

Vital witness on the rural frontier

Six handles for contextual theology

David Boshart

For most of the twentieth century, rural congregations in North America provided the financial resources that fueled the church's mission in church planting and overseas ministries. Now some rural churches believe that their best days are behind them.

During the farm crisis of the 1980s, young adults fled farming communities in pursuit of a brighter future in an urban area. Those who stayed have had fewer children. These factors have contributed to a significant decline in attendance in many rural congregations, and to a perception of overall population decline in rural areas.

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For a time, it seemed like evangelism and church growth were becoming irrelevant subjects in rural areas, strategies better suited

to urban contexts. Nevertheless, historic rural churches have a long, rich tradition of faithfulness that has withstood pressures of time and change. In a world that worships the individual, rural congregations value community and retain wisdom about how strong communities are constructed. But in their hearts, members of century-old rural congregations know that things are changing in ways they had not imagined.

A new way of seeing

Rural communities do well to reassess the focus of their spiritual ministry by considering how to build sustainable community in the changing ecology of rural North America. Latin American base communities may provide a model. In several Latin American countries during the 1980s, government and social structures became so unstable and unpredictable that people could no longer trust social institutions and welfare safety nets. In Christian

base communities, people began to read the scriptures together. Relying on the internal spiritual resources of their Christian brothers and sisters, and gathering around the scriptures, they began to trust their own discernment more than their unpredictable and often dangerous world. Before long, these Christian base communities no longer made a distinction between secular affairs, such as economic and business activities, and the ministries of the church. Thinking contextually and theologically, they began to see the world transforming around them. While this movement has not endured in many places, Christian base communities have been a beacon of hope for people in a context where nothing was working.

The Gospel of Luke provides a similar vision for the possibility of bearing witness to the reign of God apart from our perceived abundance or scarcity. Consider a favorite missional text. In Luke 10, Jesus sent out the seventy, expecting that they would be—and *were to be*—defenseless, innocent, inexperienced, and ill-equipped. Jesus says, in essence: I will keep back your bag, your change of clothes, and your credit cards. These witnesses left behind the security the world had given them, and they relied on the resources of the kingdom and the kindness of strangers. Jesus tells them to stay in the home where they are welcomed, “eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Luke 10:8–9; NRSV).

What does it mean to announce that the kingdom of God has come near? It appears that this message was announced to people at their point of need, where God’s shalom was being disrupted, where the sick needed to be healed, where people were living under oppressive forces beyond their control. When the seventy announced this message, amazing things started to happen: sick people became well; even people possessed by evil spirits were liberated. In short, when the kingdom comes near, people thrive in wholeness and hope.

They seventy returned with joy and said to Jesus, “Lord, even the demons submitted to us in your name!” And Jesus said, “While you were out there, I saw Satan fall down from heaven like lightning.” This work of announcing that the kingdom of God is near causes Satan to fall like lightning from heaven. Luke says, “At that time, Jesus was full of joy in the Holy Spirit.” This is the

only place in the whole of Luke's Gospel where we see Jesus responding this way: full of joy in the Spirit as he prays to the Father. When we see all three members of the Trinity engaged in a joyful celebration of human witness, something noteworthy is taking place!

In Luke's conclusion to this narrative, we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!" The church in mission has a new way of seeing. This is an instructive message for rural communities today. One chapter later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray in hope that things will look on earth like they look in heaven.

Contextual theology, missional vocation

Let me make a couple of proposals: (1) Developing a relevant witness in rural communities is inherently a task of contextual theology. We might define doing theology like this: *read the Bible with the world before you, and dream!* (2) The missional vocation of

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the church is to *bear witness to the reign of God in the world*. We can assume that the apostles, like Jesus, didn't solve every problem they encountered. They offered signs of how things are when God gets God's way. *God brings the kingdom; we bear witness to it*. It is important to remember this distinction in order to maintain proper scale for the church's ministry.

Rural communities doing contextual theology will read the Bible with the world in view, asking: Where is God's shalom being disrupted in the biblical context and in our rural context? What are the barriers to people thriving in wholeness and hope? They will ask an eschatological question: Given the biblical witness, how are things in our context when God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven?

As we consider this theological task, I propose six possible handles for congregations seeking to develop a relevant witness in their rural contexts.

1. Discernment. Congregations, as base communities, need to trust biblical and spiritual discernment more than they trust the

specialists' patterns and expert prescriptions for (re)building strong congregations. We need a theology that insists that the vitality of our congregations will not be determined by the economic vitality of the nation or by the categories of secular socio-economic-political discourse.

Biblical and spiritual discernment is a discipline the church needs to relearn. Many Sunday school classes and discussion groups have taken whole topics off the table for discernment because of fear that conversation will become partisan and rancorous. We do not need to let the political rhetoric spewed on talk radio and cable television divide us. When that happens, it is a sure sign that we believe that the politics of party are more powerful and more trustworthy sources of hope than the reign of God is. When we imagine that the powers of this age hold the best solutions to the problems in our world, we abdicate the ministry of bringing hope.

When our discernment is foundationally biblical, we will have confidence that the church can be a colony of heaven, and we will not turn to the world to solve our every problem. And keeping our discernment biblical will enable us to maintain the appropriate scale in our witness rather than attempting to manufacture the kingdom.

2. *Economic development.* We need to reclaim the spiritual ministry of local congregational economic development. There will always be shifting population patterns driven by market forces. Some rural communities may be losing population, but in fact few rural communities are. Most are instead being repopulated with different people. What opportunities for ministry and business might these new people present?

We should remember that strong, rural Mennonite communities weren't always here. They were built on prairie land without ready-made markets. Mennonites moving into these places with the help of government subsidies—and through the displacement of indigenous people groups—created new economic opportunities. Congregation-based economic development will be an important theological issue when congregations see themselves as base communities. Thinking theologically with regard to economic development will inform how we will prosper and enable us to do so with justice.

Mennonites readily affirm the economic development that Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Economic Development Associates offer to bring hope and strengthen communities in other parts of the world. Why should we consider this kind of work any less spiritual when it happens locally, among us?

In the face of recent worldwide economic upheaval, the appeal of the city may be on the wane. There is a discernible trend of

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gifted young adults moving back to their roots expecting that they can build a rich and meaningful life in rural contexts. Our business people and self-employed people need to claim a spiritual ministry of mentoring them, modeling how to develop God-honoring businesses that include countercultural patterns of environmental stewardship and attendant spiritual practices.

Mennonite dairy farmers John and Mary Ellen Kauffman of Exeland, Wisconsin, found significant meaning in retirement by becoming mentor farmers. John and Mary Ellen offered the use of their land and equipment to families aspiring to do dairy farming with grass-fed cows. They have helped six families start their own farming operations as God-

honoring businesses that model a deep commitment to observing the Sabbath. Their witness to these families caught the attention of a secular publication that profiled their prophetic work.¹

3. Rethinking church numbers. Rural communities need to join Jesus in rejecting a victim posture when congregational vitality seems threatened. Jesus said, “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again” (John 10:17–18; NIV). Jesus was never a victim. Mennonite congregations, as cruciform bodies, do not need to assume a victim mentality when facing demographic shifts that seem beyond their control.

Congregations of 300 members may not always be congregations of 300. A congregation that shrinks as a result of demo-

graphic changes need not have a witness that is any less dynamic, relevant, and transformative. Global church growth researcher Christian Schwarz has found that when congregations reach 300 members, church growth becomes far less efficient. His research in 120 countries demonstrates that churches of fifty have the greatest potential for growth, the highest return on the energy invested in their witness. Declining membership in rural churches does not need to be a sign that a congregation is dying.² Reading the Bible with the world in view will remind us of the power inherent in witness that begins with mustard seeds.

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4. Food production. Rural congregations are ideally located to develop a robust theology of food production and consumption. Discussions in the church can quickly devolve into division and accusation between organic producers, those who practice community-supported agriculture, and bulk commodity producers. The church that is serious about bearing witness to the reign of God in a rural context will not be divided over differences in farm practices. A church fractured by the moral indignation of some directed against others offers hope to no one. Instead, the church will gather around these issues in biblical spiritual discernment. Reading the Bible with the world in view and dreaming, they can construct a theology of food that is hopeful for consumers and producers.

Currently, only five percent of food consumed in my state is produced in the United States. Agronomists tell us that 85 percent of the food that is being consumed in the state could be produced locally. On average, our food travels 1500 miles before it reaches our tables. All types of food are available to us year round, yet we are eating a less diverse, and therefore less healthy, diet.

Iowa State Professor Emeritus Neil Harle says that a just global food policy is *the* most important contributor to world peace. We tend to think that oil supply is the greatest barrier to world peace. Should the oil run out, and communities lose access to food locally, we will face global destabilization on an apocalyptic scale.

Developing a grace-based, just theology of food production is an area where our rural peace churches should be doing cutting-edge theology for the whole church.

In rural Freeman, South Dakota, a group of Christians known as Rural Revival are taking seriously the call to bear witness to the reign of God on these matters. Rural Revival seeks “to revitalize and sustain our community by nurturing a positive environment for making a living on the land.” The group’s case statement goes on to say, “We are a faith-based organization committed to the agrarian way of life as an expression of God’s intention for mortal humans living together peacefully in a finite world.” They are committed to the growth of a local food system, to linking those with land and resources to aspiring farmers, and to planning educational and informational programs on local food and land tenure issues.”³

5. *Host to the nations.* The story of our Anabaptist origins has been that of a migrating martyr community. But we are not being

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martyred now; no one is asking us to leave. Though we are aliens in this world, and though we want to keep learning from the rich testimony of our forebears, we need to cast off our identity as migrating martyrs while avoiding the temptation to move into seeing ourselves as entitled settlers, a mentality that is toxic to witness. Instead we can become hosts who capture the eschatological vision of God’s reign by seeking to be a colony of heaven where all tribes and peoples and languages and nations are welcome to

worship God among us. We need to take on a new identity as prophetic hosts to the nations.

Our heritage has given us gifts for the task of building community among immigrant people who are fleeing oppression as our spiritual ancestors did. We need a theology that insists that we can successfully build Christian community in rural settings across ethnic lines, to the enhancement of our collective spiritual vitality.

6. *Retirement alternatives.* Finally, as base communities, our congregations need to develop an alternative theology of retirement. Rather than consigning people in retirement to spending

their last decades of God-given life in enclaves of the like-aged, we need to extend a call to our older sisters and brothers to be present to bless the community that bears witness to the reign of God. One never retires from one's spiritual vocation of meeting a world of need with the love of Jesus.

Every congregation needs the testimony of those who have lived the community's life deeply and well. We need elders in our congregations with a clear sense of call, who show us how to imagine a joyful life in the new order of God's reign while living in a world whose structures and systems aren't sustainable. Our consumer society suggests that there is only one direction in life: forward. One keeps going forward, always forward, never looking back. At some point in life, Christian elders need to stop looking forward and turn around to offer those who are coming after them a word of blessing and a word of hope.

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Author and poet Robert Bly says it this way: "What is asked of adults now is that they stop going *forward*, to retirement, to Costa Rica, to fortune, and turn to face the young. . . . One can imagine a field with [the] adolescents on one side of a line drawn on the earth and adults on the other side looking in[to] their eyes. The adult in our time is asked to reach his or her hand across the line and pull the youth into adulthood. . . . If we don't turn

to face the young ones, their detachment machines, which are louder and more persistent than ours, will say, 'I am not a part of this family,' and they will kill any real relationship with their parents."⁴

Is it possible for rural congregations to offer a relevant and transforming witness to the inbreaking of God's reign in the world? These six handles for doing so offer a place to begin. Who wouldn't want to be a part of church whose witness was this relevant, hopeful, and transformational? When we trust the wisdom of rural folks who submit their dreams to one another as they gather to read the scriptures with their world in view, Satan falls like lightning. Our congregations become kingdom colonies, and things on earth begin to reflect the realities of heaven.

Notes

¹Raylene Nickel, "Giving Beginners a Leg Up," *Successful Farming* 104, no. 11, 22–26.

²Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996).

³See links to Rural Revival's mission statement and goals at www.ruralrevival.org/.

⁴Robert Bly, *The Sibling Society* (New York: Random House, 1997), 237.

About the author

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