

# Called to become the household of God

## Proclaiming the gospel among rural diversity

Brad Roth

Those of us who live in rural communities know people, and people know us. More than population size or relation to agriculture, “rural” is a way

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of seeing the world, an internal landscape defined in part by knowing and being known.<sup>1</sup> As a result, when rural communities experience demographic change, they also experience disruption of their fundamental social fabric and their identity.

When this happens, the rural church is called to reclaim the ancient vision of Ephesians 2 and proclaim the gospel to those who are near and those who are far. Proclaiming the gospel to the near—those who already belong to the body of Christ—will mean renewing a commitment to the broad and gener-

ous peoplehood envisioned in the scriptures. Proclaiming the gospel to the far—those who have not yet embraced Christian faith—will mean reclaiming the gospel practice of neighboring.


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1 The United States Census Bureau defines rural as communities with a population of less than 2,500, while the USDA uses a continuum based on density and nearness to urban areas. See “Urban and Rural Areas,” [https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban\\_and\\_rural\\_areas.html](https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban_and_rural_areas.html); “Rural-Urban Continuum Codes,” United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes.aspx>. My understanding of rural comes from what sociologists call the “social-constructivist approach”; see David Brown and Kai Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Change* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 4.

## **“You live in the old Krehbiel house”: Fitting people into the community story**

Rural communities often plot relationships across time and space by pinning identity to address. “You live in the old Krehbiel [or Galle or Schrag or Kaufman] house” is the sort of statement one commonly hears here. Such an observation is a way that rural people evoke continuity with the past and also fit newcomers into the community’s story. One rural pastor I talked to chided his congregation, saying, “Folks can name who lived in the house fifty years ago, but they can’t name who lives there now.”

Researchers Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas experienced this reality when they set out from big-city Chicago to explore the intricacies of small-town life through an immersive sociological study. They rented a house in rural Iowa and began interviewing local people and observing life in the community. The two sociologists faced suspicion from some residents, but



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they discovered that one way they could build trust was by dropping the name of the owners of the house they were renting: they lived in the old Daugherty house. “We realized that the Daugherty family name almost always granted us safe passage.”<sup>2</sup> If the house is known, or if at least the provenance of the house can be traced, then the person living in the house is in some way known too.

Seeking to interpret the differences between rural and urban communities, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in the late 1800s formulated a distinction between two kinds of social groupings, which he labelled *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies described the way rural communities are structured and regulated by trust, relationships, and social boundaries (*Gemeinschaft*), in contrast with an urban social order defined by institutions, contracts, and prescribed roles (*Gesellschaft*).<sup>3</sup> The distinction is a simplification, but the paired concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*

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2 Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 13.

3 David Brown and Kai Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century*, 37.

serve as a convenient shorthand for summing up some basic characteristics of rural and urban. For rural communities, the structure of relationships, built up over the years through blood and friendship, is key.

And yet, the known and knowable community prized by many in rural America has been disrupted as new populations, often attracted to plentiful work in meatpacking plants, come to make their homes in rural places. While some rural communities have faced decades of population decline, many towns hosting large meatpacking operations have grown. This growth has brought with it opportunities for rural congregations to engage their neighbors with the gospel. But it's also brought challenges, for the new neighbors aren't necessarily interested in fitting into the old web of community relationships. They don't particularly care about the provenance of their house. They might not even speak the same language.

### **The new rural migration**

Many rural communities have experienced profound demographic change in recent decades. Beginning—in many instances—in the 1980s farm crisis, many people left agriculture, and in some cases they left their rural communities and small towns to seek work in cities and suburbs. Further changes have been spurred on by the meatpacking industry's need for an abundant labor force to do the grueling work of slaughtering, processing, and packaging meat, primarily for human consumption. Small towns and rural communities across the Midwest of the United States have been transformed as immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and Asia have moved to town.

A May 2017 *New York Times* article details the demographic transformation that has taken place in the small town of Storm Lake, Iowa, as immigrants and refugees have arrived to fill jobs at a large meatpacking plant. Less than half of the community is non-Hispanic white, and as many as eighteen languages are spoken in the halls of the public schools. This is in Iowa, a state that remains overwhelmingly white.<sup>4</sup>

Schuyler, Nebraska, a community located in Omaha's orbit, also underwent rapid demographic change beginning in the late 1980s with the arrival of a large Cargill beef processing plant. Kem Cavanah, economic director in Schuyler, describes how his community—long made up of people of Czech, Bohemian, German, and Irish descent—became majority

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4 Patricia Cohen, "Immigrants Keep an Iowa Meatpacking Town Alive and Growing," *New York Times*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/29/business/economy/storm-lake-iowa-immigrant-workers.html>.

Hispanic with an African restaurant located downtown, a Congolese congregation worshipping in the Lutheran church, a Guatemalan congregation worshipping in the Methodist church, and a mosaic of some ten languages spoken in the school system, including Sudanese and Somali dialects. Cavanah describes Schuyler as “an international community competing in a global economy.” Says Cavanah, “We aren’t all white and Christian. You might see a woman in a burka.”<sup>5</sup>

These population shifts have in many cases simply accelerated changes already under way across rural America, as well as accenting existing rural diversity. While rural America has often been perceived as largely white, the picture has always been more complicated. For instance, Native American groups make up the majority, or a large minority, in many small towns in Alaska. Some rural communities in the United States have been on a long arc of transitioning to majority Hispanic, minority white. These include communities along our border with Mexico, but also in places such as North Carolina and Washington State.<sup>6</sup> Warden, Washington, the small town where I previously served as a pastor, was 75–80 percent Hispanic—mostly folks from Mexico who had arrived in waves after the Grand Coulee Dam brought irrigation and agricultural jobs to the Columbia Basin. When they played with their friends, our sons—to our delight—were more likely to speak Spanish than English.

Some people have welcomed these demographic shifts in their rural communities as the antidote to declining schools and workforce. Timothy Friedrichsen, pastor of St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Storm Lake, says that many people have accepted the changes: “This is who we are now.”<sup>7</sup> Pat Norris, pastor of Christ United Methodist Church in Schuyler, says people in her congregation value the new life that immigrants have breathed into their community. “We just embrace what’s here,” says Norris. “There are a lot of small towns that are diminishing. We, on the other hand, are growing.”<sup>8</sup>

But in many rural communities, rapid demographic change is perceived as a threat. When a large poultry processor made plans to locate to

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5 Phone interview with the author, May 20, 2017.

6 Housing Assistance Council, “Race and Ethnicity in Rural America,” Rural Research Brief, April 2012, [http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/research\\_notes/rrn-race-and-ethnicity-web.pdf](http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/research_notes/rrn-race-and-ethnicity-web.pdf).

7 Cohen, “Immigrants Keep an Iowa Meatpacking Town Alive and Growing.”

8 Phone interview with the author, June 5, 2017.

another Nebraska town, the community put up stiff resistance, no doubt because residents were aware of the changes that had occurred in nearby communities. Mused one concerned citizen: “I’m worried about the type of people this is going to attract.”<sup>9</sup>

In Schuyler, Kem Cavanah describes the “white flight” that occurred as the community’s population was transformed. Moreover, Cavanah speaks of challenges that arise when middle-class people, with their built-up social, financial, and leadership capital, move to other communities or choose not to settle in Schuyler, despite working in town.

### **Baptized near and far: The new community in Christ**

I’m convinced that the gospel contains within it the ingredients we need in order to address contemporary rural demographic change. Rather than

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lifting up a community identity rooted in blood ties and knowability, the gospel vision points toward a transcultural household based on communion in Christ. In understanding how the gospel uniquely positions the church to walk with rural communities facing demographic transformation, we take our cue from Ephesians 2 and look to the ways the gospel disrupted and transformed the social order of the Roman Empire in the first century.


In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, this new community is established in baptism. The “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5) marks our entrance into the one church. The “washing of water by the word” makes us

holy (Eph. 5:26, NRSV). According to the vision of Paul’s letter, baptism marks the transformation of unrelated people into the new community in Christ.

In Ephesians 2, Paul unfolds the meaning of this baptismal transformation. “By grace you have been saved through faith,” he writes (2:8). Among the saved are Gentiles (2:11), formerly estranged from the Jew-

9 Scott McFetridge, “Tiny Nebraska Town Says No to 1,100 Jobs, Citing Way of Life,” Associated Press, May 2, 2016, <https://www.abqjournal.com/766752/tiny-nebraska-town-says-no-to-1100-jobs-citing-way-of-life.html>.

ish people and from peoplehood in God (2:12). In the emerging peoplehood, those “who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13). In Paul’s context, the Gentiles are those who were far off, and the Jews are those who were near (2:17). Both groups have been brought together by the sacrificial death of Christ (2:16), which established a relationship based not on where either group came from but on



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where they’re headed: toward the Father, through Christ, in the one Spirit (2:18). It’s an identity that flows from baptism. Those who belong to this identity are “citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (2:19).

According to Paul, the gospel has transformed the old, reliable structure of community in Ephesus and beyond. For those baptized into Christ, it is no longer possible to locate people according to their Gentile or Jewish origins. It doesn’t matter which house—Jewish or Gentile—they lived in before; now they belong to the household of God (2:19).

Near and far have been baptized into a new community in Christ and given a new identity. They have a new address: the household of God.

While Paul’s letter to the Ephesians gives us a glossy theological overview of what he envisioned, we know from Acts that his gospel project proved exquisitely disruptive. Not only did Paul’s message threaten the stable division of Jew and Gentile; it also called into question the place of the Roman pantheon, whose patronage was understood to be vital for upholding the structure of the Roman Empire and whose worship supported a vast industry of veneration encompassing temple complexes, sacrifice, statue artisans, and more (Acts 19:27). In Ephesus, proclaiming this disruptive gospel led to a riot (Acts 19:23–41), much as Paul’s teaching among the Jewish people led to a riot in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26–30). The gospel, one concerned citizen was quoted as saying, was “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

With the advent of Christendom and the European colonization of North America, the disruptive gospel seemed to be tamed, more likely to play a socially useful, cohesive role than to threaten the established order. Yet the power of the gospel is subtly disruptive in the context of

rural North America. The church, in faithfully proclaiming the gospel, challenges structures of alienation and forms people in a new identity—a new *polis* or peoplehood—one at least suggestive of a generous openness to newcomers and immigrants.

### **Proclaiming the gospel to the near**

The church's proclamation begins with those Paul calls the "near" (Eph. 2:17). In his context, the near were the Jewish people, heirs to "the covenants of promise" and "the commonwealth of Israel" (2:12). They were those with deep familial and affective connections within the faith of Israel. They were part of the structure of their community. But their identity, deeply rooted in history, shared scriptures, and blood ties, would no longer define them in the new order of the church that Paul lays out. The near and the far have been reconciled "in one body through the cross" (2:16). Jesus "is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one" (2:14). The Gentiles have been made a part of the household of God that has "Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (2:19–20).


The unity Paul describes is of a different order from the *e pluribus unum* of the democratic *res publica* or the unity around the idea of diversity that is cultivated by academia. It is the unity of *ekklesia*—a hard-won unity made possible only by Christ's self-sacrifice. It is a unity held together by common belief, sacrament, worship, and communion with the body and leadership of the church. We do not manufacture this unity, but we are invited to participate in it by our baptismal vocation.

By proclaiming this baptismal vocation, the church walks with rural communities experiencing demographic change in contemporary North America. In this way, we proclaim the gospel to the near. It will mean we keep the center of gravity of our preaching firmly on Ephesians 2. It will mean our leaders model unity by reaching out to newcomers in town. It will mean we form partnerships with newer residents, especially when they come from other cultures. And it will mean authentic, noncondescending patience with those struggling with an influx of newcomers.

Going from a predominantly white community where people know and implicitly understand one another to a mixed-race community where not everyone speaks the same language is no small transformation. This change can make people feel that the rug has been pulled out from under them. Carlos Barcenas, a community organizer with the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, Nebraska, guides communities to have "comfortable uncomfortable conversations" about diversity and demographic change.

He asks community leaders to complete an intercultural development inventory and then develops a plan that guides participants through activities and reflection that build intercultural competence. In this process he helps them both recognize differences and also discover commonalities. He asks, “How do our differences help us make our community a better place?”<sup>10</sup>

The power of the transcultural gospel to address changing community demographics arises from the gospel’s subtle radicality. We dare to



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proclaim that Christ draws together people from all tribes and tongues (Rev. 7:9). Christ sends the church to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). Indeed, the fullness of the kingdom will only come when the gospel has been proclaimed “throughout the world” (Matt. 24:14). It’s the broad and generous peoplehood envisioned in the scriptures, promised in God’s covenant with Abraham, in whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). It’s the peoplehood glimpsed in stories like those of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1–19), Ruth, Jonah, and others. In the simple proclaiming of this message in word and

deed, we challenge other visions of the rural polis that are built on family ties and shared history.

One recent study reported in *The Atlantic* would seem to confirm the power of the gospel to form people in this alternative polis. The study found that while conservative people who leave the church often become more tolerant of same-sex marriage and legalization of marijuana, they simultaneously “become intolerant in different ways.” For instance, a correlation can be drawn between church attendance and sentiment toward immigrants. Summarizes *The Atlantic*: “The less you attended church, the more anti-immigration you were.” One theory suggests that the church’s message of “universal love” breaks down prejudices toward the other, in-

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<sup>10</sup> Phone interview with the author, May 2, 2017.



cluding immigrants and refugees.<sup>11</sup> While the study did not specifically target rural communities, the conclusions would seem to hold true among

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rural people, many of whom hold conservative views on a range of issues.

At the same time, we have to keep in mind that in our suburbanizing age, rural people have become a poorly understood tribe. There are those who admire rural communities as a mythical source of the nation's moral fiber. There are those who pity rural communities as backwaters left behind in the march toward an urban future. But there are few who value rural people and places as they are.

Rural has come to represent a unique facet of contemporary North

American diversity, and proclaiming the gospel in rural communities requires us to assume a stance of advocacy on their behalf. We learn to cherish rural people and places. We testify to their goodness. We love rural communities as God loves them. A commitment to speak on behalf of and not just into rural places helps shield us from becoming pedantic outside experts who fail to recognize the special identity and challenges of rural life.

### **Proclaiming the gospel to the far**

Proclaiming the gospel to “the far”—those who have not yet embraced Christian faith—will mean sharing our faith among newcomers to our communities. We will not be able to invite people into the unity that Paul describes in Ephesians 2 without inviting them to Christ, the source and author of that unity. Sharing the good news—the *evangelion*—that far and near have been made one in Christ will not be possible without evangelism.


Whatever our aversion to the misuses of evangelism, we must remember that not all evangelism starts with a tract, just as not all proclamation happens in the pulpit. In our rural communities, and especially among

11 Peter Beinart, “Breaking Faith: The Culture War over Religious Morality Has Faded; in Its Place Is Something Much Worse,” *The Atlantic*, April 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking-faith/517785/>.

people from other cultures and languages, evangelism begins in love, and love looks like becoming neighbors.

To become a neighbor means relating to people in the love of Christ. It's working on behalf of the whole community, not just within the community. By becoming neighbors, we learn to see people not as mere targets for evangelization or as projects that we seek to fix up, but as human beings worthy of our concern, care, and friendship. The neighboring approach requires patience and prayer. We take the time to listen. We learn to proclaim the gospel with our lives before we proclaim it with our mouths.

Yet we do proclaim it with our mouths. At some point, with the gentleness and respect urged by Peter, we share our hope in Jesus (1 Pet. 3:15–16). We listen to the other's story, but we also speak our story. We respect where people are coming from, but we also point them toward Christ.



**In our rural communities, and especially among people from other cultures and languages, evangelism begins in love, and love looks like becoming neighbors.**

In my ministry in Warden, Washington, I thought proclaiming the trans-cultural gospel mainly came down to us proclaiming the gospel to them—but in Spanish. I thought it was mainly a translation issue. But somewhere along the way, I began to realize that the challenges

of forming the new community in Christ went much deeper. There were long histories of racism, resentment, and distrust that ran both ways between white and Hispanic cultures. I came to understand that my first task was to build trust—within my congregation and beyond it. Singing a song or two in Spanish during worship or having the sermon translated into Spanish for folks to hear it through headsets did not exactly usher in the kingdom. We were still us. They were still them. Where my wife and I eventually gained traction was in simple practices of neighboring, such as friendship and listening—practices that made space for the new community to form.

I had to grow into this approach. My wife and I hosted a Spanish Bible study in our home, but it was thinly attended. We crafted bilingual worship services but never managed to scale the language barrier. We invited two vanloads of our Hispanic pastor friends from Oregon to come up, canvas the community, and lead an outreach service in the park, but we didn't make any new converts.

It was not until I had notched up several years of attending *quinceañeras* and birthday parties that I received an invitation to come and lead a Spanish-language Bible study in the home of a large Hispanic family we had gotten to know. Mom and dad and the kids and the uncle from next door were there. I sat down on a swivel chair and taught. In the winter months, when they had the heat cranked up, I would remove a layer of clothing for every fifteen minutes of study. It was good work—maybe even kingdom work—exactly the kind of thing I had wanted to do all along. It started with the patient work of becoming neighbors.

### **Taking the long view**

Paul saw the formation of the new community in Christ in terms of a movement from death to life, the reception of God's kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4, 7). Paul took the long view, knowing that his work was both pressing and patient, and only realized in fits and starts. Christ had laid the foundation, but the vision was ongoing as the new peoplehood was being built together across time and space (2:20, 22). Paul faced setbacks, but he did not lose heart, for the new polis was guaranteed in eternity by Christ's calling to humanity to become the household of God.

### **About the author**

Brad Roth serves as pastor of West Zion Mennonite Church, Moundridge, Kansas. He blogs on encountering God in the everyday at *DoxologyProject.com*. His book, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church*, was published by Herald Press in September 2017.