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# Revitalizing Rural Communities: How Churches Can Help

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# Revitalizing Rural Communities: How Churches Can Help

## **Abstract**

There is a popular American perception that rural communities are places of failure. It is a perception that is apparently shared by rural communities themselves. North Dakota rural sociologist Curtis Stofferahn and his colleagues, in a 1991 study, discovered that by the late 1980s most rural citizens in the Midwest already harbored the notion that their communities were dying. Researchers found that the metaphor which dominated the thinking of rural community residents was the "corpse." On one hand, rural citizens believed that the death of their communities was inevitable and their only reason for staying around was to prepare the corpse for burial. On the other hand, some believed that a new industry might yet come to town and revive the corpse. <sup>2</sup> But they found no evidence of hope that renewal could come from within their rural communities.

## **Disciplines**

Rural Sociology

## Revitalizing Rural Communities: How Churches Can Help<sup>1</sup>

Frederick Kirschenmann

*The groups that had most completely shaken off the old symbolisms were those that were most ready for the American adventure: they turned themselves easily to the mastery of the external environment. To them matter alone mattered.*

---Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day*, 1926

There is a popular American perception that rural communities are places of failure. It is a perception that is apparently shared by rural communities themselves. North Dakota rural sociologist Curtis Stofferahn and his colleagues, in a 1991 study, discovered that by the late 1980s most rural citizens in the Midwest already harbored the notion that their communities were dying. Researchers found that the metaphor which dominated the thinking of rural community residents was the “corpse.” On one hand, rural citizens believed that the death of their communities was inevitable and their only reason for staying around was to prepare the corpse for burial. On the other hand, some believed that a new industry might yet come to town and revive the corpse.<sup>2</sup> But they found no evidence of hope that renewal could come from within their rural communities.

By the early 1990s the media had reached similar conclusions. Dismissing the relevance of rural communities in the American economy, Margaret Usdansky, in a front-page story published in *USA Today* on January 6, 1992, suggested that small rural towns in the United States had “a lot of history, little else.” Usdansky claimed that small rural towns flourished with the railroads but that the arrival of the Model T began to “wipe out the need for small commercial centers as surely as if Ford had driven through their storefronts.”<sup>3</sup>

This perception of rural places as failures now seems to pervade our entire culture. Reflecting on his own experience as a youngster growing up in the small community of Minneota, Minnesota, author and poet Bill Holm wrote; “at fifteen, I could define failure fast: to die in Minneota, Minnesota.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is now understood that if you can’t escape the rural community in which you are unfortunate enough to grow up, by definition you are a failure.

I came face to face with this culture of failure syndrome in 1976 when I decided to leave an academic career in Boston, Massachusetts to return to our family farm in North Dakota. Both my colleagues at the university and my neighbors in North Dakota were

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<sup>1</sup> Speech given at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting of The Northern Plains Conference of the United Church of Christ, Bismarck, North Dakota, June 10, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Curtis W. Stofferahn, C.A. Fontaigne, D.J. McDonald, M. Spletto, and H. Jeanotte, 1991. “Growth Fundamentalism in Dying Rural Towns: Implications for Rural Development Practitioners,” *Agriculture and Human Values*. 8 (3)

<sup>3</sup> Margaret L. Usdansky, 1992. “Need for Little Places Disappeared,” *USA Today*, January 6.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Holm, 1985. *The Music of Failure*. Marshall, MN: Plains Press. 56

perplexed by my decision. At the heart of their bewilderment was morbid curiosity--- why would *anyone* deliberately choose to go from success to failure?

### **What's wrong with rural America?**

So what's wrong with rural America? Is it true that rural communities are no longer relevant? Is it true that rural America is populated with failed communities? Are the people of these communities inferior? Do they lack the inherent assets to be successful?

Of course we all know the answer to those questions. And it is "no".

There is a *reason* why industries routinely come to rural communities in North and South Dakota and other rural states to obtain the labor for their enterprises. They know that they will find ample supplies of the social capital that they desperately need to succeed--- a strong work ethic, a sense of purpose, ingenuity and dependability.

Rural communities also seem to be proficient at producing leaders. Gregory Page, the current CEO of Cargill; Rick Schnieders, the CEO of SYSCO; Tom Brokaw, long-time evening news anchor for NBC Television; Norman Borlaug, credited with launching the Green Revolution---they all were raised and educated in small, rural midwestern communities. And we can all name similar pivotal figures who grew up in our presumably "failed" rural communities.

So, what is it about rural communities that has led society to write them off?

The answer to that question is complex and some of the answers lie in rural history. Knowing that history will begin to help us understand why the faith community can play a critical role in revitalizing our rural communities.

Five hundred years ago European immigrants began imposing a unique kind of culture on the North American landscape which, I think, has had a direct effect on what happened to our rural communities. In his formative work, *The Golden Day*, Lewis Mumford, who is perhaps the most eminent scholar of the history of American culture, reminds us that the European immigrants who came to this country emerged in a cultural vacuum. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the culture of the Middle Ages had broken down and the old symbols and trappings were no longer meaningful.

It was in the wake of this cultural transformation that Europeans began to migrate to North America. Mumford argues that those Europeans who were the "most ready for the American adventure" were precisely the ones who had most thoroughly rejected the old values. Hence, they also were the ones who "turned themselves easily to the mastery of the external environment. To them matter alone mattered."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis Mumford, 1926. *The Golden Day*. New York: Horace Liveright. 30f.

In other words, the Europeans who were most eager to immigrate to this new land were the ones who were most disenchanted with the old values and were looking for a fresh start in a new environment based on a new way of being in the world.

The Puritans who came to these shores perhaps were prime examples of immigrants who shook off the old ways and developed a new ethic here, an ethic that subsequently dominated much of American culture.

The Puritans arrived intent on creating a “new kingdom of god on earth” and that new kingdom prescribed new economic goals. For Cotton Mather the wilderness was the “devil’s playground” and building the kingdom of god meant, among other things, pushing the wilderness back and planting nice neat rows of corn. In other words, for the Puritans, exploiting the natural resources of the wilderness for economic gain was in large measure synonymous with building the kingdom of god. And they believed their success in this venture was clear evidence that they were fulfilling god’s will. They believed that exploiting this “wasteland” and turning it into a shining example of economic productivity was their “manifest destiny.” And so in the final analysis, despite all of their lip service to god, for the Puritans “matter alone mattered.”

In fact, as the European immigrants saw it, the “failure” of Native Americans to exercise their god-given duty to properly make use of this wasteland was all the justification they needed to take the land away from the Indians who had lived here for 15,000 years.<sup>6</sup> Since they hadn’t made proper *use* of the land they gave up their *right* to it. “Matter alone mattered.”

Frederick Turner, a contemporary historian of American culture, reminds us that it was also this spiritual vacuum that encouraged European immigrants to decimate native *culture*. European newcomers saw no value in the rich, indigenous, legendary myths that were attuned to the ecological and cultural fabric of this “new” world.

Turner envisions what it must have been like to first set foot on the shores of this rich ecological landscape with its majestic trees, beautiful prairie and magnificent animals. “Had they been other than they were,” he wrote of the European immigrants, “they might have written a new mythology here. As it was, they took inventory . . .”<sup>7</sup> In other words, had they not come here out of a cultural vacuum which predisposed them to tote up the resources to be exploited, rather than appreciating the value of what was already here, they might have developed a different life, and therefore, ultimately a much richer appreciation of, and proper role for, rural communities. As it was, they reduced a lush and beautiful land to an opportunity for bureaucratic bean counting.

It was this spiritual vacuum---the notion that god had brought them here to exploit the raw materials of nature to build a human-dominated, kingdom of god---which became the basis for developing an economy based on resource exploitation. And it was their

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<sup>6</sup> William Cronin, 1983. *Changes in the Land*. New York: Hill and Wang. 127ff.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Turner, 1990. *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 256.

predisposition to master the external environment and maximize short-term economic returns that subsequently shaped the role which rural communities were expected to play in that economy---an economy in which “matter alone mattered.”

Karl Stauber, President of the Northwest Area Foundation, who I think has emerged as one of our more thoughtful investigators of the roots of rural poverty and the prospects for revitalizing our rural communities, reminds us that rural communities in America have experienced several transitions. In each phase rural communities have been party to a social contract which placed them in the position of being the supplier of raw materials for the evolving urban economy. Consequently, rural communities have *never* been seen as *valuable in themselves*, they were *always* regarded as valuable *only* in so far as they generated raw materials for the larger economy.

Stauber characterizes the first phase of rural America as the *Frontier* which lasted from the end of the American Revolution to the late 1800s. During this phase, rural America was expected to provide the raw materials for food and feed to support the growing urban population and to fuel the export trade. Our nation initially had very little manufacturing capacity so it had to import most of its manufactured goods, creating a huge trade deficit. Exporting raw materials, especially cotton, tobacco and timber, helped to balance that trade deficit.

Obtaining these raw materials was the principal rationale for opening the frontier and establishing rural communities. And because rural communities provided these essential raw materials from the *Frontier*, the public supported the *Frontier* venture through “government-sponsored exploration, military protection, [and] government-sponsored displacement of the existing cultures and people . . .”<sup>8</sup> In this scenario rural communities were valued only in so far as they provided the raw materials for the larger economy. Once again, “matter alone mattered.”

The second phase is what Stauber calls the *Storehouse* phase. The frontier had disappeared by the 1890s and the Industrial Revolution had come to urban America. In this new era, rural America again was expected to provide the commodities to feed the “urban machine.” The Industrial Revolution spurred a major population shift in America as more labor was required to service the industrial economy. While more than 90 percent of Americans were farmers when Thomas Jefferson was president, only half of Americans lived in rural communities by 1920. At the end of the *Storehouse* period in the early 1970s, slightly more than a quarter of Americans remained in rural areas.

And it was, of course, the Industrialization of America which demanded that we make agriculture more labor efficient. This would “free” people from the “drudgery” of food production so that they could work in industry to improve our common quality of life. In response to this new social demand, our Land Grant Universities devoted most of their research to making agriculture more labor efficient. They offered a constant stream of

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<sup>8</sup> Karl N. Stauber, 2001. “Why Invest in Rural America---and How? A Critical Public Policy Question for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” A speech delivered for the Center for the Study of Rural America, Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, April 30. Available from the author.

new technologies that required less labor on the farm, which, of course, contributed to the departure of the population and income earners from our rural communities.

The public, once again, supported this exploitation of rural communities, not only through the research and extension of public Land Grant Universities but also via subsidies to rail and water transportation, government-supported irrigation projects, rural electrification and telephone systems, crop subsidies, and the opening of public lands for mining and logging.<sup>9</sup>

The *Storehouse* period ended in the 1970s, and “economies of scale” became the new strategy for maximizing wealth in urban areas. The deregulation of the airline industry, followed by numerous other industry deregulations, signaled that the new economy would be determined solely by market power. And consolidation became the next principal strategy for domination in the food and agriculture system.<sup>10</sup> Once again, “matter alone mattered.”

Furthermore, since capital had accumulated primarily in the marketing and input sectors of the agricultural economy during most of the industrial period---owing to the fact that rural communities were increasingly expected to provide cheap labor and raw materials to feed the industrial machine---it left farmers and rural communities undercapitalized, and therefore at a distinct competitive disadvantage in this new world of economies of scale and winner-take-all capitalism.

While a few public subsidies that may benefit rural communities have been kept in place in this new economy by powerful special interests, the tolerance for such subsidies on the part of urban and suburban taxpayers is clearly waning. The majority of citizens now live in suburbs and they see little connection between the welfare of rural communities and the welfare of their own suburban communities. In the industrial economy, rural communities now are viewed almost exclusively as a source of cheap labor and raw materials for the sole purpose of adding value elsewhere. If rural communities in America cannot compete with lower priced raw materials from other parts of the world, well, then it is simply a market signal that they are not competitive and are, therefore, failed communities. “Matter alone matters” continues to be the ideology that defines our rural communities.

### **Is there hope for a different future for rural America?**

Given this historical analysis one must ask whether there is any hope for rural America? Powerful forces poised to rape the few remaining resources from rural communities seem deeply entrenched, not only in our culture but in every aspect of our infrastructure. Economic, political and cultural forces appear to be ranged against the long-term welfare

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<sup>9</sup> Stauber, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>10</sup> See the work of William Heffernan and Mary Hendrickson on the evolution of consolidation in the food and agriculture system during the past 20 years. Access papers at the Food Circles Network Project, <http://www.foodcircles.missouri.edu/consol.htm>

of rural communities. So we might be forgiven if the “corpse” is the metaphor that comes to mind when we think about the future of our rural communities.

A few thoughtful visionaries in recent years have suggested alternative futures for rural America. Some of these futuristic scenarios actually would *eliminate* many of our rural communities. The Popper’s famous “buffalo commons” proposal suggested that there is little reason to hope that we can maintain viable human communities in the rural landscape, especially in the western plains. They proposed that we consider converting the Plains to an expansive wildlife preserve---a “buffalo commons.”

Willard W. Cochrane, one of the more imaginative agricultural policy researchers of our time, offered an alternative strategy. He proposed that we restructure the entire rural agricultural landscape in the farm belt. His plan suggests that we identify those lands which best lend themselves to sustainable crop production---meaning land with rich top soil, not dependent on large quantities of irrigation, and not susceptible to soil erosion---and then limit crop production to those lands. Land not suitable for crop production should then be converted to grass and domestic livestock production. Land too marginal for domestic livestock production should be purchased by the government and “given to Native American tribe or tribes . . . to be held by them in perpetuity and managed by the governing body of the tribe for use in the raising and grazing of bison . . .”<sup>11</sup>

Cochrane argues that such a plan would reduce the surplus production of commodity crops---the “curse” of American agriculture. By reducing surplus supply, farmers would be in a better competitive position to capture more value from the marketplace and, therefore, garner more income for rural communities while simultaneously encouraging a more sustainable kind of agriculture.

Such proposals might be worth considering but they still fail to reach the heart of the problem---the cultural and spiritual vacuum that has plagued our rural communities from the beginning. I think if we truly want to revitalize our rural communities, we must come to terms with the fact that *more* than matter, *matters*---that there is a spiritual dimension to community health.

To begin with, when we ask whether or not there is any hope for rural communities, I think we have to be very clear about what we mean by “hope.” Our cultural heritage, which has taught us that “matter alone matters”, has deprived us of a true meaning of hope, and consequently we are easily prone to pessimism.

In our materialistic culture, hope means that there has to be something out there in the world that gives us reason to be optimistic. At least a few of our contemporary visionaries have tried to remind us that hope, at least as it is interpreted from the perspective of our faith, is *not* based on what we see out there in the world, but what we value inside ourselves.

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<sup>11</sup> Willard W. Cochrane, 2001. “American Agricultural Abundance: Curse or Opportunity.” Unpublished paper available from the author.



Vaclav Havel, Paulo Freire, Wendell Berry, and Martin Luther King all have reminded us that hope is *not* confidence that things will turn out alright, but a commitment to justice even when there appears to be little to be gained by making that commitment. Wendell Berry refers to this virtue as “difficult hope.”<sup>12</sup>

Hope is a state of mind, not of the world, as Vaclav Havel put it when he was asked if he saw even a grain of hope anywhere in Czechoslovakia three years before he became its president and the country was still in a mess. Hope is not a belief that things will go well, he said, but a willingness to work for something because it is right.

It is in this sense that Rosa Parks stands as one of the great symbols of hope in our time. From the perspective of things turning out well, Rosa Parks could not have had any reason to be optimistic when she refused to go to the back of the bus on that fateful day in Montgomery, Alabama. Given the culture and power structures of the time, the only outcome she could have expected from such a rash act was to be arrested and thrown in jail. But, at some deep level in her soul she knew it was the right thing to do.

And then, as sometimes happens, the convergence of events caused that simple act of courage and hope to change the world. Or, as we would say in our faith community, god used that simple act to bring salvation to the human family by revealing to us that we are *all* children of god, and that discrimination of any kind is inconsistent with the kingdom of god. God indeed is “still speaking” as we now like to remind ourselves in our United Church of Christ communion.

In our faith hope is *always* characterized this way. In almost every biblical story, there is very little to be optimistic about in the world in which those stories take place.

Would we have been hopeful had we been part of that little band of slaves who were led out of Egypt to make that treacherous journey across the desert to a strange and distant land? As the prophet Isaiah reminded us, that little band had been enslaved for so long that they had lost all *semblance* of being human. “Who would have believed,” that anything of significance could have come of them, and yet, he said, they became the “people of god.”

Would we have been hopeful on that first Christmas Eve had *we* been in that cold, smelly barn where a pair of teenagers gave birth to their first child, far away from home without so much as a pail of warm water, as Martin Luther described the scene? And yet it was an event that forever changed the world.

Would we have been hopeful for an *epiphany* when a desperate ruler ordered the slaughter of all children under the age of two in the entire kingdom? And yet an epiphany, in the midst of that carnage, is *exactly* what happened, causing even foreign wise men to “return home by another way.”

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<sup>12</sup> Wendell Berry, 1990. *What Are People For?* San Francisco, CA: North Point Press. 57.

Are we hopeful that the kingdom of god can come into *our* lives from a simple act of kindness toward a stranger---indeed, toward an enemy---beaten by robbers and left in a ditch on the roadside to die? Yet, in the Good Samaritan parable, Jesus implies it is the *only* way to enter the fullness of life.

Do *we* have hope that the fullness of life---the kingdom of god---can come into our lives by interrupting *our* business journeys to attend to the needs of one of the least of these? Do *we* have hope as a community of faith that the kingdom of god can come into our lives by being present to all those who are among the least of these in our rural communities?

These are the stories of hope in our faith. In our faith, hopeful changes in the world don't come because *we* engineer them or because *we* have superior abilities to alter powerful forces. They occur because we respond in faith to doing the right thing in our neighborhoods and in our communities, by taking the time to be neighbors to each other.

And, *of course*, we know that such changes don't always come on *our* watch just because we do the right thing. It is sobering to realize that *of all the women* who started the woman's suffrage movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only *one* lived to actually exercise the right to vote.

Yet, grounding our hope in faith is, I believe, essential to the revitalization of our rural communities. We know that it is not right for our rural communities and their resources to be exploited for the sole purpose of accumulating wealth elsewhere. We know that it is not right for our rural communities to export all of their raw materials as cheaply as possible so that other communities and businesses can benefit from their added value. We know that it is not right that we must spend our entire earned income to import all the goods we need because we devote all of our labor to making cheap raw materials for export and so deprive our communities of the benefits that come from producing those goods ourselves.

We know it is not right for any community to operate by the "colonialist principle" which assumes that "it is permissible to ruin one place or culture for the sake of another" as Wendell Berry has so eloquently put it.<sup>13</sup> We know it's not right and so we have to *refuse* to sit in the back of the bus, we have to choose to be neighbors to each other in our communities, welcome the love of god into our lives, and together build a future for our rural communities based on justice and love rather than dominance and exploitation. More than matter *has* to matter if we are going to revitalize our rural communities.

### **How can churches help to revitalize rural communities?**

It should now be obvious that the church has a role to play in revitalizing our rural communities. Who better than the faith community to call attention to the fact that matter is *not* the only thing that matters; that cooperation and equity may do more to produce a healthy economy in the long run than competition and violence, that ultimately we cannot

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<sup>13</sup> Wendell Berry, 1993. *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays*. Pantheon Books. 128.

have thriving economies without a framework of justice? The faith community can point out that a world in which almost half of the world's people live on less than \$2 a day while a tiny fraction controls the majority of the world's wealth cannot produce a secure social order or a healthy global economy.

Even leaders of the financial institutions in our rural communities are beginning to recognize that further wealth concentration is not in their best interests, and that while centralization of power and wealth may be seductive in the short run, it ultimately does not lead to a healthy and secure economy in the long run. After all, when communities disappear, banks disappear with them.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, there is an emerging awareness in the *scientific* community that the extreme concentration and centralization of economic power is dysfunctional. In 1992, John Gardner (then the Superintendent of the North Dakota State University Carrington Research and Extension Center) and his wife Julie were already calling attention to the fact that there was no scientific basis for the bias against the economic viability of family farms and rural communities. In an op-ed piece that appeared in the *Farm and Ranch Guide*, they said “. . . we'd like to suggest that perhaps there is an economic bias against the people who care for the land and produce the agricultural wealth . . . The 'family farm' may prove more valuable than serving as a romantic image of yesteryear. It's beginning to appear that centralization, either by government or economic might, is not the best strategy to deal with either the natural world or our social and economic structures.”<sup>15</sup>

A friend and colleague who teaches economics at New Mexico State University wrote recently that “All problems seem to point to the same path. There is a new vision emerging demonstrating how we can solve problems and at the same time create a better world and it all depends on collaboration, love, respect, beauty and fairness. The time has passed when we think we can solve problems with domination, competition and violence. It seems the artists and spiritual leaders have been saying this forever, and maybe now the scientists are beginning to see it as well.”<sup>16</sup>

So, shouldn't our rural churches become part of this emerging new economic vision--- one *not* captivated by the matter-alone-matters theology---a new economy based on collaboration, love, respect, beauty and fairness that may play a significant role in revitalizing our rural communities?

If the church is to be part of this newly emerging vision of rural economies, for what role is it best suited?

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<sup>14</sup> I have had conversations with numerous bankers in rural communities and almost without exception they agree that further wealth concentration will not work for them, that what we need is wealth expansion.

<sup>15</sup> John and Julie Gardner, 1992. “Dakotans Rarely Question Social, Economic Destiny.” Bismarck, ND: *Farm and Ranch Guide*. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Constance Falk, 2006. E-mail communication.

If the history of our faith is still a valid guide for appropriate action, the role of the church should *not be* one that joins us to the political power structure of the day. Similar unions of religion and politics almost always have been disastrous for the church and for the long-term welfare of communities---from Constantine to the present. What our faith seems to be suggesting is that in god's kingdom a "voice crying in the wilderness" is preferable to cozy conversations with lobbyists on K Street.

If that is true, what are some of the ways that we can *be* that voice crying in the wilderness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? This calls for our most creative and most prayerful thinking: Most *creative* because we have to entertain new and unconventional ways of being in the world, most *prayerful* because we have to be the most attentive---the most humble---the most open to the voice of god in our midst. If we truly believe that god is still speaking today, we have to engage in the practice of listening---and as our faith reminds us, such listening is always most effective in community---"wherever two or three are gathered together."

In our faith it appears that the reason we need to do this in *community* is that none of us as *individuals* seem to be very good at recognizing god's voice in the world. Too often as individuals we seem to confuse god's voice with our own deluded arrogance. So meeting together as a community, in humility, listening to each other, seems to be an essential ingredient.

The community also is essential to hearing the voice of god because, according to our faith, god only meets us in the flesh---when we choose to be a neighbor to an enemy on the road to Jericho, when we engage each other in humility and love.

And, it may be useful to remember that in our faith, the "two or three gathered together" need not be priests and deacons---more often it can be ordinary fishermen, publicans, sinners, farmers, and even unanticipated enemies on the road to Jericho. The message here, I think, is that god most often meets us in our everyday lives, not in the sanctuaries of religion---often where we least expect him, but *always* in those moments when we choose to be a neighbor to the other---especially that other who is in need.

Here are a few true stories that may serve to stimulate our imaginations and our prayerfulness as we seek to identify some roles that our churches in the Northern Plains may play in revitalizing our rural communities.

The first story comes from Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank. In his wonderful book, *Banker to the Poor*, Yunus tells how he came to develop micro-lending networks among some of the world's poorest people, enabling them to use their skills to lift themselves out of poverty.

Yunus' faith story begins in 1974 when famine plagued Bangladesh. At the time Yunus was the head of the economics department at one of that country's universities. As the famine spread, people died of starvation on sidewalks and porches across the street from his lecture hall. This forced Yunus to question what good all of his complex economic

theories were, when children were dying of starvation a stone's throw away. And so, as he put it, he needed to "run away" from his theories and textbooks and "discover the real-life economics of a poor person's experience."

This started Yunus on a long journey where he discovered that what was missing in the lives of most poor people: access to the small amount of capital necessary to help them exercise their skills to produce locally the products needed by people in their community and elsewhere. In most instances, he discovered that it was the *women* in these poor communities who were in the best position to create new micro-economies in their own areas.

He began by loaning \$27 of his own money to a group of 42 women whom he organized into a small sub-community so they could be a source of inspiration and accountability for each other. As it turned out, the only thing these women needed was enough credit to purchase the raw material to make stools. As a result of Yunus' small loan, they were able to break free from their cycle of poverty. Based on that experience, Yunus began involving his students to develop such local networks in other communities. Thus, the micro-lending institution was born and began to spread to other parts of the world

Through this process of engaging people in their own communities, Yunus learned many things. He discovered that viewing the world of poverty from a "bird's-eye view"---remaining aloof and developing strategies from afar---was dysfunctional because we cannot fully understand a community from a distance and because we tend to become arrogant when we are not fully engaged with the people we seek to serve. So, he chose the "worm's-eye view"---studying poverty up close, engaging the people in poverty and learning from them what was needed. The key lesson for him was that "what worked well was to offer people tiny loans for self-employment" and their own ingenuity and cooperation could turn poverty into self-sufficiency.<sup>17</sup>

Employing this perspective Yunus began to work in numerous places, arranging micro-loans for small networks of people in poor communities so they could acquire the tools they needed to become self-employed entrepreneurs. Over and over, the little pockets of wealth they generated began to create local economies that pushed back the specter of poverty. And, since all of this was done in the context of community, with people in the community supporting each other and holding each other accountable, almost no one has defaulted on the repayment of their loans.

With his record of success, Yunus finally was able to convince the banking community that such micro-loans to poor people in the context of community was good business. The micro-lending phenomenon has spread widely and today more than 250 institutions in nearly 100 countries operate micro-credit programs. This Grameen Bank model stands at the forefront of a growing world movement which is beginning to eradicate poverty through micro-lending.

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<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Yunus, 1999. *Banker for the Poor*. New York: Public Affairs.

The Grameen Bank provides us with a model of economic development based on principles that have abandoned the narrow perspective which assumes that matter alone matters. Here is an economic system that is based on collaboration, love, respect, beauty, and fairness. It is producing healthy local economies in which local wealth expands to benefit the entire community. The story clearly demonstrates how one “voice crying in the wilderness” can make a difference.

What can we learn from this story that can help us imagine how the faith community might help revitalize our rural landscape?

A second story comes to us from the anti-poverty program launched by the Northwest Area Foundation of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 1998 the Northwest Area Foundation decided to focus on long-term poverty reduction by inviting the people who live in poor communities in the Northwest to engage each other and do asset assessments to determine the indigenous strengths and opportunities in their own communities. Asking communities to imagine their own futures and identify emerging new markets has produced some interesting results in many of our rural communities. Once communities have defined their assets and developed ideas for using them in revitalization, the Foundation makes long-term financial commitments to provide them with start-up resources that enable them to begin their journey out of poverty.

Numerous stories have begun to emerge from this process.<sup>18</sup> Here is just one.

When the citizens of Miner County in South Dakota did their asset assessment they found that senior citizens were a significant economic factor in their community: “Seniors were an economic engine whose pensions, social security, Medicare payments and other income represented 28 percent of Miner County’s economic base.” They realized that “when five seniors left town it was the equivalent of losing a small business.” So the county invested in a for-profit, assisted-living facility. Since the facility was locally-owned and -marketed, seniors were more inclined to trust its operations, so they stayed in the community rather than moving to a more urban area. Now the facility houses more than 20 seniors who, thanks to the facility, have stayed in the county and the enterprise employs 16 people. All of this means more people patronizing local businesses, putting dollars into local church collection plates and helping to revitalize community spirit.

What can we learn from *this* story that can help us imagine how the faith community might help us revitalize our rural landscape?

A third story, published in the *Des Moines Register* on February 27, 2006,<sup>19</sup> told about a lesson at the First United Methodist Church in Newton, Iowa. The pastor and the

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example the Northwest Area Foundation’s 2005 Annual Update, “Can Communities Reduce Poverty?” Available from the Foundation at <http://www.nwaf.org/Content/Files/NWAF-05-AnnualUpdate.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Shirley Ragsdale, 2006. “Pastor challenges volunteers to spend \$100 on good deeds.” *Des Moines Register*, February 27. Access at [www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060227/LIFE05/602270343](http://www.desmoinesregister.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060227/LIFE05/602270343)

church's governing council decided to take \$5,000 out of their reserve fund and engage the congregation in an experiment. One Sunday morning, Pastor Gary Marzolf preached his sermon based on the parable of the talents in Matthew, Chapter 25. After the sermon, he invited 50 volunteers to come forward---no one knew exactly what the volunteering opportunity would be.

When all 50 were lined up at the altar, Pastor Marzolf, as in the parable of the talents, handed out \$100 bills to each of them and then charged them to go into the community and make the most of the money. According to the story, this simple act immeasurably enriched not only the lives of people in the community---often helping them through periods of temporary crisis---but also enriched the lives of the volunteers. In many instances the \$100 dollar bill leveraged hundreds of additional dollars to address problems the community had ignored for years. According to reports from the volunteers, the responsibility entrusted to them by being given \$100 to invest in the community's welfare, in the context of the parable of the talents, was so awesome that they all devoted a great deal of time in prayer and imagination to make sure they used these "talents" wisely.

What can we learn from *this* story that can help us imagine how the faith community might help revitalize our rural landscape?

A final story comes again from Iowa and appeared recently on a regional television station. While the number of dairies in Iowa has fallen by 60 percent since 1990, an enterprising young man named Russell Sheeder ten years ago decided to quit his job working for UPS, buy a farm and *begin* dairying. But, instead of buying a large dairy farm with lots of equipment and infrastructure, he bought a small farm, and planted the whole farm in grass. He decided *not* to use growth hormones or sub-therapeutic antibiotics and fed his cows entirely on grass. These management strategies allowed him to differentiate his product in the market place. His approach produced a more flavorful milk which the Sheeder family bottles on their own farm and sells to area restaurants and grocery stores. A growing number of customers now *wait* for the Sheeders' milk because it tastes so good. And they are making money!

There are now 7 such micro-dairies in Iowa, each serving as an economic stimulus in their communities because there is very little import/export activity. All of the resources used on the farms are generated by the farms and all of the wealth generated by these farms remains in the community.

This last story is but one signal that a new market is emerging in our food system that could provide novel opportunities to revitalize our rural communities.

Our "matter alone matters" culture has led us to believe that the only thing food customers want is "fast, convenient and cheap." But the Hartmann Group, one of the most sophisticated market survey organizations in the country, tells us that today 62 percent of the consuming public wants to buy food that is "consistent with their *values*." They not only want food with superior taste, but food that provides the greatest health

and nutritional qualities. They also want to buy food that has a good story, and that comes from a company that allows them to engage the people in the food chain all the way back to the farmer who produced the food. They want to know that the food was produced using good environmental stewardship; that animals were treated appropriately; that the family farmers producing the food were adequately compensated. They want to be active participants, not passive recipients, in the food system.

This new, emerging, values-based market may provide a unique opportunity for farmers, local communities and churches to work together to develop a new regional food economy based on collaboration, love, respect, beauty and fairness. These are the values this emerging market wants to support. The food that this market wants can be produced best by family farmers, linked together in marketing networks with their own brand, allowing customers to engage the farmers who produce the food.

Collaboration and cooperation are essential to achieving these market objectives. And to the extent that we still have or can rekindle trusting relationships in our rural communities, these new values-based markets give a distinct comparative advantage to our rural communities.

Maintaining the *identity* of these products from farm to table is a further essential requirement of these new markets. Consequently, these foods must be processed in local community processing facilities where the identity of each product can be maintained all the way back to the farm. Such local enterprises can go a long way toward expanding the base of wealth in local rural communities. And these new food chains can be designed to operate using the values that best serve the *community*, as well as the market, not only assuring that farmers are fairly compensated but also that the wealth generated stays largely in the community.

This is not an idle pipe dream, although it is a market that is only now beginning to emerge. Already there are similar successful ventures---Organic Valley Family of Farms, Natural Country Beef, Shepherds Grain, Heritage Acres, Niman Ranch, Naturally Iowa. These are just a few examples of this brisk new economy that is performing well. Recently the National Farmers Union Board of Directors agreed that they will use their membership organization to help organize farmers into more of these marketing networks. And our rural churches can help.

All of this is evidence that we do *not* have to let our rural communities evolve into pockets of poverty interspersed with leisure islands occupied by the idle rich who move into our communities for life style reasons, a future for our rural communities that some observers have predicted.<sup>20</sup>

Even futuristic business leaders see a very different future for our global economies and their projections hold much promise for our rural communities. John Thackara, business design specialist and Director of Doors of Perception, a design futures network based in

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<sup>20</sup> Jedediah Purdy, 2000. "The New Culture of Rural America." <http://www.prospect.org/archives/V11-3/purdy.html>. January 5.



Amsterdam, suggests that the industrial economy has reached its end. The industrial economy, he insists, is simply too exploitive to survive much longer, and the new economy which he envisions is an economy based on community networks that operate on “relationship value”. He asserts that our future food and agriculture system will become decentralized into regional foodsheds, our health care systems will be restructured to operate on social capital defined as “networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings, that facilitate cooperation within or among groups.”<sup>21</sup> It is a future in which more than matter, matters! And it holds great promise for the future of rural America and great opportunities for its churches.

This evolving future provides our rural churches with a unique opportunity to become partners in these ventures. Who better than the faith community to help design these new concepts, concepts that are based on the theology that more than matter matters---that long-term community health is based on collaboration, love, respect, beauty and fairness?

With imagination and prayerfulness we can---by choosing to be neighbors to each other and to those around us, to be “voices crying in the wilderness---allow god to speak to us in new ways that brings new life and meaning to our rural communities.

And even if we aren’t optimistic about the future, our faith calls upon us to do the right thing—to love god through our neighbors, wherever two or three are gathered together, to service and care for his creation, and to boldly go forward in confidence by faith, with imagination and prayerfulness---to be voices crying in the wilderness where others see no hope.

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<sup>21</sup> John Thackara, 2006. *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 113.