

Mission and Parish in the Town and Country Community

HAROLD S. HUFF

TO begin my presentation with a discussion of the importance of **change** in the Town and Country Community will surely seem to some of you that the needle has stuck in the first groove of a well-worn record! Virtually every sociological paper or every book you may read these days plays upon this point. Of course the reason is the point is fundamentally true and provides an entre to both the basic problems and some of the solutions to an understanding and appreciation of rural community affairs—including the church in that rural community.

I particularly like an introduction used by Dr. Shirley Greene of the United Church of Christ. With his characteristic grin he suggests, "It is rumored that as they departed the Garden of Eden, Adam was overheard saying to Eve; 'My dear, we are living in an age of transition!'" Dr. Greene makes his point well—"social change is not a new phenomenon in rural life." This surely is true, but never lose the significance of the fact that such change is an important key to both problems and solutions in Town and Country community life. But every serious thinking rural sociologist and rural churchman also knows the critical factor in this decade—and the decades to come is the **rate of change**. What is unique as we sit here now is the rapidly speeded up rate of social change—especially in the technologically oriented areas of our rural society.

How rapid is this change can be illustrated in many ways. Within the lifetime of persons sitting in this room we have moved from the first wobbly flight

of Wilbur and Orville Wright in 1903 to modern jet travel. This year airlines will board some 60 million passengers in the U.S. Man needed thousand of years to learn how to get off the ground, but once he lifted his feet off, he needed only 58 years to learn to fly over 50 miles high in an airplane or over 150 miles high in an orbiting space craft. Predictions are now given in terms of months rather than years for controllable space flight. Professor Virgil Overholt of Ohio State University has stated there have been more technological changes in our lives since 1940 than there had been from the time of Christ until that date. In 1940 a small group of men were working in an old building in Chicago which only a few people realized was a laboratory. Their work brought forth a substance called uranium 235. Shortly after this we began to talk about chain-reactions. What tremendous social chain-reactions have followed!

As Dr. Marvin Taves of the University of Minnesota has put it, "Indeed a rapidly changing world, but these changes are not restricted to man's environment, **they extend to man himself.**" For example, estimates of the anthropologists and demographers as reported by the Population Reference Bureau are that throughout all the history of man some 77 billion babies have been born. Of all these, 3 billion are living today—that is 4% of all human beings are still alive today—in an assumed history of 600,000 years. The scientists put it this way to illustrate accelerating rates: "It took hundreds of thousands of years for world population to reach the first **quarter** billion mark—some 250 million people by about the beginning of the Christian era. Some sixteen centuries more were required before the next quarter billion were living. It took only 200 additional

HAROLD S. HUFF is Director, Town and Country Department, Board of Missions of The Methodist Church. This paper is the text of a lecture delivered at the Iliff School of Theology Summer Lecture Series on July 5, 1962.

years to reach one billion, and only 80 more years—to about 1930—to reach two billion—now 30 years to reach 3 billion. And population growth rates are still going up. All the history of man to reach a world population of 3 billion, but it will take only 40 years to double this to 6 billion according to U.N. estimates . . . if growth rates remain unchanged." (Feb. 1962, Vol. 18, No. 1). Startling? Yes, but we don't have to rely upon theories about the world populations of the past. In our country we required about 160 years to reach our first 90 million citizens, but only 50 years to add the second 90 million and according to the July "Current Population Report" the estimate for 1980 of 259.5 million people means we will gain another 80 million or so in just 20 years time.

But illustrations of change and rates of change can be drawn almost without limit. The point of concern is the **effect** of change upon these people and their ways of life—more particularly upon people living in smaller communities and rural areas where, perhaps, changes are most radical of all. Not only are people changing in numbers, but they are changing in movement, and this movement or population mobility lies at the root of some of our serious concerns. How much easier for us if population volumes and pressures obeyed Boyle's Law! Unfortunately in the midst of rapid rates of **growth** we have the further complicating processes of a rapid exodus of people from some communities with the rapid influx of people into other communities. Both variations give rise to a whole area of problems.

But as Dr. E. W. Mueller of the National Lutheran Council has pointed out for us in the church, 'tis not the sheer number of people—or simply their moving about which gives rise to our concerns as it is their attitudes leading to their reluctance to face changes forthrightly. He reminds us that two basic aspects of our general culture are involved and there are differing attitudes toward these aspects. One is the aspect

of technology and our apparent readiness to accept technological changes. Men apparently readily accept new tools and the products of new tools and eagerly explore new ways of using them. The other aspect is social institutional structure. Here our behavior is quite different. Not only do ideas change slowly but emotions and sentiments charging these institutionalized ideas change more slowly. "The issue is the difference in the development of technology and institutions in a given community."—or in our nation as a whole. In general technology accelerates change and tends to be forward looking, while institutional structures resist change and tend to be conservative.

Among these institutional structures is the church and within the church is a large majority of participants who use religious sentiments as protective coverings for their socio-personal attitudes, ideals and values. To deal with change intelligently and to use change constructively requires that we **most** need to deal with these attitudes, ideals, and values rather than the technological aspects of church life embodied in administrative procedures. New administrative machinery becomes impotent all too rapidly when encrusted with institutionalized attitudes of conservative nature. Techniques are only tools for ideas. When ideas are restrictive and lack motivational power, techniques do not produce advance.

To this thesis we will return. May we now observe briefly some generalized but basic changes in rural culture which affect the church because they are part of the context of Town and Country life in which the church functions. I have in mind two, and related, trends which are significant, and both of these arise from the population picture of general increase in the number of people and the increase in mobility which is more rapid than the population count.

The first trend has to do with the diminishing differences between the "rural" and "urban" ways of life. Students of

sociology have accepted the term "rurban" to denote this. In the excellent little paper from the N.C.C. (The CREST Committee or "Committee on Rural Economic and Social Trends") titled "Keeping Ethically Alert Amid Rapid Rural Change", this statement summarized the trend:

"... the general tendency of the socio-economic changes going on in rural life is in the direction of a dilution of the former sharp distinctions between 'rural' and 'urban' life. Although there is no definite evidence that the classic differentiations of sociology between rural and urban culture have disappeared or are likely to do so in the near future, it does seem certain that we are moving toward a more generalized or 'homogenized' American culture, a 'rurbanization' of the American way of life." (p. 1)

In detailing these changes, the paper published by U.S.D.A. (Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 215, October, 1959) points up the component factors in this trend:

"The occupational structure is changing—increased intermingling of non-farm rural residents with farm people—greater industrialization—increased numbers of farmers working off their farms—more women employed outside the farm home—greater mobility of all people. . . . changes are also taking place in community institutions and services. There are larger and more complex institutions—greater dependence on services beyond the immediate locality—increase in number and kinds of organizations—consolidation of schools—changes in communication and transportation—maladjustments of community services and local government." (p. 2)

To point up this trend a bit dramatically, some two years ago Mr. Orville Jones of the Ohio C.I.O. Council challenged the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation that there were more farmers as members of the C.I.O.—commonly thought of as an urbanized labor organization—than were members of the Farm Bureau—the rural organization. This proved to be true as many of the successful farmers are also working in industry more than

100 days per year. One of the Sandusky County Farm Bureau leaders has replied, "This we don't mind. What concerns us is the number of C.I.O. members who are moving out of the city to take up part time farming!" The remark was made to be partly facetious, but it does speak to an actuality.

In his excellent textbook, **Social Change in Rural Society**, Everett Rogers points up six factors culminating in this rurbanization trend. (This by the way, is one of the best recent treatments of this phenomenon).

1. "Americans are movers."
20% of population changes residence annually.
Between 1950 and 1960 close to 60% of U. S. citizens moved at least once.
2. Farm people are decreasing in number.
12% of 1960 population.
Decrease largely due to migration.
3. Increasing number of part-time farmers.
A permanent status largely.
Now involving 40% of our farms.
4. Rural non farm people are increasing rapidly. Largely concentrated in small towns and the rural-urban fringe around metropolitan centers.
5. The urbanization of traditional rural values is closely related to improved communication and transportation.
Dr. Wm. F. Ogburn stated that "The inventor of the automobile has had more fluence on society than the combined exploits of Napoleon, Genghis Khan and Julius Caeasar."
6. "There are rural implications of growing industrialization."
Rise of agri-business.
Interdependence in economy.
7. These factors come together in the rurbanization of both rural and urban values—a process of exchanging and merging of both value systems.
Two new symbols for this now apparent:
 1. The farmer in a business suit.

2. The corporation vice president or the labor union lead man riding his small tractor on his 10 acre "ranch-home" on weekends.

Now, I mentioned two and related general trends. The second of these is more diffuse and more difficult to grasp—therefore to some people more frightening. Dr. Charles E. Lively of the University of Missouri speaks of it as the trend toward "mass society." Negatively it is the breakdown of distinctions and definitions where recognizable and identifiable groups are being lost in the "general mass." Rural isn't "rural" anymore. The farmer isn't a "farmer" anymore; he is an "entrepreneur", an "agri-businessman." Dr. Lively says,

"This mass society is held together chiefly by propaganda, channeled constantly to the people by indirect means of communication. In forming such a society, many of the traditional ways of grouping people, such as by race, religion, social class, and hereditary privilege have been either destroyed or considerably weakened. The groupings in the new mass society are based increasingly upon interest factors, such as vocational, political and recreational interests, and these are expressed through such social forms as trade associations, unions and political parties. As a consequence, the psychology of the crowd is more in evidence, and social movements tend to spring up quickly."

Now, pause a moment to relate these trends to our earlier thought. We are experiencing this rurbanization trend toward a "mass society" with loss of formerly identifying qualities which gave meaning to groups, neighborhoods and communities. Much of this change is technologically related or oriented. People re-group faster than they change their values and attitudes which are the basis of their institutions. Perhaps, more accurately, we should say our institutional systems cling to older sets of values and attitudes for their justification after a large proportion of the people have begun to yield to the changes of technology.

A good illustration is our use of the term "the rural church" or "the Town and Country church." We have identified the Town and Country church by a traditional image involving a set of socio-religious values which were related to a generalized set of behavior belonging to the past. But in thousands upon thousands of communities the patterns of life of the people have changed so they no longer fit into the image. Many of the "traditionalized" people have grown old or moved out. The "rurbanized" people have grown up or moved in. Both the traditionalized and the urbanized are slow to change their church life to relate to the changes in social behavior, so the "Town and Country church" is out of touch! They coddle a sentimentalized image of a family oriented, neighborhood related, little chapel-like church where the warm glow of familiarity sustains the institutional life and work of the group. All this when most of the important and necessary elements of this traditional village, or open country chapel are gone or in transition. Warm familiarity doesn't exist. Sentiments are not common. The neighborhood is not a fact.

Now, my punch line! The older image of the "Town and Country church" was made up of **social** elements which have changed and which, **even in former** days of the past 2 or 3 generations, were not adequate or significant for the full conceptualization of the church; therefore, they **should** pass away to make room for the new. The "Town and Country church" is dead or dying — as it should be! I do not believe in the "Town and Country church", for it was too much a **social institution** which had not kept up with significant changes. Its definition was far too dependent upon just social factors. Many of us have coddled and protected this image to the point we've failed to fulfill the true purposes of **God's called church**, as we have failed also to continue as a relevant rural institution. Our present failures are two-fold: We fail to relate to God and His

Kingdom and we fail to relate to the new rural life.

This is not said in harshness; it is said as a matter of fact. Hereafter let us speak of the **Church in Town and Country**, not the "Town and Country church." In so doing let us renew our emphasis upon the unique purposes and function of the Church of Jesus Christ in her full ministry to and through Town and Country people. We have no Town and Country Church for we **are** the **church in Town and Country** communities if we have a right to be called the church at all. Our unique purpose as a socio-religious institution is to be the Church, called to serve a mission.

This brings me back to my central thesis again. In the presence of fundamental sociological changes in rural communities where values and attitudes change slowly even though technological changes push forward the radical social changes, the old and sentimentalized concept of the "little brown church in the vale" is not coming to grips with realities. Further to try to shore up this outmoded concept of the church with administrative maneuverings, the use of general church funds as subsidies or the resort to untrained ministerial leadership will continue to be ineffective. The final answer must be to renew the mission of the church in Town and Country communities and this can come only through changing the attitudes, the value systems and the theological orientations as the bases for a new institutional adequacy. The two key concepts to this task are caught up in the terms "mission" and "parish".

The first—"mission"—grows out of the ultimate nature and purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ. What she **does** is largely determined by what she **is**. I have already said to assume she is a homey and convenient, old-time rural neighborhood institution is not adequate. The second—"parish"—leads to a more significant appreciation of the sociology of religion as a sound discipline, with the resultant administra-

tive action through an informed strategy which understands and appreciates what is happening in our modern communities.

May we look more closely to the first concept of "mission". We go forth to serve a mission because we are debtors. In J. B. Phillips paraphrase of Romans 1:14, St. Paul writes, "I feel myself under a sort of universal obligation, I owe something to all men . . ." This is the passage we more familiarly read "I am debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians . . .". We owe **so much** for our very life. God does not love but that He commands—He calls, Because God has acted, we must go. Because God's action is the energy of redemptive love, we must serve, be used—even used up—in a mission of praise, proclaiming the Good News of a New Life, and serving His cause with our borrowed lives and time.

This means to us who are so strongly oriented to the values of the rural community parish that "it is the nature of the Christian faith and not the nature of society which calls for the prophetic mission of Christian community." Our mission lies not in what we do, but what God has done and is doing — loving, reconciling, empowering and changing. For many of us, to allow the community to define our mission rather than our mission to define the parish-community is too easy. If it is our faith which defines our mission, and this centers in an incarnate action of God — God's power acting in history — and if God's power is our dynamic, then it is God's action generating both our faith and our mission.

The church stands, then, in a unique double relationship to the human community. She stands both beyond and within as does her Lord. Her mission arises from her nature as the divine body of her Lord, and from her task as that body made flesh to dwell among and within human market places. To be satisfied with either aspect without appreciation of the unique inter-relation-

ship of both, in the purposes of God, is to lose the sense of mission. The Church of the Master, knowing from whence she comes and assured of His power to achieve the purposes given her, enters the empirical communities of men to serve life in its actuality by infusing the community with that power which transcends yet transforms — from the actual to the possible and intended. To be a passive little family centered chapel of a few people is not enough to fulfill this mission of the true church.

Now, what of some implications of this sense of mission. Primarily, and in general, this means taking the **total** Gospel and the **total** Church to Town and Country communities. In the Town and Country movement we simply cannot be satisfied with a series of limited worship services where the work of Christian education and Christian social service have faded to insignificance, or with a few surveys or with putting up a display at Annual Conference, and to call this the work of the Church in Town and Country. We cannot be satisfied with a clergy that provides only limited chaplaincy service to thousands of small churches. We cannot be satisfied with lay participation which makes a limited witness — perhaps no witness at all—of the renewing power of God in personal and social life. We cannot be satisfied with the old dodge that the number of people gathered together is a measure of effectiveness or importance or worthwhileness. We cannot be satisfied that we lack administrative imagination to enable us to provide a full ministry of clergy and laity in the community. Within a true mission the energizing dynamic of Christ in life often leads to double consequences. First, the "new wine of Life" bursts the old wine skins. Second, the realization of the preciousness of the "wine of Life" leads to diligent effort to obtain new wineskins to contain the treasure.

Our old institutional forms and patterns will be giving way to new ways for the new and changing rural society

as attitudes change. Even some of our frontier Methodist ways — hallowed by the years to become traditions can give way to new patterns and rightly so, if the essential Christian life is maintained within. The long cherished golden ideal of every church with its own resident pastor is now plainly not a golden ideal at all, but a tarnished substitute of base metal. It is the **parish concept** of an adequate ministry fulfilling the total mission of Christ that forms our more adequate standard. How to serve **all** the people within a sound parish context is our challenging question. The multiple church parish using a variety of administrative patterns, in a greatly exciting way is accomplishing our Lord's mission in many hundreds of places where we were fearful we were dying for lack of enough ministers or because part-time Supply Pastors could not give the creative leadership required. Increasingly we will find ourselves being realistic enough to relinquish our limited and false notions of sovereignty as Methodists, then to join hands with equally concerned and equally Christian brethren of other denominational persuasions in order to renew the mission to the parish-community. In this process of saving the precious wine of Life some churches are dying and others too — perhaps many others — will yet die.

I use the term "**die**" purposefully. Isn't it soundly Biblical? In Christ we die to live, because He died that we might live the Full Life. "lest the grain of wheat die . . ." Lose your life to save it. Well, lose your life to save what? Die for whom or what? Christ said plainly for Him; speaking of Himself, "For my sake." This is mission. If the spirit of truth continues to lead us to believe that many of our buildings and properties must go to provide for a significant parish then we must do away with them. In many small communities we will leave the work for other evangelical churches to accomplish and in others we will assume full responsibility as they close out; in still others we will

combine forces to fulfill our mission. We just **must** face the disturbing question, "What determines if a church is alive or dying or dead?" Do you feel for the pulse of its organizational activity or do you measure the activity of its administrators? Can a Bishop or Superintendent or Board Secretary decree that a church is alive or dying or dead? No, like all ministers, we simply officiate at the baptism or funeral. We do not decree life or death. The **truth**, the vitality of its message, ministry and mission is a church's life. May I carry my reference to the priestly function of the clergy a step or so farther. I'm convinced we ministers—administrators—**before** the need for funeral service arrives—should be performing many marriages. Perhaps theologically as well as biologically the function of such marriage is to bring forth new life. If this be as true of congregations within a parish as it is of persons within a home, we have only to expect blessings and joy from such marriages. And I believe this is true.

Listen to this—may I read this brief statement?

"If the Protestant Witness is to be maintained in rural America, the **concern must not be to maintain every congregation**, but the concern must be to strengthen the Protestant Witness. If this can be done by having two congregations rather than three, then let us have two. If on the other hand it can be done more effectively by having four, then let us have four. The congregation is not an end, but a means. In this sense we can definitely speak of the 'magnificent decline of the rural church', meaning thereby that while the number of congregational units may decline, the harvest is increased and the Protestant Witness is strengthened."

I cite this from another denomination to indicate similar concerns and an identical basing of these concerns on the sense of mission. Some of you may be a bit surprised to learn this is a quotation from the National Lutheran Council. If you knew him, you wouldn't be surprised to learn this is from the pen of E. W. Mueller, Director of their

Town and Country church program. This, however, is indicative of the like thinking of pronouncements of most of the major denominations. Now—in the name of Christ our Lord, why do we not **act**, out of the urging of His life in us rather than to wait until expediency or economic pressures or other mundane concerns force us to pick up the pieces of our broken and dead churches, then to try to bring new life by dumping them together with the broken pieces of other denominations.

Now, I close with a call. This call is for an increased effort in preaching and teaching within the local churches to interpret to our people these concepts of mission and parish. Not enough of our people have been lifted out of the sweet, pious, little chapel atmosphere to a challenging call to serve a mission. They have been so deadened by a personalistic, pseudo-evangelistic type of preaching as to remain completely sheltered by any sanctuary which shuts out the disturbing world with its needs and demands. The Church in Town and Country has been notorious in this. To unseat people with a restless uneasiness is surely a part of the Christian dynamic. More direct preaching and teaching toward this essential sense of mission must come. Coupled with this must come an increased appreciation of the parish unit as the design for local mission. Such parish units will comprise all the sociological and economic factors as well as religious factors to involve communities or sub-units of communities. Such parishes will vary from single churches of several denominations cooperating to multiple churches or circuits of several denominations co-operating. Administrative procedures will likewise vary to accommodate to the situation.

For all that is commonly being preached and written about the nature of the Church as a redemptive fellowship—with which I generally agree—such smaller fellowship units must function in a larger and cooperative

context to fulfill the total mission in the redemptive process. Our people need to be carefully and lovingly schooled in what this means and how the process is accomplished. To preach the "personal Gospel" is not enough. Essential as it is, the full impact of the personal Gospel is known in the experiences of worship, witness and work toward fulfillment of mission and this full mission must be known in the immediate expe-

rience of each parish as microcosm within macrocosm. Otherwise the church cannot be said to exist locally—only a piece of the church may be there—only a truncated ministry is performed. To such cause for the mission of the church in Town and Country an adequate and appreciative ministerial leadership is essential—and as yet, I fear, a long way in the future.

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.