# The Rural Church:

## Its Response to the Changing Society

OLIVER READ WHITLEY

THE earliest roots of the rural church movement, Joseph T. Howard reminds us, were social and community awareness, the ecumenical spirit, the need for stewardship, and the concern for missionary advance. These roots "were sunk deep in a faith that the church was a divine institution with a supremely human mission."[1] Yet a major reason for the seeming failure of the church to accomplish its divine intent has been the inability or unwillingness of churchmen to understand the givens of the social milieu in which its mission must be carried out. Our tendency to accept the proposition that the church is a divine institution has in some respects shielded us from the necessity of developing the strategy and tactics with which to make the church a viable and relevant institution in the midst of social and cultural change. The rural church must be viewed as a social institution. This is perhaps the sociologist's way of saying that we churchmen must—in our commitment to the rural church—follow the scriptural injunction to be "as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves."

### I

### The Changing Society

To offer proof that we live in a rapidly changing society is unnecessary. The major changes in our society as they impinge upon the environment in which the rural church must learn to survive are well known. Robin M. Williams has recently indicated that these changes include at least the following: (1) rapid technological development; (2) increased productivity; (3) greater capitalization; (4) increases in average size of farms; (5) greater dependence of farmers upon the market economy; (6) greater specialization in production; (7) greater political and economic interdependence of local areas and regions; (8) increased managerial requirements; (9) greater pressure toward economic rationality—farming as a business rather than a way of life; (10) changes in modes of economic organization; (11) continuing centralization of public services and of decision-making on matters of public policy; (12) continuing heavy migration from farms; (13) continuing increase in the non-farm employment of farm operators; (14) vast suburbanization and the transformation of rural communities, through congealing of new town-country units, dissolution of rural communities into new regional amalgams; (15) rising levels of education; (16) lessened importance of extended kinship groupings and of durable informal social relationships among local residents; (17) probably increased secularization of beliefs and values; (18) varied manifestations of strain and tension—e.g., "fundamentalism" in the political area, opposition to floridation, "nativistic" reactions, opposition to school desegregation; (19) increased complexity of social organization, especially the proliferation of special-interest associations and units of public

[1] *Town and Country Church,* No. 142, (April, 1959), 5-9.

OLIVER READ WHITLEY is Professor of Sociology of Religion at The Iliff School of Theology. This paper was originally presented as an address at the Town and Country Luncheon, Rocky Mountain Annual Conference, meeting in Grand Junction, Colorado, June, 1961.

agencies; (20) pervasive cultural urbanization of rural society.[2]

The degree to which each of these several types of change will impinge upon the rural churches of a given region or area will vary. Yet the list is sufficiently applicable universally throughout the United States to suggest that the rural church must now operate in a context which has been altered in revolutionary ways. Even to begin to understand what all these changes mean is in itself a formidable task, without considering the devising of necessary strategies and tactics.

## II

### The Church in Rural Society Today

The current situation of the rural church in the United States can be summarized in the following phrases—too many churches for a declining rural population, inadequate (and often irrelevant) programs, insufficient finances, a great shortage of ministers. Each of these items is well known, and is borne out by a host of studies. Everett Rogers has recently mentioned an Ohio county with twenty-six rural churches of the same denomination, of which in 1958 only three had more than one hundred members. Five of the twenty-six were located in an area of seven square miles![3] And this is one example from among many. Dale Medearis, then national director of town and country church for the United Christian Missionary Society of Disciples of Christ, said in 1954 that "rural churches are almost universally showing a decreased membership. In many states the decreases are more rapid than the rural population decreases. . . . If the population were decreasing at the same rate as the church membership, we might asume that the churches merely were taking their fair share of the losses. But with church membership declining at a more rapid rate than the population, grave questions are raised as to the adequacy of the rural program."[4]

The statistics concerning the decreases in membership in rural churches, and the complete closing of many rural churches, are alarming. More alarming is a possible reason for these trends—that, far from being a channel through which the love of God and neighbor might flow, the church has become merely the buttress for one or another facet of **status quo**, or perhaps simply irrelevant. This is certainly the picture of the rural church that emerges from the community studies of the past two decades.[5] Concerning the irrelevance of the churches in Plainville, a Missouri rural village, James West writes, "Not even in the Christian church, which stands proudly aloof from . . . emotionalism . . . are discussed any of the important problems of agriculture, ethics, and human relationships that actually face the community. . . . (Leaders) would not dream of making any church or preacher an instrument or ally."[6]

More recently, Vidich and Bensman, in a study of a New York rural community, have indicated that "Church life . . . is an added layer of social activity which merely thickens the public

[2] Proceedings, North Central Rural Sociology Committee Seminar Chicago. November, 1959, 3-4. On changes in rural society, see also Aylesworth, P. "Keeping Abreast of Change in the Rural Community," U. S. Department of Agriculture, Federal Extension Service, Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 215, October, 1959. Rogers E. M., *Social Change in Rural Society,* (New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960).

[3] *Social Change in Rural Society,* 2-2.

[4] *Town and Country Church,* No. 99, (September, 1954), 7.

[5] A partial bibliography of these studies would include: West, J., *Plainville USA,* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1945); Vidich, A., and Bensman, J., *Small Town in Mass Society,* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1958); Goldschmidt, W., *As You Sow,* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1947); Pope, L., *Millhands and Preachers,* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1942); Warner, W. L., *Democracy in Jonesville,* (New York, Harpers, 1949); Hollingshead, A. W., *Elmtown's Youth,* (New York, Wiley, 1949); Rubin, M., *Plantation County,* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1951).

[6] *Plainville USA,* 162-63. (Parenthesis mine)

life of the four hundred people who participate. . . . It is characteristic only of that portion which is the most social and most external in its activities. Church activities afford an opportunity whereby these social activities can find expression in additional ways."[7] The studies of Liston Pope and Walter Goldschmidt have pointed out the ways in which the church functions to buttress the local system of social classes, or to act as a bulwark against changes not desired by the dominant class in the community.[8]

To a certain extent, the studies of rural communities have perhaps given us a distorted picture of the religious situation. Paul Furfey, the Catholic sociologist, suggests that in the community studies there are certain weaknesses in the accounts of the religious life. The coverage of various aspects of church life is incomplete, the methods of study used tend to be one-sided, and the church as a complex institution is sometimes difficult for "outsiders" to understand.[9] Yet the rural community studies have gotten so uncomfortably near the truth that we do well not to ignore the findings on the grounds that they were not always prepared by persons committed to the church.

The problems of the rural church are a result of social processes which are affecting all aspects of rural life, and not simply the churches. The crisis of the rural church—if it is a crisis—is one facet of a crisis of rural society in the United States generally. The premise of all discussion of the future of the rural church must be the realization that the church's problems cannot be solved apart from our dealing with the larger problems of the rural community itself. While there are exceptions, the general rule is that great churches are products of adequate communities. If the community declines, then the church participates in this decline. So the future of the rural church must be discussed in the context of the total community.

## III

### Rural Church in New Society

What of the rural church in the new society? Only a bold man would venture an answer to this question. What can be offered is a set of guidelines by which rural churchmen might measure some of their attempts to make the rural church and its life relevant to the society now emerging. **First,** the rural church, because its ultimate roots lie in the soil of the eternal and unchanging, needs to help its people to understand the changes which confront them in the world of temporal fact. Rural people today live in the midst of an agricultural revolution, a swirling vortex of economic, demographic, and ecological forces, to which the message of the church so often seems not say anything. In the economic sphere, we can illustrate this by the developments designated by the term **agribusiness,** contract farming, and vertical integration.

John H. Davis and Ray A. Goldberg, of the Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, have recently pointed out that it is no longer accurate to refer to farming processes as agricultural. "The concept of agriculture as an industry in and of itself or as a distinct phase of our economy," they write, "was appropriate 150 years ago when the typical farm family not only raised crops and livestock but also produced its own draft animals, tools, equipment, fertilizers, and other production items; processed its own food and fiber; and retailed in the community most of the excess above family needs. Then virtually all operations relating to growing, processing, storing,

[7] *Small Town in Mass Society,* 256-57.

[8] Cf. Pope, L., *Millhands and Preachers,* and Goldschmidt, W., *As You Sow.*

[9] *The Scope and Method of Sociology,* (New York, Harpers, 1953). On the significance of community studies, both for understanding American society and for their contributions to sociological theory, see the provocative study, by Maurice R. Stein, *The Eclipse of Community,* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1960).

and merchandising food and fiber were a function of the farm."[10]

Today, however, the farm situation is quite different. "The modern farmer is a specialist who largely confines his operations to growing crops and livestock. The functions of storing, processing, and distributing food and fiber have been transferred in large measure to off-the-farm business entities."[11] So great is the interdependence between businessmen and farmers, in their dual roles of suppliers and purchasers, that neither group could operate for very long without the other. The concept of **agriculture** is no longer really descriptive of farming activities. For this reason, Davis and Goldberg suggest that use of the term **agribusiness** would greatly facilitate precision in the discussion of current farm problems. Agribusiness means "the sum total of all operations involved in the manufacture and distribution of farm supplies; production operations on the farm; and the storage, processing, and distribution of farm commodities and items made from them."[12] Based upon this definition, the hypothesis is advanced that "the farm problem" is essentially **agribusiness** rather than **agricultural.**

How many rural church leaders understand these matters well enough to give a competent analysis of both the economic situation out of which they have come, and the ethical dilemmas which result for those who are concerned about the preservation of Christian moral values? How many ministers are well enough informed concerning vertical integration and contract farming to evaluate critically and fairly Clinton Hess' claim that these developments, which constitute "the proposed revolution in agriculture," will not only destroy our rural communities, but will also threaten the ability of American agriculture to provide necessary reserves of food in the event of an emergency?[13]

On the demographic front, Truman Douglass has challenged rural church leaders to face the threat and opportunity presented by the rural-urban fringe. The rapid growth of fringe areas represents the attempt of many Americans to find a locale in which to realize their version of the American dream.[14] Too, it is the area in which rural culture is most obviously engaged in an encounter with urban culture traits. Perhaps more seriously than at any other point, the relevance of the procedures and message of the rural church will be tested in this clash of urban and rural values. Rural church leaders are only just beginning to awaken to the implications of the demographic and ecological changes which accompany the agricultural and suburban revolutions, of which the rural-urban fringe phenomenon is one phase.

An encouraging sign is the recent publication of Shirley Greene's **Ferment on the Fringe,**[15] which reports on ten case studies of "rural churches in transition." The book is concerned with churches which were, or are now, involved in the situation of community change from rural to urban, suburban, or rural-urban fringe. A study of this kind certainly indicates increasing awareness of the problems created by the mobility of the American population. More work along these lines is needed. The problems raised in the study must, as Mr. Greene himself suggests, be inquired into in greater depth than was possible in this initial attempt.

## IV
## Seizing Opportunities Where They Are

**Second,** the rural church must learn

[10] Davis, J., and Goldberg, R., *A Concept of Agribusiness,* (Boston, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1957), 1.
[11] *Ibid.,* 1-2.
[12] *Ibid.,* 3.
[13] *Town and Country Church,* No. 132, (March, 1958), 1-4
[14] *Town and Country Church,* No. 140, (February, 1959), 1-3.
[15] (Philadelphia, Christian Education Press, 1960).

to seize its opportunity for growth where, in some instances, it already exists, without waiting for the grand strategy which is going to solve all the problems. When open-country neighborhood churches close their doors, their members often drift entirely away from the church. If rural church members are looking for opportunities for evangelism, here is one that is sometimes overlooked. To be sure, many people from open-country neighborhood churches have moved to other communities, but what of those who remain? Are real efforts being made to encourage them to become a part of the church life in the nearby town? The minister and his Commission on Membership and Evangelism need constantly to be engaging in serious effort to draw these "formerly churched" persons into the fellowship of village or town church. Of course, there are often tensions between "town" and "country" to be overcome. Yet these hindrances are often an excuse, and not a reason, for the rural church not having cultivated its ecclesiastical vineyard.

## V

### The Irrelevance of Nostalgia

**Third,** the rural church needs to depend less upon the assurance that rural values and traditions are so self-evidently worthwhile that the appeal to them will convince people of the relevance of the church to their lives. To put it another way, what is needed is a certain realism about rural values. No effort to conserve them all will be either convincing or successful. We are at this point all too nostalgic and sentimental. As a result, we sometimes substitute a lament over the disappearance of old ways for a serious confronting of the fact that these old ways can never return.

Certainly, many values associated with rural life are worth preserving. Harold Kaufman, President of the Rural Sociological Society, suggests that these values are organized around three cores: the small group, the family, and the neighborhood, independence and self-reliance, and nature as something to be enjoyed and appreciated as well as controlled. Concerning these value cores Kaufman goes on to say that "strong small group life such as is seen in family and neighborhood appears to be essential for social and personal stability," "the right to make up one's own mind and to have a large measure of personal freedom is basic in the American heritage," and "nature is not only a means to an end—something to subdue — but also an end in itself — something to experience and to appreciate."[16]

The reminders about these important social and cultural values, so often exemplified in rural society at its best, are relevant and timely. If these values should be permanently lost from our way of life, we should all be deprived of something which has meant much. We need to understand, however, that nostalgia or lament over what has already been lost does not contribute very much to the efforts to preserve what is still left. The thing needed most is a serious attempt to study the conditions under which values and attitudes can be preserved, when the situations in which they were developed have been altered.

A recent attempt to raise the relevant questions concerning the impact of the agricultural revolution upon rural values makes clear that these values have become problematical and ambiguous. Shirley Greene writes that "the changes which are occurring in rural America, although they can be described sociolically and economically . . . are actually fraught with ethical implications which challenge thought, study and action by rural Christians and by the church in

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[16] *Town and Country Church,* No. 148, (January-February, 1960), 7.

town and country."[17] A brief consideration of each of the value cores identified by Kaufman as worth preserving in our American heritage will make the point that needs to be made here.

Concerning the values represented by the rural family, we can no longer take it for granted that these values will be preserved because of the family-oriented nature of farming as a way of life. Home and work life in rural areas are much more separated than in the past. Many things which once were done in the home are now done outside. Increasingly the farm family pursues its social and recreational interests away from the home or even outside the local community. The stability of the rural family may have been too largely based upon the authoritarian patterns of the patriarchal family. Since this type of family is rapidly disappearing, its support cannot be counted upon to undergird the old values. Instead of lamenting the passage of the older order, the rural church should, as Greene suggests, be asking itself questions concerning the kind of marriage counseling the family education that might render less traumatic the transition from patriarcal family to the democratic family.

The sense of vocation which many rural people have drawn from their close contact with nature is not automatic either. While farmers do their work in a natural, rather than man-made environment, and deal with the creative factors of soil, water, weather, plants, and animals, the notion of Christian vocation is not inevitably associated with these factors. Such a setting is, of course, conducive to the sense of Christian vocation, but it does not necessarily produce this feeling about one's work. We cannot presume that farming is, intrinsically, a sacred vocation. When farming as a way of life has become farming as a business, what happens to the "calling?' The old appeal to "the holy earth," and the oft-repeated phrases about the stewardship of the soil, greatly need restatement in terms which will be meaningful for agri-business conditions.

Self-reliance and individualism, too, need re-evaluation in the light of the agricultural revolution. The emergence of agri-business has surely shifted the context within which these virtues have meaning. In countless ways, the rural person, whether or not he is a farmer, has been drawn into the orbit of a highly complex, rapidly urbanizing, and industrialized society. Specialization, mechanization, and commercialization mean that the individual is increasingly drawn into a network of interrelationships in which self-reliance and individualism—understood in the traditional ways of the frontier—are somewhat anachronistic. If the church is to help rural people preserve the values associated with these character traits, a beginning must be made in placing these values in their proper relationship to other values. Here emerge such questions as what does individualism mean in the Christian scale of values? What is the relationship of self-reliance to the implementation of community objectives through voluntary cooperation? When economic decisions involve our entire economy, what does the freedom of the individual to make his own decisions mean? The church does not, of course, have either the resources or the power to provide authoritative answers to such questions, but the rural church could, in many cases, provide a climate in which rural people might as Christians discuss their real problems, and not simply the questions that nobody is seriously asking.

## VI

### Knowledge and Community

**Fourth,** the rural church must deliberately make itself more conscious of

[17] "Keeping Ethically Alert Amid Rapid Rural Change," (New York, Office of Publication and Distribution, National Council of Churches of Christ). In our discussion at this point we have followed several of the provocative suggestions made by Shirley Greene and are indebted to him for his insights in this area.

the communities in which it exists. Churches which survive will be those in which a kind of 'will" to survive is activated. Yet the will to survive is frequently lacking because there is no real basis for it. That basis can be provided, if at all, only by accurate and adequate information about the community, its people, its history, and problems. "One of the prime essentials for continued improvement," writes Otto G. Hoiberg in **Exploring the Small Community**, "is a realistic interpretation of the contemporary small community by the rural people themselves. In many quarters a pessimism prevails which often leads to inaction and aimless drifting."[18] But more than this, "a serious obstacle to self-improvement of the small community has been the widespread belief that 'we know our community.' In reality, most rural people do not know their own communities. . . . Every sound community improvement program rests upon an understanding of the physical and human resources which are available to the community and of the forces that operate within it."[19]

When Christian people say that it is not the business of the church to concern itself with community affairs and community planning, they show their lack of understanding of the situation in which the church as a social institution now exists. The future of the rural church is bound up with the future of the rural community. While it is theoretically possible for a rural church to survive and prosper in a declining community, in the long run this is not likely. Sometimes, the growing feeling of rural people that they live in a declining community—perhaps derived from the knowledge that the community has lost population since the previous census—becomes what Robert K. Merton calls a "self-fulfilling prophecy." A self-fulfilling prophecy is "a **false** definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come **true.** The specious validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error. For the prophet will cite the actual course of events as proof that he was right from the very beginning."[20] So, in a rural community the belief that "we live declining community" may sometimes evoke behavior which may eventually lead to the decline of that community.

The self-fulfilling prophecy thrives on the environment of ignorance. If Professor Hoiberg is right in saying that most rural people do not know their own communities, then rural churches which want not only to survive but to be creative forces in their communities are confronted with an obvious imperative—to devise the means for becoming the channel through which the information needed for sound community planning and improvement might be gained. Both the pessimists, who view with alarm the impending demise of the community, and the optimists, who naively suppose that somehow their community will go on forever if they have faith and leave it alone, often speak from a position of essential ignorance of what the real conditions and problems are.

Of how many of our churches could it be said, as it was said of the churches of Plainville, that none of the really important problems of agriculture, ethics, and human relationships which actually face the community is ever discussed in the church, and in the context of the Christian faith? If churches, in the pursuit of the divine mission to which they have been called, never get within shouting distance of the real problems which confront men in their daily experience, then what becomes of the confident assertion that in the Christian gospel the answer to all man's perplexities is to be found? To the extent that the church—rural or urban—has become a comfort station, in which

[18] (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 5.

[19] *Ibid.*, 11.

[20] *Social Theory and Social Structure*, (Glencoe, Free Press, 1957), 423.

men simply escape from their real problems, instead of a place where men may gain the necessary courage, inspiration, and knowledge to cope with these problems as Christians, it perhaps deserves the oblivion to which some have already consigned it.

## VII
## Working Effectively in the Region

**Fifth,** our understanding of what is happening in rural communities generally, and in rural churches in particular, must be applied in ways which are specifically relevant to the region with which we are concerned. For the Great Plains-Rocky Mountain region the most significant work is certainly that of Carl F. Kraenzel.[21] For several years, Professor Kraenzel has been attempting to persuade educators, ministers, and other community leaders to pay adequate attention to the characteristics of this region, and to devise their strategies and tactics in the light of these characteristics. In a course taught while he was visiting professor of rural church at Iliff School of Theology, in the summer of 1958, and at various conferences of ministers and church officials, he has called our attention to the demographic, ecological, economic, and institutional problems of the region. He has even been so bold as to suggest a possible solution to the problem of the rural church in the region.

In the Great Plains region, Kraenzel points out, the specific aspects of the agricultural revolution which have been most deeply felt may be summarized under three headings. **First,** there is the continued diminution and increased sparsity of population. This, he is quite sure, is likely to continue, unless measures are taken to produce some stability in population holding power. These measures will not be forthcoming until communities throughout the region gain the necessary knowledge of the situation to identify the real community centers and their functions, and take steps to encourage the necessary community organization.

**Second,** as a result of population losses in the region, there is an accompanying loss of status and importance for many small towns that have served as centers for the rural community. In the process of identifying community centers and their functions it may become evident that some of these small towns should be encouraged to "close out," since they have already lost their usefulness beyond the point of recovery. They are, in a sense, victims of the centralization and consolidation made possible by modern means of transportation and communication. The concentration of depot centers—as Kraenzel calls them—is an inevitable trend under modern conditions. Recreational activities, social participation, church going, even visiting, as well as economic and political activities, have all followed this trend.

At first glance, it would seem that this creates a hopeless situation for those concerned with the survival and effectiveness of institutions. This need not be so. As Professor Kraenzel suggests, we have failed to notice a quite obvious point—that "highways can be traveled in both directions and communication can work both ways—from the people to the depot and from the depot to the people. There is apparently a basic reason for having fewer depots, especially the larger ones; but there appears also to be a need for a new device, namely, creating extensions or pipelines from the depot to the people."[22] This is already being done with health and library services. The principle is applicable to other areas as well.

**Third,** there is an increase in the types of contacts with rural people that are manipulated from the mass society outside the rural community. Because the sources of such contacts cannot easily be

[21] Cf. especially his *The Great Plains in Transition, Norman,* University of Oklahoma Press, 1955).

[22] "The Church's Stake in the Agriculture and in the Community in the Great Plains," *The Iliff Review,* XV, (1958), No. 3, 23.

pinned down, and because the ideas, attitudes, and values involved cannot be adequately checked, such contacts often have the effect of producing apathy and hysteria. Ultimately this can only mean the erosion of some of the human qualities usually associated with life in a civilized and democratic society. In all too many communities, it produces a kind of grim resignation to the influence of forces over which rural people seemingly have no control.

What implications for the rural church are to be drawn from these points? With regard to the effects of increased diffusion of influences from outside the community, we certainly should strive to create an atmosphere in the community of the church within which people might be helped to identify and check the sources and meanings of these influences.[23] Perhaps so much has been said about religion helping us to accept the things in our experience that cannot be changed that we tend prematurely to conclude that nothing in our situation can be changed. Once again we are back at the point of saying that the church should be a place where people might be taught to respond to real problems in relevant ways, and not simply a place where we can exchange lamentations about the passing of the old order.

Concerning diminution of population and disappearance of community centers, Kraenzel makes the relevant and clear suggestion that the church in this region should implement a version of the larger parish idea. The church should, he believes, move in the direction of a major depot, but it should at the same time keep the sub-depots intact, to serve as points of transmission for the efforts of the central depot. "I have reference," Kraenzel says, to a team of ministers who have some specialties — one for preaching, one for working with the youth, one for comforting the old, one for working with all other groups to develop the . . . community, one who will do some research, and one who will do the administering."[24] Churches in Billings and Great Falls, Grand Island, Rapid City, Pueblo, and Denver might become instruments in establishing sub-depots in outlying centers throughout the region, so that religious needs of sparsely populated areas might continue to be met.

One important implication of all this is that we may have to give up our traditional assumption that religious functions can be carried out only in church buildings. We too easily assume that if the church building has been abandoned, religion is no longer represented in the area. This need not be so. If medical staff and health workers can be trained to work in a central depot and outlying sub-depots pattern for meeting needs for medical care, there is no inherent reason why this cannot be done with ministers and religious education workers. Of course, we can think of plenty of complications involved in this approach—denominational machinery and organizational shibboleths to be gotten around, for instance. Yet the meeting of religious needs on this 'off-the-premises" basis is already being done in such areas as the mission field (where it is now commonly understood that it is necessary to take the mission to the people and not wait for them to come to the Mission) and the college campus (where some of the most effective work is being done by student workers who "preach the gospel" in dormitories, or with small groups of students in their own apartments, or even on street corners, rather than in that pale imitation of a fraternity house, the Student Center). With imaginative planning, and the willingness to engage in potentially creative experiment, this version of the larger parish idea might go

[23] For a contrary point of view, see Stein, M., *The Eclipse of Community,* where he argues that "it is hard to see how the small towner could gain much by being able to appraise his situation rationally. . . . Perhaps the retention of a mythology is the only real alternative to social integration." (p. 295).

[24] *Ibid.,* 25.

a long way toward making the rural church a viable institution in present-day rural society.

## VIII

### Conclusion

Much more needs to be said about each of these guidelines. We have been able to suggest only the barest outline. Some of the points made are controversial. More detailed discussion would, one hopes, clear up many ambiguities and complexities which are involved. There is, potentially, within the life of the church the skill, intelligence, and the disposition to work conscientiously at the solution of the problems suggested. There is even the promise that in time, out of its adversity, the rural church will develop a future even more glorious than its illustrious past. All of this hinges, of course, upon the determination to look realistically at the tasks that constitute the present.

Ultimately, in an effective attempt to provide solutions for the problems of the rural church, the sociological description and analysis—which has been our major concern in this paper—and the relevant theological understandings would have to be brought into meaningful relationship. At this point, Harry B. Adams has suggested that the church has often been limited in its impact because it has a too limited concept of its mission. It has conceived of itself, he says, as the caretaker of the cemetery, the preserver of a particular institution, the creator of a society of self-righteous sanctified people, or as a social agency. In each of these views a partial picture of the church's purpose has been grasped. Yet the church cannot fulfull its mission unless it remembers its **prophetic** role of bearing witness to the truth of God made known in the fellowship of faith, its **priestly** function of centering its life around the encounter between God and man in the community of worship, and its **kingly** role of giving glory to God through its service to persons and communities. "The church with all of its blindness, its failure, its frailty, its stumbling ways, is called to make known the glory of God and to give glory to Him."[25]

To do this, the church needs all the social wisdom and skill it can muster. The new post-agricultural revolution society is already here. Learning to live in it requires, not nostalgia for a past that can never return, but the fullest use of the continually growing knowledge being provided by the social sciences. This growing knowledge cannot, however, be employed as though there is some set of magic techniques by which the rural church can survive and prosper. No techniques will be a substitute for the recovery of the sense of mission. The church which understands itself as being a genuine mission to the world will be able to make creative use of the available techniques. The church which is merely concerned about its **survival** will end by being something less than a church. More adequate knowledge and a deeper understanding of mission must be effectively combined. To implement this combination is the current challenge of the church in rural America.

[25] *Town and Country Church,* No. 141, (March, 1959), 1-4.