends and during the peak season. Business is booming but living wage jobs and affordable housing have become major problems. There is still a dark underbelly to many of these rural towns that seem to be thriving because of tourism.

that as the big banks get even larger, they do not believe small markets are worth the investment of their time.[44]

According to Simon and Jones, "the financial fabric of rural America is fraying. Even as lending revives around cities, it is drying up in small towns."[45] Globalization has resulted in the creation of massive global banks that are eating up the local community-owned banks. Of the "1,980 rural counties, 625 don't have a locally owned community bank – double the number in 1994."[46] In order for the rural economy to have a chance to rebound there must be access to capital for entrepreneurs.

The economic and population struggles of rural America also play a role in the social struggles they are facing. Perhaps the biggest social struggle, which is having devastating effects on rural families, is the opioid epidemic. The next section will explore the impact of this epidemic on rural America.

The Opioid Epidemic

Opioids are drugs that originate from the opium poppy. The opium poppy has been used as a narcotic in many cultures for centuries. However, in recent years, particularly in the United States, pharmaceutical companies have aggressively marketed opioid pain relievers to doctors and insurance companies as an effective way of treating pain. These prescription drugs were sold to both doctors and the public as being very

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[44] Ruth Simon and Coutler Jones, "Goodbye, George Bailey: Decline Of Rural Lending Crimps Small-Town Business," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 25, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/goodbye-george-bailey-decline-of-rural-lending-crimps-small-town-business-1514219515.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

unlikely to result in addiction. However, Americans now know that is not true. Opiate-based prescription drugs can be highly addictive for many people in a similar way to their illegal cousin, heroin. The United States currently finds itself facing an epidemic of deaths related to opioid abuse.[47] In 2008, "drug overdoses, mostly from opiates, surpassed auto fatalities as the leading cause of accidental death in the United States."[48]

Throughout the rural landscape the opioid epidemic and lack of access to treatment have amplified the harm to rural communities.[49] While the opioid epidemic has impacted the whole country, it has been "especially severe in rural, largely white communities."[50] The question is whether the opioid epidemic is having a greater impact on rural communities than their urban and suburban counterparts. Recent research published in the *American Journal of Public Health* confirms that, "Individuals in counties outside metropolitan areas have higher rates of drug-poising deaths, including deaths from opioids, and opioid poisonings in nonmetropolitan counties have increased at a rate greater than threefold the increase in metropolitan counties."[51] Statistics show that while the opioid epidemic has impacted almost every community, rural areas have been the hardest hit.

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[47] The book *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* by Sam Quiones is an excellent resource for understanding the history and causes of the opioid epidemic in the United States. This is a complex issue that is gaining more attention recently from both politicans and the press. There are several lawsuits pending against pharmaceutical companies who have been blamed for the problem.

[48] Sam Quiones, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2016), loc. 112, Kindle.

[49] Adamy and Overberg, "Rural America Is."

[50] Witmer, *A Big Gospel*, 52.

[51] Keyes, et al., "Understanding The Rural," 52.

Researchers see a few reasons for this difference. One reason is that rural Americans are more likely to be employed in jobs that require physical labor, such as mining, farming, or manufacturing. These careers increase the likelihood of being injured and potentially receiving a legitimate prescription for opioid-based pain medicine, such as OxyContin, that could lead to a developing addiction. In fact, "evidence indicates that chronic pain and injury are more common in rural than in urban areas."[52] Those who have been injured after decades of working in coal mines in Appalachia or in the Mountain west often look to pain clinics for relief. Research by Overberg has also shown that "rates of disability among small-town workers have long been higher, partly due to such physically taxing jobs as farming and mining."[53] Pain clinics have multiplied across rural communities in order to provide opioid-based medicine for injured workers.

A second reason for the difference in opioid related deaths between rural and urban areas is related to the exodus of many of the highest achieving young adults to larger cities for work. The young people who are focused on education and career opportunities move to larger cities. There is evidence to suggest that young adults who stay in economically depressed rural communities have a greater risk factor for drug abuse. Additionally, they are more apt to have begun drug dependencies in their youth, which resulted in their downward social drift.[54] Many rural communities simply do not

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[52] Ibid., 54.

[53] Paul Overberg, "The Divide Between America's Prosperous Cities And Struggling Small Towns – In 20 Charts," *Wall Street Journal,* December 29, 2017, https://wsj.com/articles/the-divide-between-americas-prosperous-cities-and-struggling-smalltownsin-20-charts-1514543401.

[54] Ibid.

have the resources in order to provide recovery programs, sober living homes, and transitional housing that is needed in order to help people get free from addiction.

A third reason is that the economic struggles and underemployment in rural communities results in a stress-filled environment that places many people at a higher risk for opioid abuse.[55] One way to measure the stress and anxiety experienced by rural persons is through rates of suicide. Sadly, "the nation's suicide rate is worst in small towns."[56] A contributing factor for this increased suicide rate is the lack of access to mental health facilities in rural communities.[57] By all accounts rural America is experiencing a profound brokenness and lack of hope. This brokenness impacts the local churches in these depressed rural communities.

Challenges for the Rural Church

There are five unique challenges for the rural church in light of the struggles that globalization, economic changes, and the opioid epidemic has brought to much of rural America. The first challenge is the political polarization of rural America and as a result the political polarization of rural churches. Brad Roth in his book *God's Country* states, "Theological and social convictions often cleave along urban and rural lines, with urban congregations taking more liberal views while rural churches defend traditional beliefs."[58] Rural communities voted for President Trump in 2016 at almost twice the rate of urban

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[55] Keyes, Brady, Havens, and Galea, "Understanding The Rural," 55.

[56] Overberg, "The Divide Between."

[57] Rates of sucidie are very high in the Mountain west. Some researchers argue that the higher altitude and lack of oxygen is a contributing factor to the higher suicide rate in rural areas in this part of the nation.

[58] Roth, *God's Country*, 214.

residents and there is a negative attitude in many rural communities not only toward the federal government but also toward liberal policies.

Negativism can infect small towns that used to be brimming with optimism. Wuthnow argues that rural America is angry:

> 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 communities. It stems from the fact that the social expectations, relationships, and obligations that constitute the moral community they take for granted and which they live are year by year being fundamentally fractured.[59]

Many "surveys have found, working-class whites are the most pessimistic group in America."[60] Churches must be careful to frame the gospel in a way that relates to this political climate while also challenging the areas in which rural churchgoers may be blinded by politics from the message of the gospel.[61] There can also be a gap between the political beliefs of clergy who were educated in urban schools and the rural people that they pastor. Political polarization can be a landmine that rural churches struggle to navigate.[62]

The second challenge for rural churches is the problem of population decline. As rural communities decline in population it is harder for churches to grow numerically. The sad truth is that "as rural towns have declined, so too have the presence of Christian

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[59] Wuthnow, *Left Behind*, loc. 105.

[60] J.D. Vance, *Hilbilly Elegy: A Memior of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (N.p.: Amazon Digital Services, 2016), 4, Kindle.

[61] As a Pastor I have worked to combat these attitudes by reguarly preaching on forgiveness, loving your enemies, and overcoming anger and bitterness. I have also preached sermon series during election seasons to help people be motivated by love rather than by fear.

[62] Historically black churches in rural communities would likely have a different experience regarding political polization than rural churches that are predominately white.

witness."[63] Many rural churches have closed, and thousands others are in steep decline. This is not true for all rural churches because "the reality is that rural population shifts have been uneven, and while some communities have experienced decline or plateau, others have held their own or even grown."[64] Mary Jo Neitz found in her research that "rural townships do not all have declining populations, nor are all rural churches declining in membership."[65]

However, for those experiencing not only decline but an aging population, leaders will need to find ways to maintain a spirit of hope among their congregations. Even when rural communities experience inward migration it often constitutes an older demographic. Researcher Tena Stone says, "The biggest migrators to rural communities are people over 50 years old."[66] Because of this declining and aging demographic, Roth believes that the "challenges to growth that face the rural church cannot be fixed by simply importing church growth strategies from the suburbs."[67] Church growth strategies for growing communities will not apply holistically to declining communities.[68]

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[63] Kyle Borg, "The Need For Rural Ministry," *TABLETALK Magazine,* August 2017, https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2017/08/the-need-for-rural-ministry/.

[64] Roth, *God's Country*, 118.

[65] Mary Jo Neitz, "Encounters in the Heartland: What Studying Rural Churches Taught Me about Working Across Differences," *Sociology of Religion* 70, no. 4 (2009): 343–361, http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srp065.

[66] Tena Stone, "The State Of Rural Church Planting," Rural Church Planting Talks, The Church Planting Leadership Fellowship, 2016, audio of lecture, https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/rural-church-planting-talks-from-cplf/.

[67] Ibid., 121.

[68] As a rural pastor I have been frustrated when attending ministry conferences such as *Exponential* or the Willow Creek *Leadership Conference* that only platform large church pastors from urban and suburban areas. Few resources or instruction is offered at these conferences that is relevant to pastors from small churches in sparsely populated counties.

Connected to population decline is the phenomenon of the best and brightest of the young adults fleeing for the opportunities presented to them by urban centers. Brain drain is the third challenge faced by the church. One can find that a "profound sense of loss haunts many rural communities."[69] The outcome is that churches not only suffer with this sense of loss but also struggle to find young leaders on which to build the future of the church. Congregations are proud of their young adults going to college but at the same time mourn the reality that they will likely never return to their community. Leadership development will be extremely vital for these congregations in order to survive and thrive in the future.

The fourth challenge for rural churches is the economic struggles that result in the loss of donations. Without a strong middle-class backbone rural congregations will no longer be able to function by the same economic model that worked for them in the past. As "the majority of jobs available to rural workers tend to be low-wage and low-skill with limited career advancement opportunities and sparse benefits the bottom-line for churches will be affected in a negative way."[70] The Pinetops Foundation found through their research that "average incomes in many rural regions can often be below the poverty rate."[71] Clergy may have to adjust to being increasingly bi-vocational and finding additional streams of income. Churches who can adapt to this changing environment will have the best chances of survival.

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[69] Ibid., 65.

[70] Bailey, Jensen and Ransom, *Rural America*, 300.

[71] John Crossman, *The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050* (Seattle, WA: Pinetops Foundation, 2018), 43.

The last challenge for rural churches involves the problem of addiction created by the opioid epidemic. Addiction impacts many of the families in these communities. Churches will need to provide support to the affected families while also providing recovery ministries for addicts. For many small towns, "the organization in which assistance is mobilized is usually the church."[72] Local congregations will have an opportunity to be the place which the hurting come to look for help. Churches have opportunities not only to begin recovery ministries themselves but to host groups such as Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous in their church buildings.

In order for rural churches to thrive in the future they will need to find answers to these problems. Rural clergy will also need to develop a gospel message that speaks to brokenness and hopelessness by offering healing, freedom, and hope in Christ. While the gospel message must remain simple, it must also be complex enough to deal with the implications of globalization, economic decline, and opiate addiction that have devastated countless rural families.

Denominations and church planting movements must be convinced to see rural America as a mission field that is worthy of their time and attention. They can play an important role in the revitalization of rural communities through reviving local churches and planting new churches that will bring the hope of Jesus in the midst of economic and social depression. Small-town pastor Donnie Griggs says in his book *Small Town Jesus* that "it seems that the cities have been prioritized with the gospel while the small towns have been left behind."[73] Kyle Borg writes in TABLETALK magazine that in the last 30

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[72] Wuthnow, *Left Behind*, loc. 132.

[73] Donnie Griggs, *Small Town Jesus: Taking Gospel Ministry Seriously In Seemingly Unimportant Places* (n.p.: Amazon Digital Services, 2016), loc. 181, Kindle.

years "a significant movement has devoted much of the church's resources to planting and growing churches in the city."[74] While not diminishing the good work that has been done in the cities the church must call attention to the rural areas that have been overlooked. Church leaders have an opportunity in rural America to "penetrate the culture with a contextualized approach to sharing the gospel and doing ministry."[75] However, this will only happen if Christians are no longer ignorant to the social, cultural, and economic changes being experienced throughout much of rural America in the 21st century.

Globalization, economic changes, and the opioid epidemic has contributed to a loss of hope in rural communities. A revitalized rural church cannot solve every cultural, economic, and sociological challenge facing rural America. However, thriving rural churches will be able to bring the hope of Jesus into communities struggling with these challenges. Church ministry in small towns is vital in the 21st century and beyond.

Many churches in rural America have been knocked down and seem to be on the verge of being knocked out. However, these churches have the capacity to become comeback churches with the right leadership in place. Church revitalization requires new metaphors, new vision, and usually new leadership. A revitalized church begins to dream again as it returns to health. The small-town church can be strengthened through a mix of revitalizing existing churches and planting new ones.

There is hope for rural communities. Rural America has burned brightly in the past as an example of values, culture, and hard work to the rest of the nation. Richard E.

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[74] Borg, "The Need For Rural."

[75] Ibid., loc. 763.

Wood in his book *Survival of Rural America* makes the observation that "most of our presidents have come from rural America, and at least twelve have been ranchers or farmers."[76] Rural America is not just made up of uneducated, poor, backwards rednecks. Unfortunately, that is the view of the rural landscape that many urban and suburban people have been taught. Wood says that "the 83 percent of Americans who live in metropolitan areas have about as much real-life knowledge of the other 17 percent, and of rural America in general as they do of central Africa."[77]

Rural areas have been working to overcome urban snobbery for millennia. Leonard Sweet exposes the meaning behind the word "pagan" in his book *Mother Tongue.* He shares that "the literal meaning of pagan is 'country dweller'."[78] Urban Christians in America cannot have this view of rural people if they desire to be faithful to the call of the Great Commission to reach every forgotten place and forgotten people group.

The rural church cannot afford to become a monument to the past. It can become part of a movement of restoration if it will embrace change, creativity, and urgency. The church has an opportunity to fill small towns with a new sound. The sound of brokenness needs to be replaced with the sound of healing. For the rural church to thrive in the future it must supplant the soundtrack of brokenness with a new playlist of hope.

This vision is only possible if Protestant churches see rural America as a legitimate mission field worthy of if its time, resources, and most talented people. Borg

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[76] Wood, *Survival Of Rural America*, 10.

[77] Ibid, xi.

[78] Leonard Sweet, *Mother Tongue: How Our Heritage Shapes Our Story* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2017), 112.

insists that "rural America needs to be seen (and invested in) by the broader church as a mission field."[79] The goal of this work is to create a new rural missiology that will provide biblical weight and practical motivation to make the forgotten people in the forgotten places of America a priority.

[79] Borg, "The Need For Rural."

CHAPTER 2:

THE CASE FOR A RURAL MISSIOLOGY

There is a forgotten people that are being neglected by the Protestant church in America. That people group is rural Americans. Rural communities are a mission field that deserves the attention of Protestant churches, denominations, and church-planting organizations. Churches throughout the United States celebrate those brave missionaries willing to go to the forgotten places of the world to tell forgotten people about the good news of Jesus.[1] Churches mobilize resources, leaders, and create giving campaigns to send Christian workers to small villages in Africa and remote places in China. Christians elevate their calling and admire their sacrifice. They are motivated by a theology of missions that compels them to give, pray, and send. Churches hold missions conferences and rallies to excite congregations about reaching the unreached people groups in the world. All of this is good, right, and admirable. Nonetheless, the global winds of faith have been shifting. The number of people identifying as Christians in the United States is declining while the number of Christians in the global South is on the increase.

Increasingly, Christians in America are realizing that there is a massive mission field in their own backyard. The statistics are sobering. It is estimated that only 58% of Gen Z youth will stay in their Christian faith when they become adults.[2] These statistics remind Christians that every generation is a new unreached people group. Leonard Sweet

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[1] The language of "forgotten people and forgotten places" is taken from Bryan Jarrett who is the Pastor of Northplace Church. This is a wealthy suburban church that is investing resources into revitalizing the rural church. Bryan was a speaker at the 2017 Rural Matters Conference and was interviewed by the author.

[2] Crossman, *The Great Opportunity*, 58.

says that "our inability to reproduce the faith is the number one problem facing our families and churches today."[3] As a result, the church is quickly rethinking how to reach the major population centers with the good news of Jesus. Conferences are held frequently on how to grow urban and suburban churches. Conversely, there is a forgotten people in a forgotten place that is being neglected by the American church. That forgotten place is rural America and in particular economically and socially depressed rural America. These are the small villages and remote places to which no one wants to go. Ministry conferences on reaching the next generation of rural Americans are virtually non-existent.

The Rural Reality

There is a movement being led by organizations such as The Rural Matters Institute at Wheaton College to bring attention to the rural church.[4] In 2016, they commissioned research on the state of the rural church that has been published as the "Rural Matters Strategy Brief." They begin with demographic and population numbers that show that rural America consists of roughly "17% of the U.S. population – approximately 51 million people – live in rural areas.[5] However, the percentage of Americans living in rural America varies, depending on the source, from 14% to 20%.[6]

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[3] Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet To Table* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), 1.

[4] Part of my research was attending online conferences hosted by the Rural Matters Institute.

[5] Tena Stone, "Rural Matters Strategy Brief," *Rural Matters Institute*, September 6, 2016, https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/resources/research/rural-matters-strategy-briefing/.

[6] There is variance in these numbers because of the ways different groups define and measure "rural" in terms of population. Definitions of what consitutes as rural varies even within the United States government.

Nonetheless, if rural America was its own country, by population it would be approximately the 26th largest in the world, which would make it larger than Kenya, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia.[7] The time has come for American Christians to see depressed rural communities as legitimate missional opportunities. Churches celebrate missionaries going to small villages in third world countries but overlook those who bring the gospel to the small towns and villages of America. Sarah Pulliam Bailey from *The Washington Post* writes:

> In recent decades, white evangelical leaders made the American city their mission field. If you wanted to change hearts and minds, you had to go to the cultural centers of power, such as New York City or Washington, where the population was growing. Now some evangelicals are wondering if that shift has caused them to overlook the needs and concerns of their counterparts in rural America.[8]

America is starting to wake up to the plight of the forgotten people of rural America. Anthony Bradley, a professor at King's College in New York, writes, "By overlooking the working class and small towns, urban-suburban evangelicals have not been addressing issues close to people there, including poverty, high mortality rates, drug use and job loss."[9] The elite in American cities are also beginning to realize the dangers of overlooking rural America. The Pew Research Center found that 57% of urban and 61% of suburban Americans believe that rural America is receiving less than their fair share of money from the federal government.[10] A consensus is beginning to build that

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[7] "List Of Countries By Population (United Nations)," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified November 26, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_(United_Nations).

[8] Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Some Evangelicals Question Whether They Have Overlooked The Rural Church," *The Washington Post,* December 15, 2016.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Kim Parker et al., "What Unites And Divides Urban, Suburban And Rural Communities," *Pew Research Center,* May 22, 2018, 9, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/05/22/what-unites-and-divides-urban-suburban-and-rural-communities/.

rural America needs more attention from its urban and suburban neighbors if it is going to be revitalized.

Many Christians would assume that rural America has already been saturated with the gospel. However, "the least reached states in the country are heavily rural (Utah, New England) and the large majority of the 100 least reached counties are rural."[11] While there are numerous church buildings scattering the rural landscape, many rural people embrace more of a historical cultural Christianity than a vibrant faith that results in following Jesus.[12] For many "rural religion is stereotypically known to have a kind of Bible-belt theology that pits evil and good sharply against one another."[13]

Cultural Christianity is still prevalent in many small towns. Aaron Morrow, the author of *Small Town Mission*, argues that "small towns tend to be loaded with religious non-Christians."[14] Additionally, many rural communities simply lack life-giving churches that move people from cultural Christianity to committed discipleship.

When people picture a rural church, they think of a white building, large curved windows and a tall steeple in the middle of a picturesque field. Social scientist Mary Jo Neitz published an article in the *Sociology of Religion* arguing that "rural churches as symbols inspire nostalgia."[15] Unfortunately, the reality does not match the wistful perception. Glenn Daman in his book *The Forgotten Church* writes, "Rural America is

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[11] Stone, "Rural Matters Strategy Brief."

[12] Stone, "Rural Matters Strategy Brief."

[13] Wuthnow, *Left Behind*, loc. 1226.

[14] Aaron Morrow, *Small Town Mission* (n.p.: Amazon Digital Services, 2016, Kindle), 94.

[15] Mary Jo Neitz. "Encounters In The Heartland: What Studying Rural Churches Taught Me About Working Across Differences," *Sociology of Religion* 70, no. 4 (2009): 359, https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srp065.

rapidly becoming a spiritual wasteland, where churches are being closed because they are overlooked and cast aside by the larger church community as a place deemed to insignificant or unworthy of our attention."[16]

The most recent National Congregations Study shows that 40.7% of the churches under 50 people in the United States are located in rural areas. On the other hand, only 3.1% of churches with a membership of 1,000 or more people are located in in rural America.[17] The study demonstrates that most of the churches in rural America are very small compared to churches in urban and suburban areas. Additionally, the number of churches located in rural America is declining. The National Congregations Study shows that in 1998, 43.4% of all churches in America were located in rural areas.[18] In 2012 that number declined to 31.7%.[19] The reality is that there are less churches in rural America today than there were at the beginning of the 21st century.

On the other hand, the number of churches per capita is higher in rural America than in suburban and urban areas. Witmer says, "Some have argued for prioritization of urban ministry based on the higher populations of cities and the greater numbers of churches per capita in nonurban areas."[20] Still, per capita thinking obscures the reality that rural churches are smaller and more spread out geographically. Witmer believes that since "small towns are scattered geographically, and because local community and relationships matter a great deal to small-town residents, it's important, for the sake of

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[16] Glenn Daman, *The Forgotten Church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2018), 16.

[17] The National Congregations Study, 2012, www.thearda.com/conQ5/q5-303.asp.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Witmer, *A Big Gospel,* 159.

evangelism and discipleship to have a healthy church in every small town and village – even the tiny ones."[21] To have a healthy church in every small community will require an army of talented and passionate leaders devoted to Jesus and his church.

The Talent Gap

The rural church has a leadership problem; put simply finding talented Christian leaders willing to devote their lives to the rural church is a massive challenge.[22] Since rural churches are smaller on average they struggle to attract the high caliber leaders that would find a larger church to present greater opportunities for impact. There are several reasons for the talent deficit that rural churches face.

The first reason is that rural ministry is not seen as Instagram-worthy in a social media-driven world. Daman postulates that "in an age of hipsters, the rural church is unfashionable."[23] Rural places are undervalued and shunned in pastoral circles.[24] To be called to a small town church is seen as a lesser calling by many in the ecclesiastical world.[25] Pastor Donnie Griggs has discovered from being a small town pastor that "many Christian leaders seem to look with disdain and snobbery at any attempt to justify the

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[21] Ibid., 160.

[22] One example is East Carbon Community Church located in a declining town of about 1,000 people in East Carbon, Utah. The church averages around 35 peole in attendance on Sundays, which is a significant portion of their small community. However, after four years of searching for a pastor they are still without someone to lead their congregation.

[23] Daman, *The Forgotten Church,* 30.

[24] Roth, *God's Country*, 38.

[25] When I was called to a rural Utah as a pastor in 2014 many of my colleagues wondered what I was doing and thought I was wasting my time. There was a general perception that a young pastor should give their prime years to serving in a larger community with greater potential.

legitimacy of small town ministry."[26] Pastor Shannon O'Dell has found that many Christian leaders believe that "sparsely populated rural communities are behind the times and not worth our time."[27] The Barna organization studied 769 church planters in the United States in 2016. Of those 769 church planters, only five percent were planting churches in rural areas.[28] It is clear that rural areas are not on the top of the list of places that church planters want to go. The rural church has an image challenge: it simply is not sexy.

The second reason rural churches have a leadership problem is because many pastors view rural churches as a stepping stone at the beginning of their career or a landing strip at the end. Rural America is not seen as a calling. It is seen as a means to an end. Often denominational leaders accentuate this by looking down "upon small rural churches as outdated and insignificant."[29] When it comes to pastoral placement small town churches often get the leftovers. Many of the best and brightest pastoral candidates are snatched up by larger churches or appointed to big churches by their denominational leaders.

Pastors who accept positions in small-town churches are, "called to rural places, often after spending considerable semesters and sums in urban centers of education."[30] Pastors who are trained in urban centers will often struggle to value a calling to the rural

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[26] Griggs, *Small Town Jesus,* loc. 140.

[27] O'Dell, *Transforming Church*,15.

[28] "Church Planters And The Cost of Starting A Church," Barna, April 26, 2016, https://www.barna.com/research/church-planters-and-the-cost-of-starting-a-church/.

[29] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 47.

[30] Roth, *God's Country*, 45.

setting. If pastoral leaders do not feel a sense of calling they will not succeed in the rural setting. Ron Klassen and John Koessler in their book *No Little Places: The Untapped Potential Of The Small-Town Church*, propose, "Another reason some small-town churches fall short of their potential is that their pastors and members don't understand the cultural dynamics of the small town."[31] Pastors who see a rural church as a stepping stone in their career will rarely put in the time and energy to truly understand the culture of their rural context. Roth bluntly writes, "If you can't give thanks for rural communities don't try to transform them."[32] Rural pastors must grow to love the small place they have been called and not merely see it as a stepping stone to something bigger.

Rural churches are often beholden to the traditions of the past and skeptical to embrace change, especially when it is proposed by pastors they know will not stay with the church for the long-haul because they desire to get to a bigger and better place. Small-town pastor Jon Sanders writes that many churches "know deep down that the very pastor who is so full of fresh ideas and is thus the one proposing the changes will not be around in 24-36 months to deal with the aftermath of those changes."[33] Unfortunately, the research on pastoral tenure in rural areas is virtually non-existent. Research has yet to be done on whether pastoral tenure is shorter in rural churches than in non-rural churches. Yet rural congregations are often able to discern if their pastor is simply using them as a quick stepping stone to a larger congregation. Witmer writes, "Seminary graduates

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[31] Ron Klassen and John Koessler, *No Little Places: The Untapped Potential Of The Small-Town Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 14.

[32] Roth, *God's Country*, 84.

[33] John Sanders, *Rural Church Rescue: A Call To Restore Healthy Churches To Rural North America* (Amazon Digital Services, 2018), loc. 1739, Kindle.

minister there in order to prepare for what they really want to do: be a lead pastor in a bigger church in a bigger place. They're encouraged in this by those who advise them to gain experience in a small place before moving to a bigger one."[34] Witmer and Sanders have both watched pastors use small-town churches as stepping stones to larger places.

An alternate perspective on this problem is that because of the absence of pastoral leadership many rural churches are forced to develop lay leaders more than their suburban and urban counterparts. Ed Stetzer argued in his presentation at the 2018 Rural Matters Conference that this challenge can result in a more biblical leadership model because "when pastors do for people what God has called people to do everyone gets hurt."[35] The lack of long-term pastoral leadership can be a benefit if the church excels at developing lay leaders.

While recruiting pastoral leaders to rural America is difficult, there is evidence that ministry in rural churches can actually be less stressful for the pastor than non-rural settings. Andrew Miles and Rae Jen Proschold-Bell conducted a study of United Methodist pastors. They found that rural clergy reported lower rates of congregational conflict, lower amounts of negative interaction with church members, and lower levels of loneliness and stress than did their non-rural counterparts.[36] Small towns are known for

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[34] Witmer, *A Big Gospel*, 36.

[35] Ed Stetzer, "Discipleship in Ministry," 2018 Rural Matters Conference, Wheaton College, September 18, 2018, audio of lecture, https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/rural-matters-conference-2018-audio/.

[36] Andrew Miles and Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, "Are Rural Clergy Worse Off? An Examination Of Occupational Conditions And Pastoral Experiences In A Sample Of United Methodist Clergy," *Sociology of Religion* 73, no. 1 (2012): 39, https://doi.org/ 10.1093/socrel/srr025.

having a slower pace of life. While rural churches are often seen as stepping stones, they can also be easier on the soul of the pastor than urban churches.

The third challenge is that rural churches often lack the financial resources to adequately compensate quality pastors. Shannon O'Dell, author of *Transforming Church in Rural America,* says, "Rural churches can only afford the leftovers from the leadership pool."[37] They simply cannot compete with the compensation packages offered by large urban churches.[38] As the National Congregations Study shows a large percentage of rural churches have under 50 active members.

Dr. Randall Nichols completed his dissertation at Portland Seminary on the possibility of recruiting second career pastors to rural ministry because he found that "rural churches face even greater difficulty in securing pastoral leadership than larger urban and suburban congregations."[39] Nichols provides a noteworthy solution by advocating that "a second career pastor may provide greater stability than a younger individual faced with college debt and the financial obligations of a young family."[40] Second career pastors often have greater financial resources and are able to serve without full-time compensation.

On the other hand, second career pastors without young families may have a harder time relating to the next generation. Frequently rural churches are struggling with

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[37] O'Dell, *Transforming Church*, 16.

[38] While rural churches struggle to provide adequate compensation, the cost of living in many rural communities is significantly less than in urban areas. Rural churches have an opportunity to advertise to potential clergy the quality of life they can enjoy in an area where housing is less expensive.

[39] Randall C. Nichols, "Pastoral Leadership for the Small, Rural Church: The Second Career Pastor" (DMin dissertation, Portland Seminary, 2018), 6.

[40] Ibid., 121.

aging congregations. Research done by the Rural Matters Institute at Wheaton College shows that "most rural areas have numerous church buildings, but aging congregations, unstable finances, and are unable to support full-time or even part-time pastors."[41] If a rural church has been in decline for years the chances of it being turned around are slim, but the chance of revitalization happening without good pastoral leadership is next to zero. Nichols argues that second career pastors can provide mature leadership and long-term stability for rural churches.[42]

Significant steps forward can be made if Protestant churches in America begin to dignify the people, the place, and the pastor in the rural landscape. Non-rural churches can mobilize financial and leadership resources to help these rural churches be able to thrive. The Rural Matters Institute acknowledges that rural areas will likely never be the places that draw extraordinary numbers of leaders from urban areas to serve in rural churches.[43] Still, consider how much further financial resources can go in a rural setting verses urban ones. Author and New York City pastor Tim Keller argues that the city is the most impactful place from which to launch a ministry, but he admits that "ministry in city centers is considerably more expensive on a per capita basis than it is away from the urban core."[44] The good news is that the rural church can be revitalized for a fraction of what ministry costs in urban and suburban areas.

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[41] Stone, "Rural Matters Strategy Brief."

[42] Nichols, "Pastoral Leadership," 157-158.

[43] Ibid., 154.

[44] Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry In Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 162.

A good comparison is the healthcare field. Attracting quality healthcare providers to rural areas is a struggle similar to attracting quality pastors. The National Rural Health Association or NRHA is an organization that works to provide policy solutions to improve rural health as well as strategies for recruitment of physicians and specialists. According to the NRHA, for every 10,000 people there are only 13.1 physicians in rural areas verses 31.2 in urban areas.[45] The shortage of health professionals in rural America is concerning. As of June 2018, according to the federal Health Resources and Services Administration: "there were more than 7,200 designated Health Professional Shortage Areas lacking adequate primary care nationwide – home to 85.5 million people. Of those areas, according to the HRSA, nearly 60 percent were in rural regions, and the nation needed 4,022 rural doctors to close the gap."[46] The healthcare field is aware of the need in rural America. Are urban Christians also aware of this need? Regrettably, much more research has been done on the shortage of healthcare professionals in rural areas than on the shortage of clergy in rural towns.

Rural Church Impact

Before arguing for a new rural missiology, first consideration must be given to whether the rural church actually has the potential to bring hope and healing in the midst of social and economic despair. Historically, churches have played important roles in small towns. Even today they "remain a positive force in people's lives, but in a part of

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[45] "About Rural Health Care," *The National Rural Health Association*, accessed October 20, 2019, https://www.ruralhealthweb.org/about-nrha/about-rural-health-care.

[46] Joseph P. Williams, "Wanted: Rural Doctors," *U.S. News And World Report,* August 22, 2018, https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2018-08-22/rural-doctor-shortage-a-drag-on-community-health.

the country slammed by the decline of manufacturing, joblessness and broken homes, church attendance has fallen off."[47] While church attendance may be on the decline, rural churches still have significant influence in many communities. In times of crisis it is usually the local church in which aid is mobilized.[48]

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow interviewed over 700 people from 300 small towns scattered among 43 states. He found that "in the smallest towns, churches are sometimes the only places in which civic functions can be held."[49] In these small towns, churches play a critical role in supporting the local community. Many rural communities have seen their institutions and civic clubs decline which in some cases results in the church being "the last remaining institution that connects people to each other."[50] Alex Joyner served as a district superintendent in the United Methodist Church. He writes, "In small towns, these churches form the fabric of the community, offering places of connection and hope in environments that are stressed by economic decline and narratives of despair."[51] Greg Scott and Rachel Lovell conducted surveys of 51 rural pastors for their article "The Rural Pastors Initiative: Addressing Isolation and Burnout in Rural Ministry." Their research found that churches are one of the only multidimensional resources in most small-towns

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[47] Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 93.

[48] Wunthnow, *Left Behind,* loc. 132.

[49] Wuthnow, *Small-Town America*, 232.

[50] Nichols, "Pastoral Leadership," 135.

[51] Alex Joyner, "Churches In Small Towns," *Ministry Matters.* January 10, 2018, https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8685/churches-in-small-towns.

and rural communities.[52] Scott and Lovell observe that as a result small-town pastors and churches are forced to fill in the gaps that are missing in social services.

For years social scientists have found that church involvement corresponds positively with increased levels of happiness, civic engagement, and health.[53] Studies published in 2019 by Pew Research Center show that "people who are active in religious congregations tend to be happier and more civically engaged than either religiously unaffiliated adults or inactive members of religious groups."[54] Church involvement is connected to a lifestyle that results in better health.

In light of this research, a rural revival that results in increased church involvement is very likely to increase public health in rural areas. The Pew Research report shows "that regular religious participation is tied to individual and societal well-being – that is, people who have religious affiliation and attend worship services at least once a month tend to fare better on some (but not all) measures of happiness, health and civic participation."[55] Academic research verifies that church attendance is actually good for your health.

Rural America is starved for protective forces that will help increase physical and emotional health. The sad reality is that "rural residents, particularly in the south, are less

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[52] Greg Scott and Rachel Lovell, "The Rural Pastors Initiative: Addressing Isolation And Burnout In Rural Ministry," *Pastoral Psychology* 64, no. 1 (February 2015): 73, http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11089-013-0591-z.

[53] "Religion's Relationship To Happiness, Civic Engagement And Health Around The World," Pew Research Center, January 31, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/01/31/religions-relationship-to-happiness-civic-engagement-and-health-around-the-world/.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

physically active than urban residents."[56] Church involvement seems to be a factor that reverses this statistic. A study of 268 African-American and Caucasian adults living in rural Georgia showed that church involvement correlated positively with increased levels of physical activity.[57] The rural church has been shown to be a positive force for health in rural communities. Researchers from Mississippi State University did a study on religious involvement, civic engagement, and homicide rates in rural areas.[58] The thesis of their work is that "religious institutions create a moral ecology fostering community integration and social control while discouraging deviance and criminal activity."[59] They summarize their findings by saying:

> In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that religious entities such as congregations, ministerial programs, and interfaith alliances are the key institutional conduit through which rural communities in America generated their more formidable civic bonds . . . Thus, scholars now recognize that rural religious communities provide an important springboard for the cultivation of social ties and the facilitation of civic engagement.[60]

The strength of rural communities correlates positively to the strength of its churches. If urban and suburban leaders care about reviving rural American they would be wise to start with the church.

Rural communities often look to the local church for civic leadership. However, the church must provide more than civic leadership. The church must provide spiritual

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[56] Michelle C. Kegler et al., "Environmental Influences on Physical Activity in Rural Adults: The Relative Contributions Of Home, Church, and Work Settings," *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* 9, no. 7 (2012): 996, https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/jpa/9/7/article-p996.xml.A

[57] Ibid., 1000.

[58] Matthew R. Lee and John P. Bartkowski, "Love Thy Neighbor? Moral Communities, Civic Engagement, And Juvenile Homicide in Rural Areas," *Social Forces* 82, no. 3 (March 1, 2004): 1001–1035. https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2004.0044.

[59] Ibid., 1003.

[60] Ibid., 1003-1004.

leadership as well. It must be fully engaged in the mission of Jesus. Rural churches cannot wait for the urban church to rescue them. Small-town churches must take initiative immediately to make disciples. Rural churches must see their own counties as mission fields that they have been called to reach. God is the one sending the church, and his mission includes the forgotten places of rural America.

One such organization that mobilizes pastors to serve in rural churches is Village Missions.[61] This ministry, "exists to develop spiritually vital churches in rural North America."[62] Village Missions places pastors in rural churches that would otherwise have to close or be without a pastor. They work to make the church a vibrant and vital presence in more than 230 rural communities throughout North America.[63] They accomplish this mission through placement of spiritually qualified missionary-pastors in churches at the invitation of local rural communities.[64] Village Missions intentionally views and labels their clergy as missionaries because they see rural and remote areas as legitimate mission fields.

Village Missions is doing the work that a lot of denominations are unwilling to do.[65] The sad reality is that "declining rural churches are often experienced as 'problems'

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[61] More information about Village Missions can be found at https://www.vmchurches.org/ and https://villagemissions.org/. The research for this dissertaion involved two interviews with leaders from Village Misisons.

[62] "About Village Missions," *Village Missions Churches,* Accessed June 2, 2019, https://www.vmchurches.org/about/village-missions/.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] One noteable exception is the Vineyard denomination. In recent years they have prioritized rural church planting. More information about the Vineyard Small Town USA initiatives is available at https://multiplyvineyard.org/small-town/.

by denominational administrators."[66] Village Missions does not view these churches as a problem but rather an opportunity. They help pastors raise support to enable them to be sent to forgotten people in forgotten places throughout North America. Dr. Glenn Daman from Village Missions says that one of the motivations for going to these rural areas is because "God does not call us to greatness but faithfulness nor does he call us all to reach the masses, he calls us to reach individuals with the gospel of Christ. The great commission is to go into all corners of the world, not just the urban centers."[67] Christians should feel an appropriate level of tension between the need to reach both urban and non-urban communities with the gospel.

Village Missions rightly views their pastors as missionaries and depressed rural America as a mission field. In order to develop a new rural missiology Christians must be open to seeing the rural landscape as a mission field that is worthy of the time and attention of their denominations and churches. The argument is not being made that rural areas are more important than urban and suburban areas or should be a greater priority for the church as a whole. However, a course correction needs to be made that puts small towns on the missional radar of Protestant churches.

Another way rural areas are being reached is through cowboy churches. Cowboy churches reflect cowboy culture and may meet in a barn or rodeo arena. They sing songs in a country music style, and the sermon relates to a cowboy audience.[68] The Rural Matters Institute estimates that "there are between 800-1,000 cowboy churches

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[66] Neitz, "Encounters in the Heartland," 348.

[67] Glenn Daman, Interview by author, February 14, 2019.

[68] "Cowboy Church," Wikipedia Inc., Accessed June 2, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cowboy_church.

nationally."[69] These churches look much different than suburban and urban churches. However, they are often successful in reaching their communities in a contextual way that speaks the language of the rural culture. Cowboy churches are an excellent example of what it looks like to think missionally about how to reach the rural landscape.

Missiology

Throughout the Protestant church in America, missiology has been primarily "considered to be exclusively an enterprise of Christian expansion that takes place from the West to the Third World."[70] In recent years as the United States has become more and more a post-Christian nation a missionary ecclesiology has been developed.[71] Ross Langmead is the Associate Professor of Missiology at Whitley College in Melbourne, Australia. He gives a history of the development of the study of mission that "began in theology only in the late nineteenth century, stimulated by the growth of cross-cultural mission from the West."[72] Langmead says, "Missiology has a double role in theology: to permeate theology with a missiological dimension and to serve mission praxis with specific intention."[73] Missiology is practical theology that is "driven not only by the desire to understand but also the desire to change the world."[74] The field of missiology

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[69] Stone, "Rural Matters Strategy Brief," 4.

[70] Michael W. Goheen, "The Missional Church: Ecclesiological Discussion In The Gospel And Our Culture Network In North America," *Missiology* 30, no. 4 (October 2002): 480, https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/009182960203000403.

[71] Ibid., 479.

[72] Ross Langmead, "What Is Missiology," *Missiology: An International Review* 42, no. 1 (2013): 68, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829613480623.

[73] Ibid., 71.

[74] Ibid., 76.

has been applied in recent decades to ministry in the city centers of America. Theologians and practitioners have worked together to formulate biblical reasons for reaching the city as well as best practices for doing so. Just as missiology has been used to motivate global outreach, in recent years missiology had been used to motivate regional and local outreach within the United States.

During the 1990s and 2000s, an awareness in Christian circles began to be built of the social, economic, and racial problems in the urban areas of America.[75] Many of these troubles were a result of suburbanization and the white flight that accompanied it. William Myatt, professor at Loyola University Chicago, detailed how "various theologies of the city emerged to direct the missional strategies" of the church.[76] One of the leading voices of this new urban missiology is author and pastor Dr. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan.[77] Keller argues in his book *Center Church* that "the middle class flight to the suburbs took many jobs, leaving the poor poorer and most neighborhoods riddled with crime."[78] However, Keller viewed the decline of urban America as an opportunity for the church. Thankfully he was unwillingly to give up on the inner cities of America.

Keller is perhaps the loudest voice in the call for Protestant churches to make urban America a missional priority. His arguments elevate urban ministry over suburban and rural ministry, and he passionately writes, "We believe ministry in the center of

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[75] William Myatt, "God In Gotham: Tim Keller's Theology Of The City," *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 2 (2016): 181, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829615617493.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Keller, *Center Church*, 155.

global cities is the highest priority for the church in the twenty-first century."[79] The strength of his vision has led the Redeemer City to City Network to spawn over 495 churches in 70 cities.[80] Keller argues the importance of serving the poor and that in order to "serve the poor, we must go to the cities."[81] His voice helped spearhead a church-planting movement and an emphasis by many denominations to focus on city-centers. Witmer, explaining this urban apologetic says, "According to this way of thinking, reaching the younger, urban generation–the creative class–with the gospel and influencing (or creating) culture-making institutions will shape the worldview of the broader culture and prepare the way for the gospel to advance."[82] While this viewpoint does have validity, it neglects a strategy for who will reach rural America and how it will be done. The Redeemer City to City Network has focused on planting churches in larger cities. However, the churches in those cities have not focused on planting churches in the rural areas in their states. The gospel will not organically trickle down from larger cities to small towns. Intentional planning must take place for the gospel to move from thriving urban churches to struggling rural communities.

Other young church planters have been motivated to reach larger cities because of social justice concerns. Daman says, "Following the lead of the evangelical social justice movement, young pastors with a strong sense of social responsibility turned to the inner city to plant churches and ministries designed to bring social, economic, and spiritual

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[79] Ibid., 21.

[80] Statistics are provided on the home page of Redemmer City to City website (https://www.redeemercitytocity.com).

[81] Keller, *Center Church*, 162.

[82] Witmer, *A Big Gospel,* 77.

renewal to the inner city."[83] The urban missiology that has been shaped in the 21st century has been concerned with not only sharing the gospel but also improving social conditions in the inner cities of America. Many Christian leaders have come to believe that "the city is key to reaching the world. It is strategic ground zero for mission activity."[84]

Urban pastors Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard in their book *Why Cities Matter* go as far as to say "that to go to cities is necessary for anyone who wants to have an impact on how life is lived in this world."[85] Um and Buzzard seem to go too far and would be wise to listen to Keller's more nuanced approach when he says, "I believe there must be Christians and churches everywhere there are people. In one sense, there are no 'little' places or people."[86] Rural pastors would likely disagree with Um and Buzzard's belief that in order to have impact on the world it is necessary to go to the city. Big movements have been and continue to be launched from small places.

The truth is that urban areas will generally have a greater ability to impact the world than suburban and rural centers. Thriving churches are needed every city in the world. These churches have the capacity for great levels of influence. Keller passionately believes that one "can't reach the city from the suburbs, but you can reach the suburbs from the city."[87] However, where are the poor today? What is the population group that currently struggles the most? While the inner cities were the place of greatest struggle,

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[83] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 93.

[84] Myatt, "God In Gotham," 184.

[85] Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 11.

[86] Keller, *Center Church*, 166.

[87] Ibid., 159.

even *The Wall Street Journal* is now saying that rural America is the new "inner city."[88] Studies conducted by Pew Research in 2018 show that since the year 2000, urban America has grown by 13%, suburban America has grown by 16%, but rural American has only grown by 3%.[89] In the Midwest the picture is even worse as most rural counties in the Midwest have experienced population loss since 2,000.[90]

The picture of much of rural America is no longer picturesque. The call to focus on the rural context is formed from the belief that in the same way "the suburban church cannot remain indifferent to the plight of the inner city, so the urban church cannot ignore the plight of rural America."[91] What if rural pastors could do for the rural mission what Tim Keller did for the urban mission? As Keller and others helped create a new urban missiology, so the purpose of this work is to create a new rural missiology. A new missiology is best formed by taking a fresh look at the scriptures. Missional movements begin with scriptural study that bring to light neglected truths that motivate mission. This has been true from Nehemiah to Martin Luther to A.B. Simpson to Tim Keller. Every movement begins with a revival of forgotten spiritual truths.

There are many ways to address the declining interest in rural ministry. However, before addressing the "how" of rural ministry we need to address the "why." Why does rural ministry matter? What are the biblical and practical reasons for why ministry to

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[88] Adamy and Overberg, "Rural America Is."

[89] Parker, "What Unites And Divides Urban, Suburban And Rural Communities," 4.

[90] Ibid., 20.

[91] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 63.

rural America in the 21st century matters? The purpose of this work is to address the "why" before addressing the "how."

Rural Missiology Outcomes

A new rural missiology can be created and disseminated. This new rural missiology will solve some of the problems that the small-town church currently faces. However, rural, suburban, and urban churches must work together in order to accomplish the purposes of this new missiology. In this next section, we will explore four purposes for the development of a rural missiology for Protestant churches in America.

The first purpose is that a new rural missiology will dignify the call to the rural church. Just as The National Rural Health Association has worked to raise the level of respect given to rural health care providers, the church can do the same for pastors. Scott and Lovell found through their survey of rural clergy that rural pastors experienced greater levels of loneliness and isolation from their pastoral peers as well as a greater sense of disconnection from the leadership of their denominations as compared to non-rural pastors.[92] Rural pastors should not feel overlooked and neglected by their peers and denominational leaders. Witmer says "the greatest joy killer in small-place ministry is the feeling that what you're doing doesn't count for much."[93] Geographic isolation is hard

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[92] Scott and Lovell, "The Rural Pastors Initiative," 91.

[93] Witmer, *A Big Gospel,* 128.

enough to overcome, but feeling as if your ministry is not valued will result in greater disconnection between the pastor and her denomination.[94]

If the rural church is seen as a mission field by the larger church then the calling to be a rural pastor will be dignified in a fresh way. Instead of rural pastors feeling that they are second-class leaders serving second-class people, they will be motivated by knowing that their work is important and respected by their suburban and urban pastoral colleagues. In the same way that missionaries to third-world countries are honored by churches, these leaders who are willing to sacrifice by living in towns without Starbucks will also be honored.

The second purpose is that a new rural missiology will transform the way denominations, church planting movements, and seminaries equip leaders for the rural church. Martin Geise, president of Oak Hills Christian College, says, "Denominations, church associations, seminaries and colleges need to seriously consider how to better equip leaders for success in the rural context."[95] Rural leaders must be taught relational skills as much as they are taught exegetical skills. In most rural areas, the church will not be built on the pastor's ability to study the bible but upon their ability to invest in relationship building.[96] O'Dell says he has become "more and more convinced that leadership in the rural church has little to do with what happens on the stage and everything to do with what happens on the stage of life in the public arena, because in

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[94] I use the pronoun "her" on purpose. Perhaps God will use the women who have hit the glass ceiling in non-rural areas as missionaries to the rural communities that will have the courage to welcome them.

[95] Martin Giese, "The Thriving Rural Church," *Evanglicals Magazine* 3, no 2 (2017): 16, https://www.nae.net/evangelicals-fall-2017/.

[96] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 86.

rural America, there is very little that is private."[97] Rural pastors live in a fish bowl and their reputation can be enhanced or tarnished quickly. What they do off the stage is noticed as much as what they do on the stage. There is a need for training that helps them navigate ministry in a small towns where there is very little anonymity.

Often rural pastors look to city churches as examples of ministry success and as a result end up discouraged. Small-town churches simply do not have the resources, the people, or the talent to do the things that large city churches are able to do. Rural churches get frustrated implementing the successful programs of suburban mega-churches and wonder why they do not seem to work in their context. When priority is given to the rural mission then priority will also be given in seminaries and bible schools to train leaders how to contextualize ministry for success in small towns. The new rural missiology will lay a theological framework for the recruitment and training of rural leaders.

The third purpose is that a new rural missiology will inspire Protestant churches and denominations to devote financial resources to rural places. There are financial resources available, and they can be unleashed. Grigg writes, "City churches simply need to see the larger mission in their state."[98] How mission is defined will influence how mission is funded and Christians will "do missions today and tomorrow."[99] This funding will occur through local churches, denominations, wealthy donors, and parachurch agencies as they catch the vision for the rural mission field. Perhaps in the future a

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[97] O'Dell, *Transforming Church*, 90.

[98] Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, loc. 1243.

[99] David J. Hesslegrave, Ed Stetzer, and John Mark Terry, *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 2.

portion of the budgets of large metropolitan churches will go towards church plants and church revitalization in small towns that lack a life-giving church. Ministry in the most depressed and unreached rural areas will be factored into the missions budget of larger churches. Non-rural churches will begin to view rural counties that lack a healthy, Jesus-exalting church as a justice issue.

The fourth purpose is that a new rural missiology will show how rural America can benefit the church as a whole. There is a yearning in the heart of America for the rest that the rural landscape offers. Sweet says, "In this Google world, we have forgotten how to dwell, to live in our landscape."[100] The rural church can offer urban and suburban leaders the opportunity to come serve in the rural landscape, but also to dwell in it and enjoy the open spaces for soul renewal. Short-term mission trips to rural areas could be combined with recreational opportunities for mission team members.

Some of the most beautiful places in America are found in the recreational areas outside of major population centers. The digital world of 21st century America makes it easy to feel alone and isolated, especially in urban centers. Fortunately, rural communities are different in that they are "marked by knowing and being known."[101] In the age of the celebrity pastor there is a certain grounding that the rural church can offer the larger church when it becomes infected with celebrity, success, and progress.

A new rural missiology could bring great change in the way rural ministry is viewed and resourced by Protestant churches. Many denominations and church movements are led by those from mega-churches in metropolitan areas. The current

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[100] Leonard Sweet, *Mother Tongue: How Our Heritage Shapes Our Story* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2017), 25.

[101] Roth. *God's Country*, 27.

Presidents of the Christian & Missionary Alliance denomination and Acts 29 church-planting movement are both mega-church pastors.[102] Additionally, the last seven Presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention have been mega-church pastors. These leaders express great value for biblical authority. Their organizations are motivated by an emphasis on good biblical theology. A rural missiology that is biblically grounded has potential to move the heart of these leaders and the denominations they represent.

There are some bright spots already. Brad Thie is the director for the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative at Duke Divinity School. "Every summer, Thie oversees student interns at small churches in North Carolina. Many come from urban or suburban locations then head out to a rural church, where they preach their first sermon or perform their first funeral."[103] Thie devotes his summers to equipping young pastors for rural ministry. If Duke Divinity School can see the importance of helping rural communities thrive by equipping leaders for the rural church then perhaps a nation-wide movement can begin.

Another bright spot is Northplace Church, a mega-church in the suburbs of Dallas, Texas.[104] In recent years Northplace Church has mobilized to help resource rural pastors. Bryan Jarrett, the lead pastor of Northplace, describes himself as like "Robin Hood," leveraging the resources of his wealthy suburban church in order to help

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[102] John Stumbo is current president of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. He previously served as the lead pastor of Salem Alliance Church in Salem, Oregon, a church with an average weeked worship attendance of over 3,000 people. Matt Chandler is the president of The Acts 29 Network. He is the lead pastor of Village Church, a multi-site mega-church in the Dallas/Fort-Worth area of Texas.

[103] Bob Smietana, "American's Hidden Mission Field: Why We Need Rural Churches," *Christianity Today*, October 27, 2018, https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/october/americas-hidden-mission-field-why-we-need-rural-churches.html.

[104] For more information on Northplace Church visit https://northplacechurch.com.

struggling rural churches.[105] He believes that "rural pastors feel like second class citizens serving second class people."[106] Jarret says they "need someone to cheer them on."[107] Jarrett devotes time every month to cheering on rural pastors. This is a legitimate need because "the American church has consistently celebrated the success of innovative ministries in large population centers while often overlooking or even denigrating innovative, successful ministries in smaller places."[108] Every year Northplace Church gives thousands of dollars to help encourage, equip, and love on small-town pastors.

Jarrett opened Lonesome Dove Ranch in 2012. One of the purposes of the ranch is to serve the under-resourced and overlooked pastors in rural America. For those pastors who come to Lonesome Dove Ranch, it "is a place of training, refuge and healing."[109] One of their initiatives is to work with Christian institutions for higher education in order to develop a degree in rural ministry. Jarrett says his goal is "to put rural on the radar" of the suburban and urban churches.[110] He believes "we can rekindle the ashes from past awakenings, someone just has to offer themselves as the next log."[111] The new rural missiology is a call to pastors and leaders to consider offering themselves as that next log on that fire.

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[105] Bryan Jarrett, Interview with author, April 2, 2019.

[106] Bryan Jarrett, "Becoming A Rural Church Planting Church," Rural Church Planting Talks, The Church Planting Leadership Fellowship, 2016, audio of lecture, https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/rural-church-planting-talks-from-cplf/.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Giese, "The Thriving Rural Church," 17.

[109] "Raising Rural Pastors," *Lonesome Dove Ranch*, accessed April 2, 2019, http://lonesomedovetexas.com/pastors/.

[110] Jarrett, Interview with author.

[111] Ibid.

Rural Americans are often looking for hope in the wrong places. In the midst of economic changes and the decline of manufacturing and coal mining, they often look to politicians who promise to revive the industries of past. In the face of the opioid epidemic they often look to counselors, therapists, and government agencies for relief. What they are left with is misplaced hope and broken promises. What if they could look to a thriving rural church instead? The rural church has the opportunity to introduce rural people to the true hope that is found in Jesus. The goal is not to point people to the church, but to have churches that are healthy enough to point people to Jesus.

Increasingly a call is being issued to the Protestant church from passionate rural leaders. Jon Sanders is the pastor of the Rescue Church, a rural multi-site church in South Dakota. He has authored the book *Rural Church Rescue* and is the host of the *Small Town Big Church* podcast. Sanders writes, "What if people in rural places were an overlooked people group with significant problems and God was raising up a generation of leaders willing to go engage the mission of the cross in that context for a lifetime?"[112]

A picture is being painted of a "rural church that discovers its common vocation and destiny alongside the global church."[113] In order for this to happen the Protestant church in America must not only embrace the global mission but also the rural mission. A new rural missiology will lay the theological framework required to mobilize Protestant churches to devote people and resources to bring the hope of Jesus to depressed rural America. Revived rural churches will then bring the hope of the Jesus to their

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[112] Sanders, *Rural Church Rescue*, loc. 450.

[113] Roth, *God's Country*, 17.

communities. Hope is in short supply for many rural people, but Jesus is not worried because he has plenty of hope to offer.

CHAPTER 3:

RURAL MISSIOLOGY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The story of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament demonstrates that God cares about rural people and desires the whole earth to be cultivated with his presence. Throughout the Old Testament it is clear that God has a mission for his people to fulfill in his world. This chapter will develop a biblical missiology for rural ministry. Missiology is a focus of study within theology, yet it also provides a needed seasoning to all Christian theology. While theology can become bland, boring, and disconnected from everyday life, it is the role of missiology to infuse it with passion, purpose, and practicality. Its role then is "to permeate theology with a missiological dimension."[1] Missiology is about articulating the mission of God in the world to every tribe, tongue, and nation. The goal of missiology is to put theology into action.

While the "word mission is rare in both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, what is emphasized regularly is the concept of being sent, with an emphasis on the authority and purpose of the sender."[2] The sender is not the church, but Christ himself. Jesus told his followers after his resurrection, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21 NIV). In both the Old and New Testaments God is active in sending his people. Although God is the ultimate sender, the church is also involved in this sending mission. Brian M. Howell, associate professor of anthropology at Wheaton

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[1] Ross Langmead, "What Is Missiology," *Missiology: An International Review* 42, no. 1 (2013): 71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829613480623.

[2] David J. Hesslegrave, Ed Stetzer, and John Mark Terry, *Missionshift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 10.

College, says the goal of missiology is "to empower the local church to engage in mission."[3] A new rural missiology must be developed in order to empower the local church to engage in mission as well as to motivate urban and suburban Christians to join in that mission. This new rural missiology must also be developed by those within the rural church, not just those looking in from the outside.[4] Rural leaders are those who can best apply biblical truths to their ministry context. Theology professor Brian A. DeVries proposes that "not only is a mature church self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting, but it is also self-theologizing."[5] Rural church leaders must do the theological weightlifting required to create a compelling rural missiology.

As rapid shifts have taken place in the socio-economic realities of rural communities the church has the opportunity to change its ministry methods and its ways of doing mission in order to respond the social change taking place."[6] Missiology must adapt to cultural and societal changes while staying faithful to the mission of God revealed in scripture. The goal of missiology is to understand the heart of God to reach every place, no matter how small or difficult.

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[3] Brian M. Howell, "Multiculturalism, Immigration And The North American Church: Rethinking Contextualization," *Missiology* 39, no. 1 (2011): 83, ALTA Religion Datatbase with ALTASerials.

[4] As a rural pastor myself I feel an obligation and a calling to be part of developing this missiology as a member of the rural church. The Rural Matters Institute at Wheaton College has been making strides to develop this new rural missiology as well. Unfortunately, many of its board members live in urban or suburban locations and their organization is headquarterd in the greater Chicago area. Therefore, the missiology they are forming does not benefit from being cultivated by the rural church.

[5] Brian A. deVries, "Towards A Global Theology: Theological Method And Contextualisation," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37, no. 1 (2016): 9, https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v37i1.1536.

[6] Wagner Kuhn, "The Gospel As Holistic Mission," The Challenges Of Contextualizing Relief And Development," *International Forum Journal* 10, no. 1 (2017): 20, ALTA Religion Datatbase with ALTASerials.

In this chapter a biblical missiology for rural ministry will be developed through a study of the Old Testament. The chapter will explore the opening scenes in Genesis, the Tower of Babel, the calling of Abraham, the urbanization of Israel during the reign of the kings, the Babylonian threat, and the prominence of the shepherd metaphor. Then chapter four will explore a biblical missiology for rural ministry from the New Testament through the lens of Jesus, the Great Commission, the scattering of the church in Acts, the Pauline ministry to the church of Colossae, and the future marriage of urban and rural.

Trust the Story

The bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is a story. In theological work it is crucial to trust the story. The new rural missiology will be shaped by looking at what the story told in the scriptures has to say about God's heart for rural people and communities. Leonard Sweet says, "There is only one story you can trust your life to."[7] That story is the one told in the pages of scripture. Sweet argues that not only are the words of scripture inspired but that the stories, metaphors, and images of the bible are also inspired.[8] The new rural missiology will be formed by studying the stories, metaphors, signs, and images throughout the Old and New Testaments. Theologians often systematize the scriptures when they should storify the scriptures. The truth is found in the story. The heart of God is found in the narrative. When Christians grasp the theme of the story they are then able to make sense of the world and their place in it. Throughout the story it will be clearly seen that God cares about rural people.

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[7] Leonard Sweet, "Trust the Story," *Napkin Scribbles,* Podcast Audio, September 30, 2018.

[8] Ibid.

Humanity yearns for a good story. James Bryan Smith writes in his book *The Magnificent Story: Uncovering a Gospel of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth,* "We are a story making people."[9] He goes on to propose that "our narratives help us make sense of our world."[10] There is a metanarrative weaving throughout the scriptures that will help us make sense of this rural mission. Metanarrative is "a larger story that is capable of answering life's key questions."[11] The metanarrative for the new rural missiology starts at the beginning of the story.

In the Beginning

The creation account in Genesis says that on the sixth day God created animals "according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:25 NIV). After God created animals he created mankind in his image and likeness. Genesis 1:26-28 reads:

> Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (NIV).

The story says that God set apart humanity from the animals on the sixth day of creation. Old Testament scholar John H. Walton writes, "All of the rest of creation functions in a relationship to humankind, and humankind serves the rest of creation as

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[9] James Bryan Smith, *The Magnificent Story: Uncovering A Gospel Of Beauty, Truth, And, Goodness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 4.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., 5.

God's vice regent."[12] Humans, both male and female, are given a special responsibility as those made in the image of God. The responsibility given to humanity sets them apart from the rest of the animals. The first humans are given a divine directive to fill the earth.

In the modern world it may seem archaic to some for belief in this creation story to persist. For years science and religion have been engaged in an unfortunate war over the origins of the universe.[13] Yet, even those who doubt the veracity of the story understand that humanity has been shaped by the biblical narrative. Stephen Greenbalt in his book *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* writes,

> Whether we believe in the story of Adam and Eve or regard it as an absurd fiction, we have been made in its image. Over many centuries, the story has shaped the way we think about crime and punishment, moral responsibility, death, pain, work, leisure, companionship, marriage, gender, curiosity, sexuality, and our shared humanness."[14]

The creation story is surprisingly powerful and continually shapes the way we view life. The Genesis narrative impacts even how non-religious persons understand what it means to be human. Both the Christian and the atheist must acknowledge the truth that they stand underneath this story.

For humanity to be made in the image of God means that humans are the representatives of divinity on the earth. To be clear, humans are not divine but they are the image-bearers of God in his creation. As Walton argues, mankind is to function as the

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[12] John H. Walton, *The Lost World Of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 67.

[13] An excellent resource on creating a bridge between Christianity and science is the book *Mere Science and Christian Faith.* Greg Cootsona, *Mere Science And Christian Faith: Bridging The Divide With Emerging Adults* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

[14] Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise And Fall Of Adam And Eve* (New York, NY: W. M. Norton Company Inc., 2017), 39.

vice-regents of God. In the ancient near east, "an image was believed to carry the essence of that which it represented."[15] God tells his image-bears to fill the earth and multiply upon it. The story begins with a sending. The goal is not for humanity to stay in the garden but to make all of the earth like the garden. In the beginning, "God's creation plan is that the whole earth should be populated by those who know him and who serve him wisely as his vice-regents or representatives." Daniel Carrol, Old Testament professor at Denver Seminary, says, "The directive at the very beginning of the grand narrative presupposes movement."[16] The story begins with the movement of God and is to continue with the movement of his vice-regents throughout the earth. Jeff Clark writes in his article "Rural Theology: Biblical Case for Rural Ministry and Rural Church Planting," that "filling the earth is the first priority in Genesis. In fact, Genesis is the story of how people fulfilled God's command to fill the earth."[17] Migration to the uncivilized rural places of the world is central to the prime directive given to the first humans in the creation story. In fact, throughout the scripture "migration is a key metaphor for understanding the Christian faith. All Christians are sojourners and strangers in the world."[18] Migration and mission go hand in hand.

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[15] John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 29.

[16] M. Daniel Carroll, "Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission: Contributions from the Old Testament.," *Mission Studies: Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 30, no. 1 (April 2013): 11, https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341255.

[17] Jeff Clark, "Rural Theology: Biblical Case For Rural Ministry and Rural Church Planting," *The Rural Matters Institute,* January 11, 2018, 5, https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/rural-theology-biblical-case-for-rural-church-planting-ministry/.

[18] Carroll, "Migration and Mission," 11.

In Genesis 3 the story takes an ugly turn as Adam and Eve choose to rebel against God and lose access to the garden. The first humans are deceived into thinking that God is holding out on them, and they suffer the consequences of believing the serpent. Adam and Eve's children do not fare much better as God's vice-regents on the earth as their oldest son Cain kills his younger brother Abel as recorded in Genesis 4. The murderer, Cain, leaves his parents and becomes the first person to build a city. Genesis 4:17 says, "Cain made love to his wife, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Enoch. Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch" (NIV).

The first city is built by Cain. Um and Buzzard lament that "this is the first explicit reference to the city in the Bible, and because Cain is cast as a shadowy character throughout the scriptural narrative, many have assumed that his shadow falls on the city."[19] Um and Buzzard are correct in arguing that cities are not evil in and of themselves. However, throughout the story recorded in Genesis the city is often painted as evil. Greenbalt says, "For the author of Genesis 2 and 3 the garden, not the city was the great good place, the place Yahweh designed for the human he created."[20] In early Jewish literature the garden is preferred over the city.

The Tower of Babel

Humans fail time and again throughout the story to exercise dominion and fill the earth. Missions researcher and Old Testament professor Walter McConnell argues, "It was Adam and Eve's failure to exercise dominion that led to the fall, just as it was the

[19] Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter,* 60.

[20] Greenbalt, *The Rise And Fall*, 59.

failure of the people who lived in Noah's time to exercise dominion that led to the flood."[21] God's vice-regents had become so evil that by Genesis 6 he decides to start the human experiment over with Noah and his family. In the midst of a corrupt world Noah was the only one who found favor in the eyes of God.[22] The waters of the flood destroy everyone on the earth except Noah and his immediate family. After the flood Noah is given a very similar command as the one given to the first humans in Genesis 1:26-28. God says to Noah, "As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it" (Genesis 9:7 NIV). Again God tells humanity to multiply and fill the earth.

Instead of filling the earth, the story tells us in Genesis 11 that humanity elected to stay in one place and build a city. One might argue that there is a consistent theme throughout the Old Testament of humanity congregating together in cities and ignoring the mission to fill the earth as the image-bearers of God. Likewise, urban Christians today face the temptation to congregate together and fail to see the importance of spreading the good news of Jesus to the relatively unpopulated places of their day. The gospel needs to be shared in city-centers and in small towns. Christians cannot neglect rural areas for the comfort and convenience of the city.

Twice God commanded his vice-regents to multiply throughout the earth. Regrettably, humanity has an innate desire for comfort and convenience. Walled cities in the ancient near east were desirable places to live. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures the city is portrayed as the place people look for safety and comfort.

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[21] Walter McConnell III, "In His Image: A Christian's Place in Creation," *The Asia Journal of Theology* 20, no. 1 (April 2006): 123, ALTA Religion Database with ALTA Serials.

[22] Genesis 6:8.

The calling of Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 9:7 is still the same today. There is a mission that involves the cultivation of the neglected places of our world. Viola and Sweet write that humans "are subcontractors who are privileged to participate in God's creation project."[23] The story in Genesis 11 is of humans who are more concerned with their own creation project than being part of God's creation project. It is the story of Babel:

> Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plan in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth. But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth (Genesis 11:1-9 NIV).

There are different theories for why humans worked together in Shinar to build the Tower of Babel. The perspective of many ancient people, including Philo, Josephus, and Augustine of Hippo, was that they attempted to build a tower that would reach the heavens so that if a destructive flood was sent again they would be able to survive it.[24] Others scholars, such as Arthur W. Pink, have argued that in the Babel story the goal was to create a world-empire.[25] Another option is that Babel is about the human desire for

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[23] Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 44.

[24] Sang-Hee Lee, "A Look at the Tower of Babel from Perspectives of Ancient People," *Korean Christian Theological* 93 (July 2014): 61–78, ALTA Religion Database with ALTA Serials.

[25] Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings In Genesis* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1922), 134.

independence apart from God. In building the tower humans are claiming to be gods themselves.

Whatever the motivation of these ancient people may have been we know that the "problem in the story of Babel is not the tower but the failure of people to do what God commanded, be fruitful and fill the earth."[26] The text records that the people were motivated by a desire to resist being scattered all over the earth. From this point on, "God's will that the race go forward and possess their lands is now carried out with added vehemence because of human resistance; God scatters them because they will not freely spread abroad."[27] Forced migration is the result of ignoring God's mission.

In the 21st century rapid urbanization can be compared to a modern day tower of Babel. In America the majority of God's vice-regents are gathered together in the cities while leaving many of the wide-open rural spaces and sparsely populated towns uncultivated. Smith says, "We were designed for dominion. We were created to live well, to design, to create, to govern, and to build."[28] The new rural missiology is the rediscovering of the calling of God's people to be his sub-contractors in this world who "rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devasted" (Isa. 61:4 NIV). Not everyone is called to leave the city but every Christian should be open to being called by God to leave the city, in order to bring the hope of the gospel to the forgotten people and places of rural America.

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[26] Clark, "Rural Theology," 5.

[27] Andreas Hock, "From Babel to the New Jerusalem (Gen 11,1-9 and Rev 21,1-22,5)," *Biblica* 89, no. 1 (2008): 105, ALTA Religion Database with ALTA Serials.

[28] James Bryan Smith, *The Magnificient Story,* 140.

God scatters the people from Shinar throughout the earth so that they would execute his plan to fill the earth as his vice-regents. When the Hebrew people passed this story on from one generation to the next they likely laughed at all the city building that was going on in their world, especially by the Babylonian empire. Greenblatt says:

> Pious Hebrews who had always feared and hated cosmopolitan Babylon must have loved this story. They must have laughed at the punning reference to the babel of languages and at the inability of the ambitious builders to finish their proud tower. And they must have relished the transformation of the city as a fulfillment of human destiny into the city as an emblem of human arrogance and futility.[29]

Those who have been part of writing the urban missiology in the 21st century would offer a different perspective on the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Um and Buzzard argue, "This divine call for humanity was, ultimately, an urban mandate."[30] For them the directives given in Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 9:7 are not so much about filling the earth but about creating urban cities for humanity to exercise dominion over.[31] However, they do agree that "God created humanity to be his representatives, to be his estate managers – to draw out and steward the resources of the earth, to build its culture and civilization."[32] The goal is not to pit urban verses rural, the goal is simply to trust the story. There is a story being told that is about filling the whole earth, not just congregating in massive cities.

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[29] Greenblatt, *The Rise And Fall*, 59.

[30] Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter,* 59.

[31] Um and Buzzard rightly argue that the city will eventually be restored in the New Jerusalem. We will get to that part of the story at the end of chapter four. Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter,* 58-61.

[32] Ibid.

What is the story saying about God's heart for the city and for the rural environment? Clark writes, "The Pentateuch seems to demonstrate a bias toward rural settings."[33] He goes further to say, "The ideal situation in the Pentateuch involved the possession of rural, farmland where crops could grow and a nation could grow and God's command to go fill the earth could be accomplished."[34] The Tower of Babel demonstrates the capacity of humanity to combine hubris with defiance in the rejection of God's directive to fill the earth.[35] The story moves on from the failed Babel experiment in Genesis 11 to the sending of the first urban to rural missionary in Genesis 12.

The First Urban to Rural Missionary

Genesis 12 begins with the call of a man named Abram to leave his city and go to a new land that he had never visited before. The story goes like this:

> The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed by you." So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran (Genesis 12:1-4 NIV).

Abram seems to be perfectly happy with his life when God calls him. He was not looking to move. He was content in the place he lived. Yet, God called him to go. Every Christian is not called to ministry in rural America. Ministry-minded people are also deeply needed in the large and medium-sized cities throughout the world. Yet, hopefully

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[33] Clark, "Rural Theology," 4.

[34] Ibid., 7.

[35] Carroll, "Migration And Mission," 16.

every Christian would be open to God calling them to somewhere small. Abram gives an example of someone willing to leave the comfortable for the unknown.

The story introduces him as Abram, but later God will rename him Abraham because of his destiny to be the father of many nations.[36] Abram's story mentions a city named Ur.[37] Ur is the city in lower Mesopotamia that is cited as Abram's birthplace. Ur, Kish, and Uruk were three significant cities in Sumerian and Babylonian civilization."[38] However, there is some disagreement among theologians over from where Abraham raised. Shubert Spero, professor of Jewish Though at Bar Ilan Unversity, argues that Abram was from the region of Haran, not the city of Ur.[39] Christoph Stenschke from the University of South Africa disagrees. He writes, "Abraham left his home in Ur and came to Canaan."[40]

While the exact timeline of Abraham's journey is difficult to ascertain the story says that his family came from the city of Ur. No matter who is correct in this debate Clark maintains that, "filling the earth becomes a prominent theme for Abraham and his descendants."[41] Abraham follows the call of God into an unknown land. This required

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[36] Genesis 17:5.

[37] Genesis 11:31.

[38] T.M Kennedy, "Ur," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

[39] Shubert Spero, "Was Abram Born in Ur Of The Chaldees," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (July 1996): 156–159, ALTA Religion Database with ALTA Serials.

[40] Christoph Stenschke, "Migration and Mission: According to the Book of Acts," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Missiology* 44, no. 2 (2016): 129, https://doi.org/10.7832/44-2-99.

[41] Clark, "Rural Theology," 6.

great sacrifice on Abraham's behalf. Abraham gave up his land and his inheritance by obeying God's call.

Abraham gives up the right to the inheritance of his father because he had been promised a better inheritance from his heavenly father. To his friends though, he must have seemed crazy. Carroll declares, "Most miss that Abraham, the father of the Christian faith, never settled down. He was a wandering pastoralist, and his walk with God was one always on the move."[42] For the rest of his life Abraham camped in a tent. Hebrews 11 says this about him;

> By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him to the same promise (Hebrews 11:8-9 NIV).

In Genesis 11 people are scattered, but in Genesis 12 a man and his family are sent. Throughout the scriptures from Babel to Jonah, from the early church in Jerusalem to the apostle Paul, God chooses to scatter his people when they will not obey his sending. Unlike the people of Shinar, Abraham goes down in biblical history as a man of faith because he obeys the call of God to leave Ur for a new land unknown to him.

The story continues in Genesis as the storyteller highlights the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 19, two angels warn Abraham's relative Lot that the city is going to be destroyed. Lot, his wife, and daughters flee the city of Sodom for a small town.[43] Genesis 19:23-29 says:

> By the time Lot reached Zoar, the sun had risen over the land. Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah – from the LORD out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, destroying all those

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[42] Carroll, "Migration and Mission," 14.

[43] Genesis 19:20.

> living in the cities – and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot's wife looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace. So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived (NIV).

The story portrays the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as places of sin and rebellion against God. Lot had foolishly chosen to make his home in these evil cities in contrast to his relative Abraham who continued to live in a tent and faithfully follow God's call to a new land. Many years later, Abraham's grandson, Israel, will lead his family to migrate to the safety of urban Egypt during the years of famine in rural Canaan.[44] After the passing of Israel and his son Joseph's generation, the descendants of Israel become urban slaves in Egypt.[45] They are put to work building cities out of brick for Pharaoh. God hears their cries for deliverance and sends Moses, the disgraced urban prince turned rural shepherd, to deliver them out of Egypt in order to once again attempt to possess the promised land that has been pledged to their forefather Abraham.[46]

The Hebrew people travel for forty years around the desert camping in tents. After the death of Moses, Joshua begins to lead them to possess the promised land.[47] When Joshua dies the Hebrew people are led by judges. Hebrew scholar Edward Neufeld writes that the judges, "sprang from the ordinary folk and led a humble life. Their relationship to their people was, therefore, much more intimate than that of a king. They lacked great

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[44] Genesis 47:1-12.

[45] Exodus 1:8-11

[46] Exodus 3.

[47] The Old Testament book of Joshua records the Hebrew people conquering the promised land.

political ambition, but they safeguarded the religious and social traditions of the people."[48]

Disappointingly, the Hebrew people tire of being led by ordinary men and women. 1 Samuel 8 records that the Hebrew people desired to be like the nations around them. They ask the prophet Samuel to appoint a king and Saul is anointed. David is anointed as the second king of Israel. A rural to urban shift begins to happen under the reign of the kings. At the time of David, "Israel was still very rural but the transition to urbanization had begun."[49] Neufled says, "One of the broadest and most revealing of all contrasts under the united monarchy in ancient Israel is that exhibited in the differences between newly developed urban life and that of the old conservative rural life."[50] During the reign of David and his son Solomon, the center of Israel becomes the city of Jerusalem. Like the other nations around them Israel now has a king, a capital city, and a temple for the worship of their God.

The Urbanization of Israel

As the kings of Israel focus on building the city Neufeld says that "the old rural economy had to come to an end, and superficial conditions were created to introduce an urban economy."[51] In many ways this urbanization is similar to the experience of the 20th and 21st centuries in America. The old rural economy has come to an end in order for the

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[48] Edward Neufeld, "The Emergence of a Royal-Urban Society in Ancient Israel," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 31 (1960): 34, ALTA Religion Database with ALTA Serials.

[49] Clark, "Rural Theology," 8.

[50] Neufeld, "Royal-Urban Society," 31.

[51] Ibid., 37.

urban economy to flourish. Rural America has been left behind as urban America has flourished in recent years.

The urban leaders in Jerusalem prioritized urban needs over the rural needs. Neufled says, "The kings were closely connected with the new city life; David was already vigorously maintaining a policy mainly favoring Jerusalem, largely ignoring the interests of the peasantry. Cities usually tend to grow at the expense of the country, and through a large measure, through migration from the country."[52] Financial resources were devoted to expanding the city of Jerusalem and building palaces for the kings in places such as Masada.

However, the newly formed and expanded cities of this time period were used by God to nudge Israel towards becoming a nation of worship, justice, and mercy. Jerusalem was created to be a city of worship. The Israelites also created cities of refuge for persons who had committed an unintentional homicide."[53] Sadly, as the story continues to move forward in the Old Testament scriptures the kings of Israel lead the nation into a downward spiral of sin and idolatry. While prophets such as Elijah and Elisha try to warn Israel of the coming judgement, the monarchy collapses, Babylon conquers Israel, and the people are exiled from their land.

Conquered by Babylon

After the collapse of Jerusalem the city that occupies the imagination and fear of Israel becomes Babylon. Theologian Walter Brueggemann, in his article "At the Mercy

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[52] Ibid., 42.

[53] Joshua 20:1-9.

of Babylon," writes, "Although Babylon may be regarded as simply one among several great powers that concern Israel, it is also clear that Babylon peculiarly occupies the imagination of Israel."[54] Brueggemann argues that Babylon is portrayed as an antagonist toward Israel and Yahweh but Babylon is also perceived as a partner of Yahweh in bringing divine judgment against Israel, Jerusalem, and her kings.[55]

While God's people are exiled from their homeland, God does not abandon them. After being held captive in Babylon for decades the priest Ezra is allowed to lead a contingent of Jews to return to their homeland to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.[56] Once the temple is rebuilt, Nehemiah will also return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city.[57] The story of the Old Testament "closes with Israel firmly united around Jerusalem. The rural areas that were valued in Genesis have given way to the rise of Jerusalem."[58] Yet, the God of Israel used the Babylonian exile to disperse his people throughout the world. The Israelites were scattered by God in order to be a blessing to the nations. As seen in the New Testament book of Acts, the Jewish people are found scattered throughout the Roman empire. God always finds a way to either send or scatter his vice-regents on his mission to fill the earth and cultivate it with his faithful presence.

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[54] Walter Brueggemann, "At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Rereading of the Empire," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 1 (1991): 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/3267146.

[55] Ibid., 4.

[56] Ezra 1.

[57] Nehemiah 1-3.

[58] Clark, "Rural Theology," 9.

The Shepherd Metaphor

Throughout the story of the bible there is one metaphor that emerges above all others for the type of leader that God desires for his people. It is the shepherd metaphor. It is a rural metaphor. Dr. Nathan H. Gunter in his article "The Shepherd-Leader Motif as a Pastoral Model for a Globalizing Church" makes the astute observation that "shepherd language is deeply embedded through the Old and New Testaments, providing a consistent metaphor to tie together the whole of scripture's teaching concerning spiritual leadership."[59] The first shepherd in the scriptures is Abel, son of Adam, who tended to the flocks, while his brother Cain worked the soil.[60] The first time in the bible that shepherding is used as a metaphor occurs in 2 Samuel when David becomes king over all of Israel. The story is recorded like this:

> All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "We are your own flesh and blood. In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns. And the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.'" When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David King over Israel (2 Samuel 5:1-3 NIV).

In the Old Testament David is exalted as the standard bearer for shepherd leaders. Psalm 78:72 says, "And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them" (NIV). In the rural pastures of Bethlehem David was prepared to become a shepherd of people. Dr. Timothy S. Laniak says, "David, like Abraham and

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[59] Nathan H. Gunter, "The Shepherd-Leader Motif as a Pastoral Model for a Globalizing Church," *Perichoresis* 16, no. 3 (2018), 96, https://doi.org/10.2478/perc-2018-0018.

[60] Genesis 4:2.

Moses, was a herder before he was summoned to spiritual shepherding."[61] The shepherd metaphor is rooted in the idea of knowing those you lead.

In the small town church, knowing those you lead is the norm. Daman says, "The strength of the rural church is found in rural pastors who provide personalized and specialized care."[62] The pastor knows the people they are leading. Shepherd-leaders are able to call their sheep by name. The danger is that when the church loses its rural roots it can also lose the power behind the shepherd metaphor. Much of the church has adopted a form of secular leadership that focuses on organizational health and church growth. Daman calls the church to embrace the type of leadership where "the pastor is called to be a shepherd who cares for, nurtures, and encourages people within the congregation."[63]

Israel's kings and religious leaders are rebuked time after time by the prophets for neglecting the shepherd model of leadership. One such example is found in 1 Kings 21-22. King Ahab of Israel lusts after a rural vineyard owned by a man named Naboth. He tries to purchase it but Naboth refuses to sell. Ahab's wife, Jezebel, takes matters into her own hands and she has Naboth killed so that Ahab can confiscate his vineyard. The urban queen steals a vineyard from a rural farmer. A short while later Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, visits Ahab. The two kings reluctantly summon the prophet Micaiah for advice on war. The prophet tells the kings that he "saw all of Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd" (1 Kings 22:17 NIV). The kings had become so obsessed with their

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[61] Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks* (Published by author, 2007), 36.

[62] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 154.

[63] Ibid., 153-154.

own well-being and their war mongering that they neglected being the shepherd-leaders that God had called them to be.

Throughout the scriptures God is portrayed as the shepherd, and his people as the sheep. In Psalm 23 the shepherd/song-writer David, writes, "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing" (Psalm 23:1 NIV). The prophet Isaiah records the shepherd-heart of God in Isaiah 40:11 (NIV): "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." Pastoral leadership is to emulate the shepherd-heart of God. Thomas Resane, professor of theology at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, says:

> The ecclesiastical leadership demands full understanding of the biblical mode of shepherd-leadership, with the three major functions of caring, courage, and guiding the church in the most effective way . . . The call is for leaders in the ecclesiastical community to emulate the shepherd-leader model for the advance and effectiveness of the mission of Christ in the world.[64]

Rural people have become the lost sheep. While denominations and church-planting movements focus on the city and the suburbs, the rural sheep have been neglected. The sheep in every population area matter to God. Church leaders have a biblical responsibility to shepherd every sheep. God will call some to leave the ninety-nine in order to go after the one. Christians cannot overlook the reality that "the ancient near Eastern shepherd is one of the most frequently invoked images of ideal leadership for God's people found in the bible."[65] This metaphor is not abandoned when Israel becomes more urbanized. The metaphor is used to motivate and rebuke both urban kings

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[64] K. Thomas Resane, "Leadership for the Church: The Shepherd Model," *HTS Theological Studies* 70, no. 1 (2014): 6, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2045.

[65] Gunter, "The Shepherd-Leader Motif," 90.

and rural priests. We cannot desert shepherd-leadership in the 21st century. This metaphor is ultimately used in the Old Testament for the promised messiah.

The prophet Micah spoke of the one who would come from the small town of Bethlehem:

> "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of the brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth (Micah 5:1-4 NIV).

The Old Testament ends with prophetic hope for a new shepherd from Bethlehem who will bring security to Israel. While Israel will experience abandonment, they will not experience abandonment forever. Although rural people in America may feel abandoned today, that feeling will not last. God always raises up a new flock of shepherds for his people.

The story painted in the Old Testament is of a creator who desires his vice-regents to multiply and fill the earth. They are not to congregate in one place but to cultivate the uncivilized corners of the earth. They are to exercise dominion and wise stewardship over all of creation. They are to be the image-bearers of God on the earth. To the extent that humanity refuses to do this, the story records God scattering them. In the times of obedience God sends them abroad. Ultimately, the story gives us a shepherd metaphor for God's vice-regents to embrace. The story shows the heart of God for both the city and the country. However, the story is not over. It continues in the New Testament. It is one story. Trust the story.

CHAPTER 4:

RURAL MISSIOLOGY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Rural Ministry of Jesus

The New Testament shows that God cares for rural people. Rural communities are not ignored or forgotten by the triune God. The central figure of the New Testament is a young Jewish man who grew up in a small town. The story is not centered around a powerful king in Jerusalem or a wealthy man from Rome. It is about a rural Jew named Jesus. It is all about Jesus. Christians must trust the story that is told through the life of Jesus. Rural missiology can only be developed by looking at the model given to the church in Jesus the Messiah. When Christians look to Jesus what do they see? Do they see a heart that beats for rural people? Do they see a passion for small towns and villages? Chapter four will further develop a rural missiology through looking at the rural ministry of Jesus, the Great Commission, the scattering of the Jerusalem church in Acts 8, the Pauline ministry to the small, declining city of Colossae, and the future marriage between urban and rural.

Jesus spent most of his life and ministry in a rural context. It would have made the most strategic sense for Jesus to be born in Jerusalem or Rome, but instead "Christ was born in a small rural village and the first visitors to pay homage were rural shepherds."[1] The Old Testament prophet Micah had foretold that the messiah would be born in the insignificant town of Bethlehem.[2] Griggs writes,

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[1] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 148.

[2] Micah 5:2.

> Micah is saying that Bethlehem, where Jesus was born, was so small it wasn't really worthy of even being one of the clans of Judah. The irony that Micah puts forth is how the most important person to ever live will come from a town that is considered irrelevant by mainstream society based in larger cities."[3]

Bethlehem is the city of shepherds and sheep. Urban pastor and missiologist Tim Keller acknowledges that "Jesus wasn't from Rome or even Jerusalem but was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth."[4] The plan of the father was for his son to be born and raised in small towns, not large cities.[5]

The one who has transformed the cities of the world was born in a small town and raised in an unimportant village. Glenn Daman in his book *The Forgotten Church* says, "Not only was Christ born in the rural area of Bethlehem, but His family eventually made their home in the rural hillside of Nazareth, where an estimated four hundred people lived."[6] Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola write, "Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a nondescript, Jewish agricultural village with probably fewer than four hundred inhabitants, and one of the southernmost villages in Galilee. It was a Podunk place."[7] Jesus grew up in a rural place with rural people. His rural upbringing would shape his metaphors, parables, and teaching. Throughout the majority of the gospels, the setting is outdoors in open spaces, next to village wells, and rarely in the city streets.

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[3] Griggs, *Small Town Jesus,* loc. 234-235.

[4] Keller, *Center Church*, 166.

[5] Leonard Sweet provides an alternative perspective in *Quantaum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic.* He says, "Approximately 250 million people lived in the world when Jesus was born, most of them in rural areas. But Jesus was born in a city - - Bethlehem. Jesus grew up in a city - - Nazareth. Jesus was crucified and resurrected in a city that he loved and wept over - - Jerusalem." Leonard I. Sweet, *Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic* (Dayton, OH: Whaleprints, 1994), 175.

[6] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 148.

[7] Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography,* 64.

At some point in his early adulthood Jesus moved to Capernaum in central Galilee. Jesus did more miracles in Capernaum than any other location recorded in the New Testament.[8] Was Capernaum a large city? According to New Testament Professor Daniel W. Hill, who authored a book on the ancient town, "Capernaum would not be considered as one of the major cities and would be classified with the villages having a population average of 500 persons."[9] Capernaum served as a home base for much of Jesus' ministry throughout the villages of Galilee. The Gospel of Mark records that Jesus also preached in the nearby towns. Mark 1:39 says, "So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons" (NIV). Sean Freyne, formerly a professor of theology at Trinity College Dublin, writes that Mark's Gospel "succeeded in conveying a very clear picture of the rural character of Galilee."[10] Jesus chose a small town in Galilee as the home base for his public ministry.

When it came time to select his disciples Jesus overwhelmingly selected young men from small towns. Hill says that Jesus' "earliest and closest disciples were from Capernaum and others would be called from that city and that area to follow him."[11] Jesus surrounded himself with small-town people like himself. They were not well educated, and they were defiantly not urbanities.

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[8] Daniel W. Hill, *Capernaum: The City Of Jesus* (Tucson, AZ: Self-published, 2018), 2.

[9] Ibid., 14.

[10] Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches And Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia, PA: First Fortress Press, 1988), 39-40.

[11] Hill, *Capernaum*, 33.

Several of his disciples were from Bethsaida, which except for the fishing industry, was a very inconsequential place.[12] Sweet and Viola write:

> These were the Twelve whom Jesus chose to be His closest friends and interns: four fisherman, one tax man, a couple of freedom fighters, and a significant number who met while they were apprenticing with John the Baptist (Andrew, John, Peter, James, and maybe even two more, Philip and Nathanael), which Jesus gathered on the shore of the Jordan when He was staying with John. He chose ordinary folk with no special training in the Scriptures from His native neighboring villages in Galilee. There is one singular exception and one striking omission. Judas was from Iscariot, a Judean village in southern Israel.[13]

Robert E. Coleman, the author of *The Master Plan of Evangelism,* also writes that most of Jesus' disciples "were raised in the poor section of the country around Galilee."[14] Where other people saw fishermen from a small town Jesus saw something special.

What did he see in these rural men? He "saw in these simple men the potential of leadership for the Kingdom."[15] The rural men and women of America in the 21st century also have potential for leadership in the kingdom of God. Denominational leaders would be wise to not overlook them in selection for leadership positions.[16] God delights to start big things in small places and use humble people to do great things.

Jesus spent three years investing in these young disciples. He choose the rural landscape for the majority of their ministry, and when he and his disciples were overwhelmed by the crowds, "he would take them with him on a retreat to some

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[12] Ibid., 23.

[13] Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography,* 136.

[14] Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan Of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1972), 22-23.

[15] Ibid., 23.

[16] My experience in the Christian & Missionary Alliance denomination is the denominational leadership is usually chosen from the large churches in metropolitian areas, and small-town pastors are rarely represented.

mountainous area of the country where he was relatively unknown, seeking to avoid publicity as far as possible."[17] The rural hills were places of retreat and prayer for Jesus and his small-town disciples. Likewise, the desert was the place of preparation and testing for Jesus.[18]

Jesus may have also preached in the newly created cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias during his Galilean tours. These new cities brought some amount of urbanization to Galilee. Nonetheless, the gospels fail to even mention these two cities, which were the largest in the region.[19] R. Alan Culpepper's article on the historical Galilee argues that Sepphoris and Tiberias were small-scale cities that brought only a small amount of urbanization to Galilee.[20]

However, when studying Galilee, researcher Jonathan L. Reed found that literary sources are known to be unreliable and the archaeological excavations often lacking.[21] Reed believes that "Sepphoris probably jumped from a population of around one thousand in the late Hellenistic period to around ten thousand in the early Roman period."[22] According to the writings of Josephus, "there were 204 villages in Galilee.

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[17] Coleman, *The Master Plan*, 36.

[18] Luke 4:1-13.

[19] Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography,* 104.

[20] R. Alan Culpper, "The Galilee Quest: The Historical Jesus And The Historical Galilee," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45, no. 2 (2018): 224, ALTA Religion Datatbase with ALTASerials.

[21] Jonathan L. Reed, "Instability In Jesus' Galilee: A Demographic Perspective*," Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 2 (2010): 343, ALTA Religion Datatbase with ALTASerials.

[22] Ibid., 351.

They ranged in size from a few inhabitants to large towns of several thousand."[23] Therefore, it is unlikely that all of Jesus' ministry in Galilee was rural ministry.

In the first century there is evidence that internal migration took place from the villages of Galilee to the newly created cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias.[24] If this is true, then Jesus likely saw first-hand the impact of rural people migrating to urban centers. Reed argues that during Jesus' time Galilee was not demographically steady.[25] One might say that it would bring rural people today a measure of comfort to know that Jesus lived in a time in which rural areas were losing population due to the employment opportunities presented by larger cities. It is interesting to note that the economic and cultural reality of first century rural Galilee has many commonalities with 21st century rural America.

Throughout his ministry in Galilee, Jesus understood the concerns of rural Jews during a time of Roman expansion. According to John Harrison, professor of New Testament at Oklahoma Christian University, many Galilean Jews in Jesus' day witnessed "a system of economic oppression along with the influx of Gentiles into the newly created cities built by Herod and Herod Antipas."[26] As resources were devoted to the newly created Roman cities, many of the primarily Jewish towns and villages

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[23] Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography,* 129.

[24] Reed, "Instability In Jesus' Galilee," 364.

[25] Ibid., 350.

[26] John Harrison, "Weeds: Jesus' Parable And Economic And Political Threats To The Poor In Roman Galilee," *Stone-Campbell Journal* 18, no. 1 (2015): 86, ALTA Religion Datatbase with ALTASerials.

suffered. Even in small towns like Capernaum there were many people with loyalties to Rome which would create "a considerable Roman cultural and political atmosphere."[27]

Jesus understood the impact of Roman urbanization and the economic realities of rural life. Culpepper writes, "Jesus tapped into the traditional independence of the Galilean villagers and their hostility toward Antipas, the Herodian elite in the cities (Sepphoris and Tiberias), and the Jerusalem authorities."[28] The result of his connection to rural people meant that Jesus' message often found a receptive audience in small towns and villages.[29] Jesus knew how to connect with small-town people and deliver a message that they could understand.

When reading the gospels, it is impossible to ignore that Jesus spent a significant amount of time in the city. Culpepper says, "Although most of those who followed Jesus were village commoners, the Gospels also record that Jesus encountered the elite, ate in their homes, debated with them and responded to their request for healings."[30] By no means did Jesus ignore those from the city who came to seek his help. Jesus often traveled to Jerusalem for the festivals and to visit the temple. Nevertheless, even when visiting Jerusalem he would often stay outside the city in the village of Bethany rather than in the city. His favorite place to stay in Bethany was in the home of his friends

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[27] Hill, *Capernaum*, 16.

[28] Culpper, "The Galilee Quest," 216.

[29] Ibid., 226.

[30] Ibid., 227.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.[31] It was here in a small village where Jesus would spend his the last days before his crucifixion.[32] Sweet and Viola write:

> The small town of Bethany, nestled in the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives and two miles away from Jerusalem was a hideaway and haven for Jesus. It's where His best friend, Lazarus, lived along with Mary and Martha, and where Jesus was always welcome. It is probably where Jesus stayed when He went to Jerusalem at least three times a year for the pilgrimage feasts of Passover, Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks), and the Feast of Tabernacles. And it is where He spent the last week of His life. Bethany was supremely dear to the heart of Jesus.[33]

Jesus loved Bethany and he loved Jerusalem. However, Jerusalem did not welcome him as warmly as Bethany. Jesus once said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you" (Luke 13:34 NIV). Jesus experienced a warm welcome in many rural towns but often got a cold shoulder in Jerusalem, just as the prophets who had gone before him. He was similar to those prophets of old because "most of the Old Testament prophets were called from a small town."[34] Small-town prophets are not always looked upon highly by the urban elite.

It was in the context of preaching in a rural village that Jesus told his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:37-38 NIV). If Jesus told his disciples to pray for the Lord to send workers into the rural harvest fields of his day, should Christians not also be praying for the same thing in 2020? Prayer ministry cannot

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[31] Luke 10:38-42.

[32] Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography,* 142.

[33] Ibid., 204.

[34] O'Dell, *Transforming Church*, 16.

be divorced from rural ministry.[35] Christians should be praying for workers for the urban, suburban, and rural harvest fields. The forgotten people and places of rural America will only be reached if there is prayer that God would send harvesters.

After praying this prayer for workers, Jesus then sends his disciples out on their own to do ministry.[36] In Matthew 10 he commissions them to go into the towns and villages of Galilee, giving them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.[37] Time after time the gospel writers record Jesus and his disciples going from village to village.[38] Additionally, he would often travel to the countryside to minister to the lepers who were not allowed to enter the city.[39] Jesus and his disciples did not confine their rural ministry to Northern Galilee alone. They also went into the towns, villages, and countryside surrounding all of Gennesaret,[40] as well as the villages surround Caesarea Philippi.[41]

Jesus did not neglect the small forgotten places of his day. He showed love, care, and concern for rural people. Daman says, "In contrast to Paul's strategy in Acts, Christ spent the bulk of his time and ministry in the rural areas and small villages."[42] He came

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[35] As I have been researching the rural church in the last few years I have been praying for God to provide workers for the harvest in my own rural community. It has been encouraging to see God answer those prayers and to see many ministry-focused young adults choose to stay in our community and be part of the rural harvest.

[36] Matthew 10:1-15.

[37] Matthew 10:1

[38] See Luke 8:1, 9:1-6, and 51-56.

[39] Luke 17:11-19.

[40] Mark 6:53-56

[41] Mark 8:27.

[42] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 149.

from a despised rural village and knew what it was like to be overlooked and undervalued.[43] It is clear from Jesus' interaction with Nathanael in the gospel of John that "the disdain of the small town seems to have been alive and well even when the bible was being written."[44] While many Christian denominations have made urban ministry a priority, they "have failed to carry out the Great Commission by abandoning those in forgotten places."[45] The life of Jesus provides a model for rural ministry and clearly demonstrates the love of God for rural people. A church that looks like Jesus must also reveal a love for rural people.

The Great Commission

Following his resurrection but before his ascension into heaven, Jesus gave his disciples a mission to go into all of the world to make disciples. The gospel of Matthew records his words: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-19 NIV). In Acts, Jesus is recorded as saying, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NIV). Daman rightly argues that "we should focus on rural ministry for no other reason than the command of Christ to go into all the world."[46]

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[43] John 1:45-46.

[44] Griggs, *Small Town Jesus*, loc. 234.

[45] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 159.

[46] Ibid., 158.

The Great Commission does not say to focus only on the large centers of population. Instead it encompasses every corner of the earth. The Acts 1:8 plan was not a trickle-down gospel from the large cities of the ancient near east to the small villages and towns but an intentional commission to every place and people group. The mission began in the urban center of Jerusalem, but it was to expand to every tribe, tongue, and nation.

Often the Protestant church prioritizes sending missionaries to the rural villages of Africa, but we ignore the rural villages of America. Are not the souls of the rural people in America as valuable as those in Africa? Daman proposes that "perhaps the greatest indictment against the American church is that we have failed to carry out the Great Commission by abandoning those in forgotten places."[47]

A rural missiology insists that Protestant churches mobilize people and resources to reach the forgotten people in the forgotten places. It is clear that Jesus "did not see a world where the city is more strategically important than country."[48] To neglect urban ministry would be equally as wrong as to neglect rural ministry. The mission of Jesus is not about "where people live, but where there is a person in need of the gospel. Thus, the priority is on both urban and rural ministry."[49] The gospel must be expressed in urban, suburban, and rural America in identical measure.

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[47] Ibid., 159.

[48] Ibid., 149.

[49] Ibid., 151.

Scattering the City Church

After the ascension of Jesus the disciples gathered together to pray until they were baptized with the Holy Spirit and power. Jesus had told them to stay into Jerusalem until this happened and then to be his witnesses throughout the world.[50] In Acts 2 the Spirit descends on the church, but the church stays in Jerusalem. Year after year no one is sent out. Everyone seemingly stays in the city, ignoring the command of Jesus in Acts 1:8. The church is focused on making disciples in Jerusalem. It does well in Jerusalem, growing to over five thousand men plus women and children. Likewise today many churches are thriving in the city. They are content to grow larger in their context but not larger in their influence. Rural areas and small towns in their state are not even on their church-planting radar. They have received power but forget about the Judea and Samaria of their day.

Throughout the story in the Old Testament, when God's people refuse to obey his sending he responds by scattering them to the ends of the earth. This is what happened to the Jerusalem church. Luke records that after the death of Stephen, "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1 NIV). Chapter eight also records that Philip the Evangelist goes to Samaria and eventually the apostles Peter and John visit Samaria as well.[51]

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[50] Acts 1:5-8.

[51] Acts 8:4-25.

Christoph Stenschke in his article "Migration and Mission: According to the Book of Acts" chronicles many instances of forced or voluntary migration throughout the biblical story.[52] According to Stenschke, "migration and mission go hand in hand."[53] God uses both voluntary and forced migration throughout biblical history in order to advance his mission in the world. When God's people resist moving to the new places to which they have been called to, he intervenes to send them.

Stephen's speech in Acts 7 is the catalyst for forced migration resulting in the evangelization of far off places. The fiery sermon given by Stephen will result in persecution that forces the church to move on from inhabiting only Jerusalem. Stenschke argues that "Stephen's speech also constitutes an often neglected theological foundation of the impending Christian mission to the ends of the world: as in past times, God will be with those who go to the ends of the earth."[54]

In the stories following Acts 7, "Luke's focus is on those Christians who leave Jerusalem voluntarily or due to persecution, and Luke follows their wanderings and ministry in different places."[55] The narrative makes clear that God is with them as they travel from the city to the unreached and uncivilized places of the Roman empire. The story shows that "obedience to the commission of Jesus to be his witnesses outside of the confines of Jerusalem begins with flight and migration."[56] As the disciples flee Jerusalem they are guided by the Holy Spirit towards new missional opportunities.

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[52] Stenschke, "Migration and Mission," 129–151.

[53] Ibid., 138.

[54] Ibid., 136.

[55] Ibid., 143.

[56] Ibid., 145.

The martyrdom of Stephen resulted in three important outcomes for the early church. The first outcome that resulted from Stephen's death is that the church was made uncomfortable. The authors of the *Life Application New Testament Commentary* write, "Evidently they had become somewhat comfortable sticking close to Jerusalem. All of that changed instantly with Stephen's death and the resultant persecution."[57] Comfort and complacency are two diseases that keep the church from obeying the mission of Jesus.

The desire for comfort leads the church to embrace a culture of consumption. Sweet proposes that "one of the greatest failures of the church in the past fifty years has been its inability to provide a culture of consumption with an alternative model."[58] Sweet goes on to say, "Sadly, my generation is responsible for turning the church into communities of convenience and comfort, not commitment and mission."[59] Metropolitan churches in the 21st century must be warned against becoming too comfortable in a culture where consumption is the norm.[60] To the extent that city churches ignore the larger mission to the forgotten people and places of America, they run the risk of forced migration by the hand of God.

Christians should not neglect the city today and more churches are needed in every large city of the world. In Acts we see many cities become missional hubs that send out people to the small towns and villages. Large churches are used by God in

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[57] Bruce Barton et al., *Life Application New Testament Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2001), 500.

[58] Leonard Sweet, *Me And We: God's New Social Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2014), 99.

[59] Ibid., 32.

[60] Rural churches can easily become places of comfort and consumption as well. This is not only a disease that infects non-rural churches. However, most rural churches lack the size and financial resources to become places of consumerism and entertainment.

magnificent ways, yet they must be on guard against the culture of consumption and consumerism. Missiologists and urban church planters Hugh Halter and Matt Smay write in their book *AND: The Gathered and Scattered Church,* "God is the one who builds the church. In Acts 2, he turned a network of house churches into a megachurch, and in Acts 8 he allowed a centralized Hebrew church to be scattered all over the world."[61] The beauty is found in a church that values being sent over being comfortable.

The second outcome of the execution of Stephen was the church being forced to migrate to the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. In Acts 1:8 Jesus laid out a plan for disciples to be made in Jerusalem and then Judea and Samaria and then the ends of the earth. After Stephen's death many of those who had been living in Jerusalem were forced to flee to the neighboring regions of Judea and Samaria.[62] Persecution and the subsequent scattering was needed in order to get the first Christians to do what had been commanded them by Jesus in Acts 1:8.[63]

In the 21st century there are many rural communities nearby large cities that need to be seen as missional opportunities. Just as the Jerusalem church was scattered to the towns and villages in Judea and Samaria, the churches in cities like Houston, New York City, and Los Angeles have the opportunity to reach the small towns near them that lack a life-giving church.

The third outcome of the death of Stephen is that the church will quickly begin its mission to the Gentiles. The heart of Jesus to reconcile Jews and Gentiles together

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[61] Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *AND: The Gathered and Scattered Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 26.

[62] Barton et al., *Life Application New Testament Commentary*, 499.

[63] Craig S. Keener, *THE IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 341.

into one body is finally grasped by some in the church. Acts 11:19-21 records:

> Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord (NIV).

The scattered church shares the gospel wherever it goes. I. Howard Marshall writes in his commentary on Acts, "Instead of indulging in wishful thinking or apocalyptic speculation, the disciples must accomplish their task of being witnesses to Jesus. The scope of their task is worldwide. It begins with Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and it stretches to the ends of the earth."[64] It is critical to note "that their particular movement is not attributed to any specific guidance from the Spirit, such as occurred at other critical stages in the expansion of the church. It seems rather to have been regarded as the natural thing for wandering Christians to spread the gospel."[65] It is natural for followers of Jesus to share the gospel wherever they go. Evangelism then becomes the natural habitus of the early church. As a result, the letters of the New Testament will acknowledge the scattering of God's people across the known world.

The book of James begins; "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings" (James 1:1 NIV). Likewise 1 Peter opens; "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1 NIV). The biblical story is one of the people of God gathering and scattering in order to

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[64] I. Howard Marshall, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries - Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 60.

[65] Ibid., 154.

fill the earth. Halter and Smay write, "The church is beautiful when she is sent, and the sent church will always be beautiful when she gathers in a way that highlights and complements her sending nature."[66] The book of Acts tells the story of a beautifully scattered church that rose from the ashes of its first martyr.

The story continues in Acts with the radical conversion of one of the most violent persecutors of the church. Saul meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and is renamed Paul. The newly minted apostle becomes the greatest apostolic missionary. In this next section we will examine his ministry to the church in Colossae.

The Pauline Ministry to Colossae

The Apostle Paul spent much of his energy focused on reaching the urban centers of his day. It was often from these urban centers that church planters would be sent out to the smaller towns and villages. Daman argues that "while much of the book of Acts focuses on events in urban centers, it's a mistake to think that Paul only focused on cities."[67] The early church also found many rural areas to be more receptive to the gospel than the urban centers. Bernard Doherty from St. Mark's National Theological Centre published an article on the first rural Christians in the Roman countryside. He writes, "Both in the small cities of Phrygia, and more importantly the rural villages of its vast imperial estate the social conditions were clearly less hostile for the growing of Christian

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[66] Halter and Smay, *AND*, 188.

[67] Daman, *God's Country*, 136.

communities over the first three centuries."[68] One example of a receptive small town that is relatable to 21st century small-town America is Colossae. The church in Colossae was the recipient of the letter named "Colossians." This young church was likely started by Paul's disciple, Epaphras.[69]

Colossae was like many small cities in America that have been bypassed by new interstates, ravaged by plant closures, or have been victims of new global trade deals. New Testament scholar Scot McKnight writes that Colossae was "at one time a prominent crossroad city in the Lycus Valley and known for its wool and textiles, but by the time of the apostle Paul" the city was declining.[70] Colossae had been in a period of decline due to a change in the trade route.[71]

Renowned biblical scholar N.T. Wright says that Colossae "was neither a large nor important town, though it had formerly been both; it had been upstaged by its near neighbors Laodicea, ten miles away, and Heirapolis six miles beyond that."[72] Other scholars say that by the time of Paul's writing Colossae had become "a small and socially unimportant city."[73] So hopeless was the situation that within a few years of Paul writing to them, the city would be devastated by an earthquake and never rebuilt. McKnight

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[68] Bernard Doherty, "The First Rural Chistians Toward an Explanation of the Christianisation of the Roman Phrygian Countryside," *Phronema* 32, no. 1 (2017): 97-98. ALTA Religion Datatbase with ALTASerials.

[69] N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon,* Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press USA, 2008), 24.

[70] Scot McKnight, *The Letter To The Colossians,* The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 18-19.

[71] Barton et al., *Life Application,* 866.

[72] Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 24.

[73] Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 568.

writes that between 61-64 CE the city was demolished."[74] Sadly, Colossae was never completely restored.[75]

What lessons can Protestant churches learn from this ancient city that became a small town and was eventually destroyed? The first lesson is that Paul believed Colossae was worth his time and effort. While he may have never visited Colossae he did write a letter to them. Not only did he write them the letter of Colossians, but the letter of Philemon is also addressed to people from Colossae. Paul involved his disciple Timothy in writing the letter and then sent his co-workers Tychicus and Onesimus to deliver it.[76] Not only did he devote his time to ministering to the Colossians, but he sent his best and brightest to serve them as well. The successful urban church leaders of our day need to see small places like Colossae as worthy of sending their best and brightest leaders to minister. They can follow the Pauline model.

The second lesson is the importance of bringing a gospel of hope into declining, small towns like Colossae. Paul begins the content of his letter by writing, "We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people – the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel" (Colossians 1:4-5 NIV). Paul understood that the people of Colossae may have lost hope in their city and therefore needed the hope of a heavenly city. He focuses on the future rewards that will be

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[74] McKnight, *Letter To The Colossians*, 19.

[75] Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 568.

[76] Colossians 1:1 and 4:7-9.

available to them, because when the present reality is not abundant the future reality gives hope.

A new rural missiology is about bringing this type of hope to overlooked people in overlooked places. True hope is not found in economic growth alone. Real hope is found in the type of abundant life that Jesus desires all people to experience. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10 NIV). The church has a mandate to share the hope of the full life that is found in Jesus. This is what Paul does in his letter to the church of Colossae, and it is also the mission of those who have a burden for depressed rural America.

The third lesson is that the Colossians received the gospel because of a man named Epaphras who was willing to sacrifice much on their behalf. The *New Bible Dictionary* acknowledges "that Epaphras evangelized the cities of the Lycus valley in Phrygia under Paul's direction during the latter's Ephesian ministry, and founded the churches of Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea."[77] Epaphras was not infected with the diseases of comfort and complacency. Rather, he sacrificed deeply to reach small declining towns like Colossae. Paul writes about him saying, "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you" (Colossians 4:12 NIV). He saw ministry in Colossae as a battle that required him to be proactive and aggressive in prayer. In order to see a rural revival take place men and women like Epaphras will be needed that are willing to "wrestle in prayer." Epaphras and

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[77] J.D. Douglas, *New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1982), 334.

Paul both understood the suffering that was going on in Colossae and were willing to bear the burdens of the church there. Rodney Reeves, professor of Biblical Studies at Southwest Baptist University writes:

> When we bear the burdens of those who are staring death in the face, we sense the heaviness of our souls, our hearts falling into our chests, the gravity of the situation. But these things do not weigh us down, dragging our souls to Sheol. Instead, we embrace the heaviness as God's glory. For when we feel the weight of these things, we know we are bearing the burden of Christ, the resurrection of our bodies.[78]

Epaphras and Paul were willing and able to carry the burdens of the small-town church in their day. In the 21st century there is a desperate need of men and women who are called and equipped to carry the burdens of the rural church. We need an army of disciples who will care about those impacted by globalization, economic changes, and the opioid epidemic that has ravaged so many small towns.

Discipleship today has to be about action, not just receiving information in the comfort of classrooms and worship centers. Unfortunately, "discipleship in the church today has more to do with consuming and absorbing cognitive content than it has anything to do with missional action."[79] The church was scattered from Jerusalem in order to achieve "a functional balance between scattering into the culture for the sake of missions and gathering together for the sake of community, growth, and development."[80] To the extent that the church only focuses on gathering it is disobedient to the commands

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[78] Rodney Reeves, *Spirituality According to Paul: Imitating the Apostle of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 197.

[79] Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, *Exponential* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 45.

[80] Halter and Smay, *AND*, 169.

of Jesus in Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28:18-20. The apostle Paul and Epaphras were obedient to the commands of Christ to bring the gospel to all peoples of the earth.

The rural church needs to hear from the Pauls of our day. Rural people need to know that they are seen and that they matter. In their book *No Little Places: The Untapped Potential of the Small-Town Church,* Ron Klassen and John Koessler write, "Many churches in small towns are struggling because they see no potential."[81] Nonetheless, anywhere there are people there is potential. God desires every person to come to him through his son. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 3:4 that God "wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (NIV). Just as many of the Colossians experienced the hope of the gospel, rural America today is in desperate need of the same timeless hope.

The Future Marriage of Urban and Rural

We have traced the story from the garden, to the tower of Babel, from the call of Abram, to the kings of Israel. We have followed the narrative of those who are sent and scattered in the Old Testament. We have looked at the exile and the dispersion of God's chosen people to the nations. We followed the story of Jesus, the story of Acts, the ministry of Paul in Colossae and the rural ministry of the early church. We have built a biblical theology for rural ministry from the narrative of the scriptures. The story has displayed the heart of God to fill the earth with his vice-regents. His methods have

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[81] Ron Klassen and John Koessler, *No Little Places: The Untapped Potential of the Small-Town Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 96.

included sending and scattering. He calls his people away from what is comfortable and into the unknown.

In this section we will look at how the story ends. Every great story has an ending that ties the narrative together in complex and compelling ways. The "Christian worldview is a story with a beginning, a middle and an end."[82] The biblical story is a great story. Trust the story.

For many Christians today the story ends with violence, death, flames, and destruction. They have bought into a narrative that says God's plan is to evacuate them from the earth and then destroy the earth completely. N.T. Wright states, "For many millions of believing Christians in today's world, the second coming is part of a scenario in which the present world is doomed to destruction while the chosen few are snatched up to heaven."[83] If this is where the story is headed then perhaps the work of rural renewal is not worth the effort. Maybe the dream of a life-giving church in every small town is not worth achieving. If rural America is doomed to destruction anyway, then it does not matter if it continues to be forgotten by Protestant churches. Christians ought to just stay wherever they are and hold on for the end times. Fortunately, this is not how the story ends.

The story started in a garden in Genesis 1. Humanity is to tend and till this garden and then cultivate the whole earth to be like the garden. However, the plan goes horribly astray. Today, humanity is doing more to destroy the earth than cultivate it. Humans are

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[82] N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008), 143.

[83] Ibid., 120.

consuming the earth's resources without regard for the divine directive to be trustees of the earth. Many Christians have no theological problems with this consumption and abuse of the earth because they believe God is going to eventually evacuate them from it before he obliterates it completely.

God created human beings to take care of his world. Our purpose is not to merely consume the resources of this world but rather to cultivate them. Sweet and Viola write, "Humans are created in the image of a God who has been cultivating the earth. Thus, our mission is to cultivate the earth."[84] For the first humans this meant to "not just take care of the garden but to make it more beautiful and more marvelous."[85]

The prophets of old gave glimpses to the Hebrew people of where the story was headed. Their prophetic visions are not purely of destruction, but rather redemption. Wright says, "Redemption doesn't mean scrapping what's there and starting again from a clean slate but rather liberating what has come to be enslaved."[86] The prophet Isaiah speaks God's promise of redemption:

> See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child; the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands. They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them.

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[84] Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography,* 42.

[85] Ibid., 43.

[86] N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope,* 96.

> Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb will feed together, the loin will eat straw like the ox, and dust will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord (Isaiah 65:17-25 NIV).

God paints a hopeful vision of the future to a people that have been scattered from their homeland. He speaks of a new heavens and earth, or a renewed heavens and earth that will be full of beauty, truth, and goodness. This was a hopeful vision for Israel and is also a positive vision for those in rural America who have lost hope for the future. N.T. Wright says, "When people cease to be surrounded by beauty, they cease to hope."[87] Rural America is strangled by pain and decline. In many ways, it has lost its beauty. Rural Americans wonder if the future has any place for them. The vision in Isaiah 65 shows a renewed world where urban and rural coexist together. The city, Jerusalem, is now a city of delight that brings joy to the people.

In the midst of this vision are very rural elements. There are people planting vineyards and building houses. They are eating the fruit they have grown from their labor. There is a city full of animals that dwell in peace alongside people. The mountain of God is a place of blessing and life. Harmony is restored. It looks urban and rural at the same time. Is this where the future is headed?

Isaiah is not alone in his prophetic hope. The prophet Ezekiel writes of a new temple, a river full of life, and trees with leaves that do not wither. Ezekiel says, "Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fall. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing" (Ezekiel

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[87] Ibid., 231.

47:12). Again, this is a very rural vision with a river and fruit trees. It gives hope for humanity to get another chance at cultivating the garden. It seems that the "human project of bringing wise order to the garden is not yet complete."[88]

Hundreds of years later another vision of the future will be written. John, the beloved disciple, will have a great revelation that will become the book end to the bible. Revelation 21:1-4 sounds much like Isaiah 65:

> Then I saw 'new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' (Revelation 21:1-4 NIV).

John's vision is about a new city, a new Jerusalem. This city is massive in size. Revelation 21:16 says it is 1,400 miles in length and as wide and high as it is long. The story ends in chapter 22 with more details about this new city:

> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding it fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 22:1-5 NIV).

This vision sounds very similar to the picture painted by Ezekiel. The images from Genesis 1 and 2 are resurrected. The story ends in a garden city, with the marriage of urban and rural. The city and the garden are not pitted against each other, rather they

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[88] Ibid., 95.

are brought together in beautiful harmony. Brad Roth writes, "If the story of Scripture begins in a garden, then it ends in a garden city. The garden is not destroyed or in conflict with the city of Zion. The two coexist. The city shelters the garden. The garden enlivens the city."[89] This vision of the future should motivate the mission to both urban and rural America. Neither one can be neglected for the other because the future needs them both.

God issued an invitation at the beginning for his image-bearers to be part of cultivating the earth. That invitation was rejected, but in Jesus Christ it has been issued again. Jesus invites the church to join him in bringing healing to the world. David McDonald says, "The church of the future will be driven by God's mission to heal the world and his long-term plan to bring heaven to earth."[90] He goes on to say, "By design, the garden was a starting point, and human beings are meant to keep the earth growing in wonder and complexity, innovation and change."[91]

The new rural missiology is the call to bring the healing of Jesus to the forgotten people and places of rural America. It is a call to innovation and change, it is a call to work faithfully with God. McDonald says that in the garden "Adam and Eve cooperated with God to perpetuate God's creation. But the Bible clearly indicates God intended to work with people forever, which is why heaven, like Eden, is presented as a place where God and God's people continue joint endeavors for eternity."[92]

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[89] Roth, *God's Country*, 211.

[90] David McDonald, *Then. Now. Next.: A Biblical Vision Of The Church, The Kingdom, And The Future* (Jackson, MI: Published by Author, 2017), 39.

[91] Ibid., 127.

[92] Ibid., 250.

To work with God now in rural America is to prepare for an eternity of co-reigning with Him. The theological work of understanding the story is essential because Dallas Willard says, "To live strongly and creatively in the kingdom of the heavens, we need to have firmly fixed in our minds what our future is to be like."[93] Simply put, future hope motivates present mission. If hope for the future is misplaced, then the mission of God in the world will be neglected. Rural America is full of misplaced hope. False hope has been sold by politicians, sociologists, counselors, and sometimes even the church. Real hope is found in Jesus and the future in which he invites all people to participate in.

This chapter has demonstrated the biblical basis for a new rural missiology by looking at the story of Jesus, the commandments given in the Great Commission, the scattering of the Jerusalem church in Acts 8, and the example of the Pauline ministry to Colossae, and the future marriage of urban and rural. The next chapter will revisit the four purposes of the new rural missiology in light of the work done in rural schools and education in recent years. Churches and schools both provide a cultural bedrock to rural communities and are necessary in order for the rural landscape to be revived.

[93] Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 376.

CHAPTER 5:

RURAL SCHOOLS AND RURAL CHURCHES

The Struggle of Rural Schools

Rural churches and rural schools face many of the same problems. The social and economic decline of rural communities has impacted both of them in significant measure. Protestant churches and denominations can learn from the strategies put in place by educators and school administrators to bolster rural schools and improve teacher recruitment and retention rates.

Ben lives in a rural area with only one public high school for the whole county. Many of the students who graduate from his high school do not end up attending college. Part of the reason is that his school struggles to prepare students for college, especially elite schools. Most universities require two years of foreign language but Ben's high school does not require students to take a foreign language course in order to graduate. Disappointingly, the only foreign language course Ben's school offers is Spanish, and it is poorly taught. Even if all of the students in the high school wanted to take this foreign language class, there would not be space for all of them.

Additionally, his high school lacks the resources to offer the same amount of advanced placement classes that are offered by suburban and urban schools. The school also lacks quality teaching in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math subjects) that prepare students for lucrative careers in growing fields. Currently the high school is exploring options to add broadcast classrooms so that STEM classes could be

taught by qualified teachers remotely. Despite being educated by caring teachers, Ben is at a distinct disadvantage compared to students in most urban and suburban high schools.[1]

Rural, remote, and small town schools encounter many of the same problems as rural churches. These schools struggle to stay open in declining towns, as do many rural churches. Recruitment and retention of quality teachers is a struggle in a similar way to recruitment and retention of quality leaders in the rural church. Teachers are not adequately prepared to teach in rural environments as pastors are also not well equipped by seminaries and bible colleges for the unique challenges of the rural landscape.

This chapter will explore the rural student achievement gap, the struggle to recruit and retain STEM teachers, and the strategies rural schools have implemented in order to recruit and retain teachers so as to improve the learning environment for their students. There are several examples of rural schools dignifying the call to teach in the rural landscape in the same way the Protestant church must dignify the call to pastor in rural areas. This chapter will conclude by revisiting the four purposes of the new rural missiology that were outlined in chapter two in order to apply the learnings from rural education strategies.

Schools are key to the survival of any small town. Wood writes, "If there is one key to a town's prospects of survival, or perhaps even its growth, it is its schools."[2] As rural areas decline in population rural schools are closed and consolidated in order to save money. Unfortunately, "the consolidation process has caused a lot of pain in rural

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[1] Ben's fictional story is based upon the real realities that face students are Carbon High School in Carbon County, UT. Carbon County has a population of approxiametely 20,000 people and is isolated from any urban centers.

[2] Wood, *Survival Of Rural America*, 31.

America, and the fact that consolidation may be necessary doesn't make it any easier for the communities where schools are closed."[3] When a town loses its schools it also loses its identity and a major piece of its culture. A town without a school will likely dive into further decline. Wood says, "The minimum requirements traditionally thought necessary for a town to remain viable typically include a gas station, grocery, bank, doctor (part-time), post office, restaurant, and school. Yet it is schools that are key."[4]

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow agrees with Wood, writing, "In all but the smallest towns, nothing serves so effectively to instill community pride as the local school."[5] Towns that lose their schools to consolidation also lose pride and hope. Rural residents will look for hope in new places and will often find solace in the angry messages of populist politicians, creating dangerous political scenarios for the country. Wuthnow says, "If a school closes because of declining population or consolidation, the blow to the community is more than simply having to see the remaining children bused to another town. It strips the town of a critical piece of its identity."[6] How is a rural community doing? Look at its school and you will find out. Wuthnow says, "As community symbols, the schools staying open or closing is one of the most telling markers of how people think the community is doing."[7] Schools are absolutely critical in order for small towns to thrive in the future.

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[3] Ibid., 34.

[4] Ibid., 32.

[5] Wuthnow, *Small-Town America*, 104.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Wuthnow, *Left Behind,* loc. 785.

Not only are rural schools facing the challenge of consolidation, they are also facing the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers.[8] The teachers they do retain are only 50 percent as likely to have graduated from top-ranked colleges or universities as their fellow teachers in urban areas.[9] David H. Monk, dean of the College of Education at Pennsylvania State University, wrote an article titled "Recruiting and Retaining High-Quality Teachers in Rural Areas." He writes:

> But for many rural schools, the quality of life in the community is lacking, working conditions are problematic, student needs are great, support services are limited, and professional support networks are inadequate. Salaries are lower for teachers in rural schools for many interconnected reasons, and certain types of rural schools struggle to appoint qualified teachers or make do with teachers who have fewer qualifications and face higher turnover rates.[10]

Rural schools face many challenges. However, the good news is that many educators, district administrators, and state officials are taking actions to strengthen rural schools in the 21st century.

Rural Schools in Idaho

One often overlooked struggle is that rural areas have lower levels of college attainment than non-rural areas. Research by Professor Daniel Player from the University of Virginia has shown that rural and remote regions have lower college-going

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[8] Brown and Schafft, *Rural People And Communties*, 67.

[9] David H. Monk, "Recruiting and Retaining High-Quality Teachers in Rural Areas," *The Future of Children* 17, no. 1 (2007): 159, https://doi.org.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/0161956X.2015.1022115.

[10] Ibid., 167.

percentages than urban or suburban areas.[11] As a result, fewer people who grow up in these small places have the educational qualifications to become teachers.[12] Rural teachers also have an education gap when compared to their non-rural counterparts. Player found that "rural teachers are less likely to hold a master's degree than teachers from any other locale despite the fact that they are slightly more experienced, on average, than teachers from urban and suburban settings."[13] He also discovered that "rural teachers were less likely to have graduated from a selective college than their urban and suburban counterparts."[14]

The Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho has performed extensive research into the struggles and opportunities experienced by their rural schools. They found that,

> While many factors contribute to low rural college-going and success rates in Idaho, a critical one is the lack of rigorous coursework necessary to prepare students for success in college and careers. One key to addressing that deficiency is to give rural students increased access to high-quality teaching, especially in courses that lie along the path to college.[15]

In Idaho they have found that "the limited supply of teachers living in rural communities, lack of rigorous training and certification options, and geographic and social isolation make it difficult to recruit and retain high-quality teachers in rural

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[11] Daniel Player, "The Supply and Demand for Rural Teachers," *Rural Opportunities Consortium Of Idaho* (March 2015): 5, http://www.rociidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ROCI_2015_RuralTeachers_FINAL.pdf.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 15.

[14] Ibid., 13.

[15] Bryan C. Hassell, Shonaka Ellison, and Jeanette P. Cornier, "Boosting Idaho Rural Students' College Prospects by Expanding Access to Great Teaching," *Rural Opportunities Consortium Of Idaho* (October 2015): 2, http://www.rociidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ROCI_TeacherQuality_Final.pdf

schools."[16] The result of the limited supply of teachers is that rural Idaho schools have to be more aggressive when it comes to teacher recruitment and retention.

The teacher shortage in rural Idaho schools is not as extreme as one might think. Player found that "there are no statistically significant differences, on average, between rural schools and their non-rural counter parts in the likelihood of having a vacant position in a given year."[17] Rural Idaho schools report difficulty in filling teacher vacancies at approximately the same rate as non-rural schools.[18] Nonetheless, rural schools are more prone than urban or suburban schools to have open positions in a STEM field.[19] The struggle to find quality teachers in fields like math and science puts rural Idaho students at a distinct academic disadvantage.

Rural Idaho school districts have realized their need to develop creative recruitment strategies while also finding innovative ways to increase the influence of their most excellent teachers, so that a greater number of rural students benefit from the type of rigorous instruction that will prepare them for college.[20] Since there are fewer college graduates in rural Idaho there are also fewer potential teachers, "which creates the need to recruit more teachers from suburban and urban areas."[21]

Rural Idaho schools face a teacher recruitment challenge in the same way rural churches face a pastoral recruitment challenge. The lack of college educated adults in

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[16] Ibid., 9.

[17] Player, "Demand For Rural Teachers," 8.

[18] Ibid., 11.

[19] Ibid., 8.

[20] Hassel, Ellison, and Cornier, "Boosting Idaho Rural Students," 13.

[21] Ibid., 10.

rural areas also lowers the supply of pastors who have formal education for church ministry. Churches and schools both have to recruit from the pools of suburban and urban people in their respective fields in order to make up for lack of educated and qualified candidates from their rural communities.

The Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho has found four strategies to be successful in recruiting and retaining rural teachers. The first is for rural schools to adopt a "grow your own" strategy.[22] Rural communities find success through creating a pipeline for future teachers from within their communities. These home grown teachers are more likely to desire living long-term in a rural area.

The second tactic is for rural school districts to develop strong marketing strategies.[23] Schools can do this by marketing the benefits of teaching in a rural school, the recreation opportunities provided in their rural area, and the ability to have greater authority in a small school. Other benefits include greater control over the instruction that occurs in their classrooms, as well as increased influence on school policy compared to urban teachers.[24]

A third strategy for rural Idaho schools is to offer financial incentives to teachers.[25] These incentives may include college debt forgiveness, bonuses, and higher teacher pay. Many of these rural districts have limited financial resources but are using

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[22] Ibid., 14.

[23] Ibid., 15.

[24] Player, "Demand For Rural Teachers," 23.

[25] Hassel, Ellison, and Cornier, "Boosting Idaho Rural Students," 16.

their resources as creatively as possible. For a young teacher, debt relief is a significant benefit.

The fourth strategy that has proved to be effective is to emphasize professional development and professional learning networks.[26] When teachers have opportunities to grow and be encouraged by their peers they are more likely to feel successful and desire to stay in a rural appointment. The state of Idaho has acknowledged the issues its rural schools are facing and is taking action to strengthen these small-town schools.

Rural Schools in Alaska

Rural schools in Alaska have also struggled to recruit and retain teachers. Alaska's vast geography and sparsely populated areas make providing quality education a significant challenge. Professors Barbara L. Adams and Ashley Woods published research in the Peabody Journal of Education on recruiting and retaining teachers in Alaska's rural K-12 schools.[27] They found that Alaska's rural schools face unique challenges in their remoteness. Additionally, in rural Alaska schools "the teacher often comes from outside the state and enters a community that is a monoculture different from the teachers own background."[28] Adjusting to rural Alaska and feeling successful as a teacher is a struggle for those who come from outside the state. Teacher efficacy, which is the quality of feeling successful as a teacher, corresponds positively with teacher

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Barbara L. Adams and Ashley Woods, "A Model for Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Alaska's Rural K–12 Schools," *Peabody Journal of Education* 90, no. 2 (March 15, 2015): 250–262, https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2015.1022115.

[28] Ibid., 252.

retention.[29] Therefore, one strategy for teacher retention is to work towards increasing teacher efficacy.

The Alaska Statewide Mentor Project (ASMP) is a joint effort for the University of Alaska and the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development to address the persistently low teacher retention rates in the state, particularly in rural districts that instruct Alaska Native students.[30] The goal of the program is to provide an veteran Alaskan teacher as a mentor to early-career teachers who are in their first or second year of their career.[31] Rural districts were pleased to discover that providing early-career mentorship to new teachers was successful in increasing teacher retention.

Adams and Woods found that "over six years, teacher retention in rural districts, measured from year to year, has increased from an average of 67% to an average of 77% among new teachers who receive ASMP mentoring."[32] The study shows that connecting experienced rural teachers and new rural teachers in a mentoring relationships has yielded fruit for teacher retention in rural Alaskan schools. These mentoring relationships help teachers better cope with the stressors that come with teaching in a rural environment. The mentors were able to help the new teachers develop realistic expectations and plan for how to meet those expectations.[33] Ultimately, providing mentors to new teachers helped increase teacher efficacy, which then resulted in greater rates of teacher retention.

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[29] Ibid., 251.

[30] Ibid., 250.

[31] Ibid, 252.

[32] Ibid., 250.

[33] Ibid.

The ASMP program was important for Alaskan rural students because low teacher retention correlates to lower student achievement.[34] If rural Alaskan schools can continue to increase their teacher retention rates they should see positive correlation with greater student achievement. The fact that something as simple as a mentoring program can make this type of difference shows that even the smallest and most remote rural communities are not without hope. Programs like ASMP can help rural schools take significant steps forward.

Rural Schools in Australia

Research conducted by education journals has revealed that "the difficulty of staffing rural and remote schools has become a global phenomenon."[35] The global challenge stretches to countries such as Australia. In a comparable way to Alaska, Australia is vast in geography and sparsely populated outside of its city centers. Additionally, Australia has a large native population like Alaska. Researchers from several universities in Australia conducted a study of 191 rural teachers in 27 rural and remote secondary schools. Their study can be applied to many of the challenges that face rural schools and rural churches in the United States as well. The study determined that the majority of new teachers in rural and remote schools arrive with little prior teaching experience. Their research also found that the vast majority of teachers stayed for a relatively short time."[36]

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[34] Ibid., 252.

[35] Boris Handal et al., "Choosing to Teach in Rural and Remote Schools: The Zone of Free Movement," *Education Research & Perspectives* 45 (January 2018): 1–32, EBSCOhost.

[36] Ibid., 23.

Professor Boris Handel and his group of researchers discovered four factors at work in teachers making the decision to take a rural position. The first factor was the "opportunity to secure a permanent position."[37] The second factor was the "attraction of a rural environment."[38] The third factor was a "perception of a stronger sense of collegiality."[39] The fourth factor was the "attraction of gaining rural education experience/exposure."[40] The study found that because many rural teachers moved to non-rural schools after a short time, the rural and remote schools were essentially subsidizing the larger schools by training their teachers for them. New teachers in Australia often spend a couple years in a rural school before transferring to a more desirable school in a non-rural location.

One lesson that can be learned from Australia is the importance of training and preparing teachers for rural appointments so that teacher retention rates increase. Graeme Lock from Edith Cowan University in Western Australia published an article in *The Rural Educator* on preparing teachers for rural appointments.[41] Lock found that "current teaching courses do not equip students with the skills and knowledge to teach in rural and remote locations."[42] Teaching programs fail to prepare their students for the uniqueness

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[37] Ibid., 21.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Graeme Lock, "Preparing Teachers for Rural Appointments: Lessons from Australia," *Rural Educator* 29, no. 2 (2008): 24–30, EBSCOhost.

[42] Ibid., 24.

of rural education. Lock believes "students need to be equipped to face the special challenges and conditions for rural teaching prior to appointment."[43]

One solution that is being advocated by Lock is customizing teaching courses to meet the needs of small communities by allowing pre-service teachers the option to experience working in remote areas as part of their education requirements."[44] This idea can be implemented by providing rural placements for pre-service teachers in the last year of their program.[45] Lock believes that this strategy could make a positive difference with the teacher recruitment and retention problem. Additionally, practicum placements in rural and remote areas gives school administrators the opportunity to audition potential teachers for future jobs in their district.[46]

This solution being proposed by Lock would allow school districts to discover potential teacher candidates and give opportunities to non-rural students to experience the opportunities and benefits of teaching in a rural community. Lock's solution could also be applied to other occupations because it is also difficult to recruit other professionals to rural and remote areas."[47]

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 25.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., 24.

Rural Schools in Minnesota

The last region to look at in this chapter is the state of Minnesota. Research conducted by Purdue University has found that "compared to schools in central cities, suburban areas, and large towns, schools in rural areas and small towns have greater difficulty filling vacancies."[48] In addition, many rural teachers are teaching outside of the field of expertise. A study of 331 Minnesota school districts discovered that compared to non-rural teachers, nearly twice as many rural teachers were working outside of their field of licensure or under a temporary waiver from their district.[49] Again, the lack of qualified teachers puts rural students at a disadvantage when compared with their suburban and urban peers.

Many of the recruitment and retention strategies that are being tried in rural Idaho are also being experimented with in Minnesota, including "grow your own" teacher initiatives and financial incentives for rural teachers. Many school districts are having success with programs focusing on growing their own teachers. These districts are "focused more on turning rural residents into teachers, rather than turning teachers into rural residents."[50] Teachers who work in the rural community in which they grew up are more likely to be committed to staying long-term.

One unique idea to increase teacher retention proposed by researchers from Purdue University is for rural school administrators and communities "to devise effective

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[48] Kasey P. S. Goodpaster, Omolola A. Adedokun, and Gabriela C. Weaver, "Teachers' Perceptions of Rural STEM Teaching: Implications for Rural Teacher Retention.," *Rural Educator* 33, no. 3 (Spring/Summer2012 2012): 9–22, EBSCOhost.

[49] Andrea D. Beesley et al., "Strategies for Recruitment and Retention of Secondary Teachers in Central U.S. Rural Schools," *Rural Educator* 31, no. 2 (2010): 2, EBSCOhost.

[50] Ibid., 8.

strategies for helping new teachers become connected to the community; for example, by introducing them to influential people who can serve as resources."[51] New residents to small towns often struggle to fit into the existing social networks. Additionally, the lack of privacy due to community member awareness of where they live and their life circumstances can be difficult for new teachers.[52] If teachers can be included into the existing social networks and assimilated into the community the chances of them staying long-term in a small town will likely increase.

From Idaho, to Alaska, to Australia, to Minnesota, school districts and departments of education are taking steps to address the lack of teachers and the quality of education in rural schools. Innovative strategies are being tried, financial investments are being made, and the need is being broadcasted. Christians that are concerned about rural America and the rural church can learn from what is happening in rural education. In the next section these learnings will be applied to the new rural missiology. The four purposes of the new rural missiology that will be explored in this section were first introduced in chapter two.

Application to Rural Missiology Purposes

The first purpose is that a new rural missiology will dignify the call to the rural church. When speaking at the Rural Matters Conference in 2017 Pastor Jarrett said, "A rural missiology will dignify the people, the place, and the pastor in the rural context."[53]

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[51] Goodpaster et al., "Perceptions Of Rural," 20.

[52] Ibid., 15.

[53] Bryan Jarrett, "Session 1," 2017 Rural Matters Conference, Northplace Church, September 19, 2017, video of lecture, https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/rural-matters-conference-2017/.

Jarrett has been working towards restoring this dignity. Jarrett believes that "a new rural missiology will dignify the people and the place."[54] Rural missiology will help to put "rural on the radar" of suburban and urban churches.[55] So what can Christians learn from the field of education about how to dignify the rural calling?

The researchers and administrators who have been advocating for rural schools understand the importance of dignifying the call to rural and remote areas. They have been able to bring respect and admiration to the rural educator through researching the problem and writing about it in academic journals, magazines, newspapers, and websites. Brown and Schafft advocate that "more than any other local institution, schools help to establish a community's identity as well as its social boundaries."[56] Statements like these from respected researchers lends gravity to the opinion that rural education matters. Lowe writes, "Great recruiting starts with a great reputation. School districts should develop a marking strategy that illuminates the positive elements of the school district, the community, and the surrounding area."[57] Dignity is brought to the rural place by highlighting the positive aspects of the rural landscape and addressing the misinformation about rural areas.

Researchers in Australia found that misinformation about rural areas has discouraged teachers from working at rural and remote schools.[58] As a result, programs

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[54] Bryan Jarrett, Interview with author, April 2, 2019.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Brown and Schafft, *Rural People & Communities*, 63.

[57] Jerry Lowe, "Rural Education: Attracting And Retaining Teachers In Small Schools," *The Rural Educator* 2, no. 27 (Winter 2006): 28, ProQuest.

[58] Handal et al, "Rural And Remote Schools," 9.

have been proposed to expose student-teachers to rural areas during their final year of schooling. Exposure to the reality of what the rural landscape actually looks like helps to combat disinformation and urban biases.

In order to dignify the call to the rural church, Christian leaders must also conduct research on the rural church and aggressively publish that research in a way that will raise the level of consciousness among Christians. Unfortunately, much more research has been done on rural schools than on rural churches in America. Misinformation about rural areas and churches also needs to be combated. Successful examples of rural ministry and rural church-planting need to be highlighted in conferences and at denominational meetings. In short, the rural church needs a marketing strategy.

The second purpose is that the new rural missiology will transform the way leaders are equipped for the rural church. Seminaries and bible colleges rarely train their students for the realities of rural ministry. Students are taught how to preach and study the bible but are not educated on how to navigate the culture of a small town. Once a pastor does take a rural assignment there are limited resources available to help them.

In education, "studies have indicated that high-quality staff development programs lead to improved classroom teaching and employee retention, especially in small and rural schools."[59] Successful rural schoolss make the development and further education of their teachers a priority. Monk writes, "Effective mentoring can break the tendency of new teachers to quickly leave rural settings."[60] Monk's findings are similar to the success rural districts have seen with mentoring programs in the state of Alaska.

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[59] Lowe, "Rural Education," 29.

[60] Monk, "Recruiting and Retaining," 169.

Rural schools have seen improvement in teacher retention by transforming the way they equip rural teachers for success.

What can the rural church learn from rural schools? Churches and denominations would be wise to implement mentoring programs for new rural pastors. A young rural pastor at the beginning of their career could be connected with an experienced rural pastor in order to begin a mentoring relationship. Denominations and church-planting organizations could also develop rural-specific training and development opportunities for small-town pastors. Social media groups could be formed to help create these connections between new and experienced pastors in non-denominational churches.

One such example that is already taking place is Small Town Summits.[61] Small Town Summits are one day gatherings of non-urban pastors for the purpose of encouraging and equipping them for ministry in their unique context. These summits help to both dignify the call to rural ministry and equip leaders for the rural church.

Rural schools have also created a pipeline for future rural teachers through "grow your own" programs. Educators have found that, "many school districts are able to grow their own teachers by having active and dynamic future teacher clubs in their schools."[62] In the same way, rural churches can focus on growing their own future church leaders and pastors. Internships for young adults and leadership pipelines can be created in order to turn rural residents into rural clergy instead of trying to turn urban clergy into rural residents.

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[61] For more information see https://www.bgcruralmatters.com/small-town-summits/.

[62] Lowe, "Rural Education," 31.

There are some differences in growing your own teachers versus growing your own clergy. Churches must focus on developing young people with ministry skills and also job skills that would enable them to serve in a bi-vocational manner. Small towns often have teaching jobs available that include full-time compensation. This is not always the case with small-town churches. Churches must develop the next generation of clergy with the technical skills to secure paid work outside of the church. Small-town churches have an advantage in growing their own clergy because they can give them ample opportunities to practice without being expected to be perfect. Rural churches do not expect professional performances from the pulpit. Another difference between developing rural clergy as opposed to rural teachers is the focus on spiritual formation and character development. Rural churches must first focus on the character development of their potential leaders rather than focusing primarily on teaching skills. A focus on growing rural clergy from within will change the way leaders are equipped for the rural church.

The third purpose is that a new rural missiology will inspire Protestant churches and denominations to devote financial resources to rural places. In order to see a life-giving church in every small town and rural community, financial resources will be needed. To create gospel access for the people of rural America new sources, of funding will be absolutely necessary. The new rural missiology will paint a missiological picture that will compel people to give for biblical reasons.

In the state of Alaska, the University of Alaska and the State Department of Education have pulled together financial resources to create mentoring programs for rural

educators.[63] Their financial investments have resulted in meaningful advancements in teacher retention.[64] In states such as Minnesota, effort has been made to maximize federal funding opportunities for rural schools.[65] Other states are making financial investments as well. Mississippi offers rural teachers an Employer-Assisted Housing Teacher Program that delivers interest-free loans to accredited teachers in fields of critical shortage and also affords a loan repayment program for new teachers who work in the rural regions of the state.[66] Passionate educators find the financial resources necessary for reviving rural schools and bridging the achievement gaps. So what can the church learn from the schools about devoting financial resources to rural places?

First, research needs to be done to show that the financial investments into the rural church really make a noteworthy difference. If rural ministries can show benefactors evidence for why their investment will make a difference they will be more likely to make substantial donations. Second, financial resources need to be released by denominations and church-planting organizations. If denominations see rural America as a legitimate mission field they will then be willing to invest money into reaching that mission field. Third, if pastors begin their careers in rural churches but then transfer to urban and suburban churches, those rural churches should be compensated by the non-rural churches for training their pastors. If rural churches are going to serve as a stepping stone for pastors on their way to bigger places then their contribution to urban and

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[63] Adams and Woods, "Recruting And Retaining Teachers," 250.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Beesley et al., "Strategies For Recruitment," 3.

[66] Monk, "Recruiting And Retaining," 167.

suburban churches should be acknowledged. In the same way that rural schools should be compensated for being the training grounds for future urban teachers so rural churches should receive renumeration for training up the next generation of pastors who will ultimately serve non-rural congregations. Even a small financial investment by suburban and urban churches into rural America could make a huge difference.

The fourth purpose is that a new rural missiology will show how rural America can benefit the church as a whole. An obvious connection to education is that a better educated rural America will benefit all of America. Likewise, a thriving rural church will benefit the whole church. A disgruntled, discontented, and declining rural America will harm the whole nation. If the church is truly the body of Christ, then if one part suffers all the parts suffer.[67] If the rural church suffers, the whole church suffers. A new rural missiology will shape a rural church that will be blessed in order to be a blessing.

In this chapter rural education has been highlighted as a model from which the church can learn. Rural churches and schools share many problems in common, but they also share many of the same solutions to their problems. The new rural missiology can be advanced by applying what rural schools have learned about teacher recruitment and retention. These lessons will help rural churches to recruit and retain the quality leaders that will be able to build thriving churches. Those thriving churches will then be able to bring the hope of Jesus to the small towns and rural communities that have lost hope for the future.

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[67] The apostle Paul wrote, "If one part sufferes, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it" (1 Corinthains 12:26-27 NIV).

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION

Expectation for the Future

Rural America has lost hope. Thriving rural churches can help restore the soundtrack of hope to rural communities. Christians can expect that tomorrow will be better than today is in the rural landscape. Expectation for the future informs how people live in the present. Expectation is the result of hope and hope fuels the expectation that tomorrow can be better than today. Hope gives faith for the future. The writer of Hebrews says, "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1 NIV). Hebrews 11 goes on to chronicle the men and women of God who had great expectations for what the Lord would do in their day. They lived boldly in the present because of their expectation for the future. What expectations do Christians have today for the future of rural America?

The goal of this work is that every Christian would realize that God cares about the small towns through America and longs to see a thriving church in every small town and rural community throughout the United States. The new rural missiology is a call to resource and equip the rural church to bring the hope of Jesus to rural America. When Christians expect that God will revive the rural landscape they position themselves in the present to be part of what they hope will happen in the future.

Chapter one gave a sobering picture of the current reality of rural America. The 21st century has brought economic struggle, population decline, and the opioid epidemic to small towns throughout the country. Rural America is now wrestling with many of the

problems that were historically concerns limited to the inner city. Today there is a widening gap politically, culturally, and economically between rural and non-rural people in the United States. The landscape of small-town America has undergone many changes in the 21st century of which Christians need to be aware.

Chapter two argued that although rural America is experiencing brokenness and misplaced hope, rural churches are often ignored in terms of missional priority and resources by the Protestant church. Christian denominations and church-planting organizations consistently overlook rural America as a legitimate mission field. Small churches in small towns find it difficult to recruit, retain, and pay good pastors. There is a deficit in leadership that rural churches struggle to overcome. In many rural communities churches still have a voice and are a central part of the cultural framework. As a result, rural churches have a unique opportunity to bring hope and revitalization to rural communities. Chapter two argued that developing a rural missiology will change the way Protestant churches resource rural churches, dignify the call to rural ministry, and bring hope in the midst of brokenness.

Chapter three began the theological work to demonstrate the biblical reasons for devoting people and resources to sparsely populated areas. The story of the Old Testament was traced from Genesis through the exile in order to show the heart of God to fill the earth with his vice-regents. When God's people refused to obey his divine directives to fill the earth he resulted to scattering them. The chapter highlighted how the large cities were viewed by ancient Jewish people and concluded by exegeting the shepherd metaphor.

Chapter four developed the new rural missiology throughout the New Testament story. Throughout the story there is a consistent theme of God's care and concern for rural people. The biblical basis for the rural mission was argued by looking at the story of Jesus, the commandments given in the Great Commission, the scattering of the Jerusalem church in Acts 8, the example of Paul's ministry to Colossae, and the future marriage of urban and rural in Revelation. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments there is a consistent problem of God's people gathering in the city when they have been called to cultivate the whole earth with the faithful presence of God. When the people of God resist being sent, God responds by scattering them to accomplish his will. Christians must obey God when he sends them no matter the context.

The biblical weight of chapters three and four is intended to move the hearts and minds of urban and suburban church leaders who are committed to the authority of scripture. New missional adventures are often motivated by fresh theological understandings. The hope is that Protestant Christians will be motivated by a new rural missiology so that people and resources will be mobilized to bring the hope of Jesus to depressed rural areas.

Chapter five incorporated the research and methods being used in rural education to improve schools and attempt to level the playing field for rural students. Rural school districts have discovered ways to dignify the call to rural education, increase teacher retention rates, and provide incentives that help with teacher recruitment. Churches can learn from the success of rural school districts in states such as Idaho, Minnesota, and Alaska. If rural schools and rural churches can both receive resources, time, and attention

from state boards of education and state denominational leaders, then perhaps the future will be bright in the small towns of America.

Recommendations for Future Research

Research on the rural church is not nearly as robust as the research that has been done for rural education and rural healthcare. There are several areas of future research related to the rural church that can be recommended. First, research needs to be done on the health of the rural church compared to non-rural churches. Measurements of health can be studied in terms of baptisms, salvations, adherents, and success in reaching the next generation. The metrics that are available currently are rarely summarized into rural and non-rural categories. This research is needed in order to prove definitively whether the rural church is less healthy on the whole than suburban and urban churches.

Second, research needs to be done on pastoral recruitment and retention. Do small-towns churches have shorter pastoral tenures? Are there more pastoral openings in these churches and is it more difficult to fill these parishes than in their non-rural counterparts? Research-based studies are needed in order to answer these questions in a more complete manner than has been accomplished in this dissertation.

Third, research on church closure rates would help discern whether rural churches are being closed at a faster rate than non-rural churches. The narrative within Christian circles is that churches are being closed faster than they are being started. Yet, to what extent is that true in rural America? Statistics on church closures would help denominations and church planting movements to know where to devote resources and identify which areas of the country lack a healthy church.

Fourth, research is needed in order to compile a list of Christian colleges and seminaries that have classes or programs specifically designed to prepare future clergy for rural ministry. Do these programs currently exist? If so, have they been successful? In order to dignify the call to rural ministry and equip the next generation for this ministry seminary education that is customized for the rural context will be absolutely necessary.

These are several areas of research that would further bolster the new rural missiology. If researchers can answer these questions there will be a better baseline to measure from. The only way to know conclusively if the new rural missiology is successful is by having a starting point from which to measure.

Practical Application in a Rural Ministry Context

In 2014, my wife, kids, and I packed up our home in a mid-sized city north of Seattle and moved to rural Utah. Our family was living in Bellingham, Washington and I was serving as the Associate Pastor at Northside Community Church. We accepted the call to pastor a church called Price Chapel in Price, Utah. In 2014, this small town was experiencing economic decline stemming from not only the Great Recession but also from years of decline in coal mining. Price is in coal country and for years coal mines had been closing. Global economic forces, renewable energy, and political pressures had contributed to this decline. Price was not only struggling economically but also sociologically. The population was in decline, brain-drain was a real problem, the suicide rate was one of the highest in the nation, and the opioid epidemic was spiraling out of

control.[1] We moved to Price with a desire to see the hope of Jesus transform our new home.[2]

In this section I will outline three actions I have taken to apply the new rural missiology in my context in order to resource rural churches, dignify the call to rural ministry, and bring hope in the midst of brokenness. The actions I have taken are ways that other rural pastors can also bring change today instead of waiting to be rescued by their denominations or church-planting movements. These are initiatives that can begin to build excitement for rural ministry and hope for the small places throughout the U.S.

The first action I took was to organize and lead a monthly gathering of local pastors. I began by sending a letter to every pastor within a 30 mile radius to invite them to gather for prayer. I was grateful when many pastors showed up to our first meeting. This diverse group has included clergy from many denominations including Independent Baptists, Lutherans, Foursquare, United Methodist, Pentecostal Church of God, Southern Baptist, and Christian and Missionary Alliance. These pastor gatherings fulfill several purposes that ultimately serve to revive the rural church in Carbon County.

The first purpose is community. Small-town pastors are often isolated from their denominational communities and need to develop meaningful peer relationships. Relationships of depth and encouragement have been built. Friendships have been formed and ties deepened between church leaders. In our community most of the pastors have now been serving in their respective churches for at least three years. We have seen

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[1] For more information on the opioid epedemic in the Price area see this article: Yue Stella Yu, "Millions Of Opioid Pills Poured Into Southeast Utah's Sparsely Populated Coal Country," *The Salt Lake Tribune,* August 18, 2019, https://www.sltrib.com/news/2019/08/18/millions-opioid-pills/.

[2] Price, Utah is located in Carbon County. The population of the whole county is approximately 20,000 people.

stability and longevity increase among the clergy in our area in comparison to previous years.

The second purpose of our gatherings is finding ways to work together to bring the hope of Jesus to our community. The local churches are now sharing resources, pitching in to serve the poor and addicted, and have created a culture of cooperation instead of competition. Hopeful events such as a community Good Friday Service have been a success. Additionally, in 2019, we had nine churches participate in Lenten Lunches, which are community-wide gatherings for lunch, scripture, and prayer during the liturgical season of Lent.

The third purpose of the pastors gathering is to equip pastors for ministry, especially in the rural context. We discuss together how to contextualize the gospel in our culture, how to navigate tough leadership situations, and how to create sermon series that will build up our congregations. Pastors in their thirties are able to learn from pastors in their sixties. Together we are able to learn principles from each other about small town ministry that were never taught to us in seminary or bible college.

Lastly, I have been able to share the new rural missiology with my pastoral colleagues. They have participated in my field research pertaining to the unique problems rural churches are facing. I have also shared with them some of the biblical underpinnings for why rural ministry is important. My hope is that this has resulted in greater dignity and value for ministering in rural church among our group of pastors.

The second action I have taken in my rural context is to join and help start local groups focused on bringing hope to our rural community by reversing the rates of suicide, inter-generational poverty, and the opioid epidemic. As a pastor of the largest Protestant

church in our community I have been blessed to have a voice in our community and looked to for leadership on these issues. Small-town pastor Stephen Witmer rightly says, "The smallness of our context gives us an outsized influence."[3] I have found this to be true in my small town. The mayor, city council members, and other civic leaders have invited me to have a seat at the table.

I helped launch the first gathering in recent decades of faith-based leaders to address the sociological brokenness in our county. In 2016, we launched the Faith-Based Coalition, which is a group of faith-based leaders, politicians, and mental health practitioners that are concerned with finding faith-based solutions to the struggles our rural community is experiencing. Daman writes, "Gaining the respect of those in the church and community at large begins with the pastor valuing both the relationships of people and the culture of the community."[4] I have found Daman's statement to be true. Recently, I have also been asked to join the board of the CARE Coalition that is taking preventive measures to protect the next generation from addiction, suicide, and poverty.[5] As faith-based leaders we have made it clear that we have hope for the future and expectation that tomorrow will be better than today. Our work to make this happen has increased the level of respect we are given in the community. We are proving that the church can actually make a real difference in depressed rural America.

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[3] Witmer, *A Big Gospel,* 94.

[4] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 89.

[5] For more information on the CARE Coalition and the Faith Based Coalition see https://www.deseret.com/2018/1/2/20637765/how-carbon-county-is-building-a-fence-to-protect-the-community-from-opioids.

The third action I have taken is to cultivate the next generation of rural church leaders and pastors from within. My goal has been to create a pipeline for future church staff from within our faith community. We have accomplished this by starting a successful internship program. In the last three years we have had eight young adults complete internships on our church staff. My associate pastor and I have invested into these interns. One of them recently joined our church staff on a permanent basis and another one is now pastoring a church in a nearby rural community. These young men and women are learning first-hand the importance of rural ministry.

At Price Chapel we are actively developing a program to grow future pastors for not only our church but for the small towns in our area of Utah, many of which do not even have a Christian church. Just as successful rural school districts are developing programs to grow their own future teachers, we are focused on growing future pastors for our region. Our dream is for every small town in Utah to have a life-giving church. We desire to be part of starting new churches throughout the rural landscape. Price Chapel is not the only church that has a passion to reach rural America. Witmer says the that goal of his small-town church in Massachusetts is to develop "a vision for planting churches from our small town into other nearby small towns so that every town in our region has a vibrant, gospel-centered, community-engaged church."[6] The ultimate dream of the new rural missiology is for every small town in America to have a life-giving church that brings the hope of Jesus to their rural environment.

In the midst of success there has also been failure along the way. I have so far failed to gain traction among my denomination for the new rural missiology. I have

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[6] Witmer, *A Big Gospel,* 110.

offered to gather rural pastors together at our yearly district conference for training, encouragement, and equipping, yet I have been ignored. Our district website highlights the ministry being done in the city, but ignores the countryside.[7] Church-planting resources have been devoted to church plants in urban and suburban areas. There is neither vision or resources for rural church-planting or redevelopment. The focus in my denomination seems to be on city churches, not on helping small churches in small communities.

As a rural pastor and the Utah regional coordinator for the Christian & Missionary Alliance, I will have opportunities in the future to put into practice my academic research and writing. I hope to be a voice advocating for the rural church in my denomination and within the greater church. I plan to write articles on rural ministry and appear as a guest on ministry podcasts to discuss how to bring the hope of Jesus to the forgotten people and places and rural America. I am convinced that big things can be started from small places like Price, Utah.

Big Things from Small Places

Throughout church history God has used small places to launch big movements. In the bible there is a consistent theme of God exalting the humble and humbling the prideful.[8] When great things are accomplished through the small and overlooked God gets the glory. The smallness of a town or church does not mean God cannot accomplish

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[7] View the Central Pacific District of the Christian and Missionary Alliance website at www.cpdistrict.org.

[8] See Proverbs 29:23, Matthew 23:12, and Luke 14:11.

great things through it. The following are just a few examples of God starting big things in small places.

In 1517, a monk named Martin Luther had grown increasingly concerned with church practices that included the sale of indulgences in order to forgive sin. On October 31st, 1517, Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church.[9] Wittenberg was a small town under 2,000 people. Yet, it was from this small place that a massive movement began that recovered the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, not by works. From the small town of Wittenberg, Luther's ideas quickly spread throughout Germany and gave birth to what is today known as the Reformation. The church would not be the same today if not for a monk in a small town in Germany.

In 1741, from the small town of Enfield, Connecticut another round of the First Great Awakening was sparked. On July 8, 1741, Jonathan Edwards was in Enfield for a mid-week service. Edwards was not the scheduled preacher that day. However, the scheduled preacher was sick so Edwards stepped up to the pulpit to deliver the sermon. Edwards then delivered one of the most famous sermons in history, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Stephen J. Nichols writes that on that day in Enfield:

> The drama overwhelmed the crowd. They shrieked and cried out. But the drama did not stem from Edwards' technique. Rather than whoop up the crowd into a frenzy, Edwards waited for the congregation to regain its composure, and then he pressed on in his sermon. The drama came not in the technique but in the truth, the truth of eternal damnation, the truth that all of us are on the precipice of eternal judgment. The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow is pointed directly at us. We are like spiders dangling over the pit of hell, saved from the

[9] For more information on Martin Luther see https://www.history.com/topics/reformation/martin-luther-and-the-95-theses.

> flames for the time being by a mere thread. God used Edwards' words to pierce hearts.[10]

From the small town of Enfield another revival was started that would shape the future of the church in America. History shows that God uses big cities and small towns to bring renewal to his church. Urban churches can benefit from what God does through rural churches just as much as rural churches can benefit from what God does through urban churches.

In 1904, God used a coal miner from a small town to start another revival. Evan Roberts was born in the small hamlet of Loughor, Wales.[11] As a young man Roberts had a burden for a great spiritual awakening to happen in Wales. In 1904, Evan Roberts convinced the pastor of Moriah Chapel to allow him to call together a meeting of young adults passionate to see God do something big in their country. That evening the small group of young adults who gathered experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. From the small village of Loughor, the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905 was birthed. The revival resulted in over 100,000 people being saved in just two years.[12]

The Welsh Revival is another example which shows that God delights to start big things in small places. The larger church needs the rural church to thrive for no other reason than because God often uses small places to launch big movements of reformation, awakening, and revival that serve as a blessing to the larger church. Rural

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[10] Stephen J. Nichols, "Jonathan Edwards And The First Great Awakening," TABLETALK Magazine (July 2018), https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2018/07/jonathan-edwards-first-great-awakening/.

[11] David Matthews, *I Saw The Welsh Revival* (Pensacola, FL: Christian Life Books, 1957), 25.

[12] The Welsh Revival was instrumental in sowing the seeds for the Asuza Street revival that began in 1906 in California and gave birth to the American Pentecostal movement.

churches can be a blessing to their suburban and urban brothers and sisters. However, in order for the revitalization of the rural church to take place a new metaphor for ministry is also needed.

Rural Ministry as Camping

Metaphor is the power behind motivation. Visual metaphors paint a picture of reality. Dr. Lon Hilder says, "We need new metaphors or neglected biblical metaphors that reinvigorate the biblical truth about the church in our day."[13] One is rarely motivated without first grasping the metaphor that explains the problem. Missiologist Craig Ott proposes that "the Bible uses images and metaphors to describe not only the logic of how Christ accomplishes salvation but also to describe the transformative implications of salvation."[14] The shepherd metaphor was explored in chapter three. The final chapter will conclude with a fresh metaphor to fuel the mission.

For Christians, this world is not their home. The apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 3:20 that their citizenship is in heaven. Their home is in the presence of God. Christians are created for more than just this world. Christians will experience home after the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of all things. Jesus is busy right now preparing a place for his adopted family in his father's house.[15]

This world is not our ultimate home. Home will only be truly revealed when the Messiah returns. In this world we are just camping. Some people take their camping very

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[13] Hilder, "Truly Rural Church," 124.

[14] Craig Ott, "The Power Of Biblical Metaphors For The Contextualized Communication Of The Gospel," *Missiology* 42, no. 4 (2014): 358, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829613486732.

[15] John 14:1-6.

seriously. They invest money in a big truck that can tow their trailer, popularly called a "toy hauler" because not only is it a camping trailer but it also has room for a few ATV's. They arrive at their campsite and it takes a few hours to set-up. By evening their campsite is outfitted with a semi-permanent dwelling, chairs, tables, corn hole, an American flag, sun shades, and a BBQ. The other extreme is those adventurous persons who go camping with only what they can carry in their backpack. Everything must be small, light-weight, and preferably from REI.

In this world we are just camping. However, it often becomes human nature to make the camping trip as comfortable as possible. Many people try to bring the comforts of home with them when they are camping. They refuse to sacrifice too many of the amenities to which they are accustomed. The temptation for the Christian today is to make the world their home instead of their campground. They are enticed by the amenities and conveniences that our modern world has to offer. As a result, sacrifice is often frowned upon instead of celebrated. Christian leaders covet the assignments that have the greatest opportunities for success, celebrity, and large congregations. Churches become infected with the diseases of comfort and consumerism.

Where is it that people go to camp? Do they go to the city? No, they venture out to the rural landscape. Daman says, "When urban people travel into rural communities, they usually seek relaxation and recreation."[16] Urbanites flock on the weekends to the isolated mountains, lakes, and deserts to camp. They breath in the fresh air, toss a fishing line in an unpolluted lake, and hike forested trails. They enjoy the rest rural America has

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[16] Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 40.

to offer. Then they head back to the comforts of their urban and suburban homes for real life.

For many Protestant clergy, Rural America has been overlooked and undervalued Rural churches have too often been used as stepping stones by pastors on the trail to somewhere bigger and better.[17] This dissertation has demonstrated that rural areas are suffering socially, economically, and culturally at greater levels than their suburban and urban counterparts. However, the forgotten people and places of rural America continue to be overlooked by Protestant churches. Paul Madsen, the author of book *The Small Church: Vital, Valid, Victorious*, writes that "vision and leadership for rural ministry is often overlooked in light of the need to reach the densely populated urban centers and suburban communities."[18] Developing a new rural missiology will dignify the call to the rural church, transform the way we equip leaders for the rural church, and inspire non-rural churches to devote financial resources to rural places.

In order to see a rural revival take place, leaders in the church must embrace the reality that this world is not their home, it is their campground. If they are just camping then they are willing to sacrifice some amenities and conveniences in order to be part of a grand adventure. If they are just camping then they will realize the temporal nature of their mission. There is a great adventure that God is calling a new generation of leaders to embark on. However, to begin the expedition they must be willing to take up their tent and follow Jesus.

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[17] Paul O. Madsen, "The Rural Church And The Rural Church Center," *American Baptist Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1990): 106, ALTA Religion Datatbase with ALTASerials.

[18] Giese, "The Thriving Rural Church," 15.

This new rural missiology is a call to the next generation to sow the seeds of hope in a landscape riddled by inter-generational poverty, drug addiction, and hopelessness. Those who realize this world is our campground, not our home, will be able to embrace the mission of sacrifice that God calls them to. The Protestant church must move beyond the nostalgia of what God did in past centuries in rural America. Christians must envision what Jesus is calling them to do in the future, not what he asked them to do in the past. Sweet says, "Jesus comes to us from beyond and pulls us from the future more than pushes us from the past."[19] In the coming years the flames of faith will be rekindled and out of the ashes will be raised new life throughout rural America.

[19] Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, (Amazon Digital Services, 2010), 212.

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