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# Canadian Rural Churches

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A high percentage of the Christian churches in Canada are found in the small towns and rural areas of the country. Per the statistics of the United Church of Canada, 70% of churches are rural and small town.

There is great variety in rural areas in Canada: climate, geography, landforms, natural resources, and history have shaped rural life. Rural communities provide their inhabitants a wide variety of professions: farming many different products, ranching, fishing, logging, mining, and tourism. Even the definitions vary widely, as we shall see.

Canada uses the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development definition for “rural,” which designates for rural communities a population density maximum of 150 people per square kilometer. However, there are areas which do not nearly approach that population. Thus, Robin Haensel has coined the definition of “sparsely populated areas” which contain less than 1 person per square kilometer, and has no community larger than 5000 within 30 kilometers.<sup>1</sup>

Though there is such a variety of rural communities, I will use my small prairie community as a sample of Canadian rural life. I live in one of these sparsely populated areas in southwest Saskatchewan, Abbey, which is a village of 100 people (in Saskatchewan a village has a population of 100 or more). To the east lies Swift Current, a city of 17,000, an hour’s drive or 92 km away. Getting there, I would pass Cabri, with a population of 413, and Pennant, with a population of 134. To the west, Leader has 860 people, and beyond that, at 2½ hours (or 222 km) is Medicine Hat, Alberta (pop. 63,000).

Ours is a village based on farming. Here on the prairies farmers grow wheat, flax, rye, barley, soybeans and lentils, canary and mustard seed, while on the hills of rough native prairie vegetation there are herds of beef cattle.

In our village there is only one church, a United Church. I served in this two-point charge for thirteen years until I went to Korea to serve as ecumenical partner. Returning, I retired in Abbey and take turns with others in the Worship Circle leading

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1. Robin Haensel, “To the Regions Beyond: Spiritual-Care in Under-Served Areas,” online lecture series on “Signs of Life in the Local Church,” by the Diocese of Qu’Appelle, Archdiocese of Regina, Saskatchewan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (July 6, 2021).

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services in area United Churches. In the next community, Cabri, there was an Anglican church until 1978, a Full Gospel Church until 2017, and a Lutheran Church until 2020. There is an active Roman Catholic Church and the United Church. Outside Abbey there are two Hutterite colonies, both of which are self-contained living and worshiping communities.

Our village just celebrated its 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary and held a homecoming celebration. The exterior of our church building had become very shabby, so a project was spear-headed by some community members (not active church members!) to paint it. In their proposal to carry this out, the couple involved said that in the village there was a “strong community spirit” of the local residents. Built in 1918, the church is a cornerstone of this enduring spirit. What a wonderful gift from the community! How wonderful to know that our neighbors hold the church in such regard! What a celebration we had at the Homecoming worship held at the end of the weekend!

In 1851 the national population of Canada was 85% rural; by 2011, it had decreased to 20%. The most rural provinces are the Maritimes on the East Coast. On Prince Edward Island 53% of the population lived in rural communities (2011 Census) while in Ontario it was only 14%, and in Saskatchewan, one of the western prairies, it is 32%. Abbey itself fell from a population of 259 in 1976 to today’s 100.

A Roman Catholic colleague tells me, “In the Archdiocese of Regina, that is, all Southern Saskatchewan, the number of Roman Catholic Churches (parishes) in the rural communities made up roughly 90% of the diocese. Many of those parishes

were very small and attached to larger centers. Almost every rural community had a Roman Catholic Church and there were many Catholic churches scattered throughout the countryside. Now, of course, many of those churches are gone, and many more are on the verge of closing.” This is also true of other denominations.

The depopulation of our rural areas is evident, and a cause for anxiety and even despair for many in the churches, at the coffee rows, among the school boards, and in the municipal government offices. The economic situation for many farmers is dire.

Thomas F. Pawlick angrily discusses this issue from his home in Ontario, but what he says is relevant across the country:

As years went on, large producers became ever larger and ever fewer. The effect in Hastings County [Ontario] was dramatic. According to the Census of Agriculture, the area’s 1931 population of 4,840 famers dropped to 2,603 by 1961, and stood at a mere 1,190 by 2001, a drop of more than 75%.<sup>2</sup>

Hundreds, even thousands of families [were] put out of business, not to increase production, but to constantly lower the price corporations have to pay their suppliers—and thus increase corporate profits.<sup>3</sup>

Roger Epp offers a critique of corporate farming and its consequences for rural lands and peoples:

What is it that people don’t know? They don’t know that a perverted system, conceived and implemented by power elites with minimal democratic process, has captured those government departments charged with supervising the countryside, turning them into little more than an enforcement arm whose practical function is to create conditions that tend to wipe out: a) the family farm, b) rural small businesses, c) the culture and vitality of rural small towns, and d) the security and autonomy of all rural landowners...

The goal seems to be simple and brutal: to clear most rural lands of their inhabitants (save for a few suburban, transplanted enclaves), to raze whatever is left of our centuries-old rural cultures, including those of indigenous or First Nations peoples, and zone the resulting vacuum as Industrial, turning it over to.... mining companies, or here and there to recreational real estate developers.

The goal appears to be to weaken or eliminate the very basis of democracy at its roots; that is to say, at the level of local municipal government, where voters have traditionally had the greatest direct influence on and control over their communities. In Canada, as Roger

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Epp, professor of political studies at the University of Alberta’s Augustana campus in Camrose, Alberta, notes, federal and provincial governments “have eroded municipal decision-making authority over intensive-livestock or confined feeding operations, in order to ensure that neither local objectors nor upstart councils can stop ‘science-based’ developments or harm provincial reputations as safe havens for agri-business investment.”<sup>4</sup>

Rural people are viewed as simply “in the way,” Epp writes, adding that “from the perspective of governments and outside investors, the countryside is no longer understood in terms of rooted human settlement and livelihood. Rather, it is coming to serve two very different purposes. The prettiest places become upscale playgrounds: tourist resorts, golf courses, parks, or weekend property with a view of the mountains. The rest—out of sight, out of mind—are envisioned as either resource plantations or dumping grounds. They are ‘empty.’”

Our area is being depopulated, as farm families have left the area or children leave after high school graduation. Older people need to leave this village for access to health care. Our school closed in 2010 and our children are being bused to neighboring Cabri. With the school closed, our grocery store could not continue operating, so we must drive to Cabri or farther to buy bread and milk. Farms are becoming large corporations, and farmers must buy into the mechanical, chemical complex of agribusiness.

One of my colleagues, a Roman Catholic priest, talks about

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2. Thomas F. Pawlick, *The War in the Country* (Greystone Books, 2009), 82.

3. Pawlick, *The War in the Country*, 84.

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4. Roger Epp, *Beyond Our Own Backyards: Factory Farming and the Political Economy of Extraction* (Saskatoon: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, 2003), 20-21.

where he was born and began ministry in rural Saskatchewan, and later returned to the same area to minister again: “The community [where I was born] was small—about 250 people—but had a much larger rural population as every half- to three-quarters section (320 to 480 acres) was occupied by a farm family... In August 2022 I returned to ministry in rural Saskatchewan. ... Depopulation and its consequences blew me away. Where there had been 10 to 20 farm families living, there was now one farming operation.”

Our little village, by contrast, has unexpectedly been growing lately. Much of the growth is a result of retirees. The high cost of housing in urban areas has meant that many people are moving to rural areas where they can purchase a house. Covid-19 has also meant that people are able to work remotely, which enables movement from urban areas. At the same time, “the overall share of new immigrants who are settling in Canada’s largest cities is declining. ... About four percent chose to make their homes in smaller urban areas, and three percent chose rural areas instead. ... In areas that haven’t necessarily seen much diversity, they’re definitely seeing more in the last year, so that’s a key trend—a move out of the big cities.”<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, parts of the rural countryside, like southern Ontario, have long depended heavily on annual migrant workers. But, as this article intimates, in many villages immigrants are found running grocery stores or motels, immigrant doctors are serving in health centers, ministers from other countries are applying to serve in churches.

For six seasons from 2007 to 2012, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation produced a sitcom called “Little Mosque on the Prairies,” created by Zarqa Nawaz, the story of a Muslim community renting worship space in an Anglican church in a little Saskatchewan town. It was a delight to see this picture of inter-faith cooperation and attempts of communities to understand each other’s gifts and diversity in this way.

Our rural municipality is part of an Economic Development Partnerships with two adjoining municipalities to “promote the region for investment, tourism and resident attraction,” reports Jenn Prentice-Biensch, who works for our village as Economic Development Officer. She continues saying “to date, our website [of the Economic Development Partnership] has been accessed by over 1800 visitors from countries all over the world including Brazil, India, Mexico ... and various countries in Europe and Africa. We have attended a Career fair for newcomers and ... for connecting new residents, employees, and employers and more!”

This is certainly an opportunity for church communities to reach out to new people. It is, however, challenging as our village population and church membership was stable for so long that we have lost much of our talent for evangelism and reaching out.

At the same time, it is interesting to see the number of young people who *do* return to farm with their parents. Although the population of the rural municipality has gone down drastically

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(in 1976 the population was 573; in 2021 it was 378) there are at least 30 families of the next generation (fourth or fifth generation in the area) who have adapted to new farming methods. These are “children” I baptized or led at Vacation Bible School when I was minister here, and now many have children of their own. It often grates that so many in graduating classes in the neighboring school at Cabri are *our* children. At least there will be a daycare center starting in our community center next year. The community center used to be our school building until it closed, and by the vision of the community members, was reopened as a community center.

Sadly, for the church community, these parents are more dedicated to children’s sports and activities than church. Hockey and dance lessons are no longer housed in our community, and families travel quite a distance for their children to participate where the numbers are greater. That was another loss when the school moved out of our village. The church used to have afterschool programs, but now the buses drop the children at home.

In June 2022, *Broadview* ran an article called, “Precarious and Part Time, The United Church is changing its model for ministry—for better and for worse.” The author reported: “Fifty-four percent of church vacancies are part time, and it’s a growing trend.”<sup>6</sup> Actually, many rural communities of faith have given up the idea of calling a minister—even part-time is too expensive.

In the Living Skies Region of the United Church (Saskatchewan) 90 out of 152 communities of faith are without paid accountable ministers. So rural areas are being served by licensed lay worship leaders and pulpit supply to a great extent. Janet Marshall, director of congregational development for the Anglican Diocese of Toronto, calls this a “liminal time of

5. Sanam Islam, “Religions on the Rise,” *Broadview* (June 2023): 27.

6. Christopher White, “The United Church is changing its model of ministry — for better or for worse,” *Broadview* (May 26, 2022): <https://broadview.org/united-church-part-time-ministry/>

ongoing uncertainty” and “sees the church of the future as having a smaller footprint and working together across denominational boundaries.”<sup>7</sup>

Such questions and exploration have always gone on in rural areas to bring life in diverse circumstances.

In 1988, through the [Presbyterian] Presbytery of Kamloops, a survey was done by the Revs. David Webber and Robert Garvin to look at the needs and viability for ministry in the Cariboo–Chilcotin region. Both ministers had had a vision to see rural and remote people reached with the gospel of Christ and to have the opportunity to worship in their communities.

After the survey was done, David and Robert presented the vision to reach out to these people with a model of house churches. Others took hold of the vision. The Presbytery of Kamloops and then the Synod of British Columbia supported the vision. . . Through the gifts of the people and the churches of British Columbia, David and Linda Webber were able to move to Lac La Hache and establish the first house church in their own home. They spent many hours driving through the back roads of the Cariboo–Chilcotin meeting people and seeking out interest for the building of the church in the area.

Five years later, there were seven established house churches meeting throughout the week with more ready to begin. During those early years a body of elders (the Session) was built up. Initially, the elders were ‘borrowed’ from other congregations. Then as the ministry grew, elders were chosen from within the new congregation.”<sup>8</sup>

At the other side of the country, there are other creative ideas to enliven rural ministry. In Atlantic Canada a group has gathered around the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Catherine Smith, a retired minister from New Brunswick. Smith initiated Rural Routes through The Holy in 2019; Dr. Marvin Lee Anderson has been our main presenter, consultant, and Rural Café facilitator at each of our three annual gatherings. Anderson is a rural specialist who has taught rural ministry at numerous theological schools including Emmanuel College and the Atlantic School of Theology.

This event was promoted through various media, both old and new, namely, social media, websites, podcasts, specialized postcards, email networks, their own Internet radio station (RuralAtlantic on Mixlr), and even internationally on shortwave radio (WRMI Miami, Florida). Anderson uses the format of “Rural Café,” which allows small groups to discuss issues together. The leader of each table group takes notes and then reports ideas/comments to the plenary gathering later. This type of exchange is reminiscent of CBC’s “National Farm Radio Forum” that was

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7. White, “The United Church is changing its model of ministry—for better or for worse.”

8. Website of Cariboo Presbyterian Church, Nazko, British Columbia, now called Cariboo House Churches.

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broadcast from 1941 to 1965.

The use of podcasts has also been effective, especially during the Covid-19 crisis. Podcast topics include multi-point worship via the Internet, online lay worship leader training, and online worship resources for rural and under-served communities of faith. Moreover, Smith has developed a program called “Table Church,” which provides resources for small faith community gatherings outside of the church building. Much of the work here is coordinated with the United Church Rural Ministry Network.

The United Church of Canada Rural Ministry Network was established in 2020 to bring together rural congregations to “share the successes, the opportunities, and the culture of the Whole People of God of the Rural Church, throughout rural Canada, specifically in the United Church of Canada with an awareness we will connect with ecumenical partners who share rural communities with us. It is a goal to reach all rural communities of faith, whether ‘lay-led’ or with resident order of ministry folk.”<sup>9</sup> One of the topics people want to talk about across the denominations and across the country is collaboration with neighboring communities of faith to seek new ways to work for the Gospel, the strengthening of communities, and support of Christians.

As I went through the records preparing for the anniversary service of our village, I was very intrigued to read that for many years ministers only stayed for one year; for quite a long period there were only summer students or missionaries who came to lead for a part of the year. I am interested to know how the congregation kept itself, how they shared leadership of weekly worship and teaching, and thrived as a community of faith without “a minister.”

I explored whether in the record of Master of Divinity theses there was anything about congregations that had been served by summer students but found nothing. There are, however, memories written down by the summer students themselves. Cliff Elliott from the United Church Observer reported visiting that area in later years.

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9. United Church Rural Ministry Network, <https://ucrmn.ca/>

Nowhere was there any service of worship being held. It could have been utterly depressing. But I remembered some of the good things that had happened to me while I was there. Green and untested, I had met people from southern Saskatchewan who had lost virtually all they had in the cruel drought of the '30s and had come north to clear land and build homes and raise families in that strange and forbidding place. That was faith. ... I had experienced the hospitality of people who shared generously of their limited food and lodging. And as I spent long hours walking between homesteads, I had learned to think and pray.”<sup>10</sup>

Theological colleges are now exploring ways to provide education to today's rural areas. Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, and Saskatoon Theological Union are ecumenical schools working to enliven rural ministries. Through the years there have been many ways of educating rural people. Joyce Sasse, preparing to receive an Honorary Doctorate from St. Andrew's College in 2021, reflected on “finding ways the church could work in partnership with the residents of rural communities to help build and maintain spiritually healthy congregants and communities.” She celebrates a number of initiatives:

By 1909, one of the earliest key initiatives of Dr. Walter Murray [founding President, University of Saskatchewan] was to develop a University of Saskatchewan Extension Outreach program that would reach people throughout the province.

In Nova Scotia during the Twenties, when social and economic conditions were desperate, the Antigonish Movement came to life under the dedicated leadership of Moses Coady. It laid the groundwork for the Co-operative and Credit Union Movements and became the training ground for faith-filled rural community leaders like R. Alex Sim. ... Dr. Bill Ramp's overview of Agrarian Activist Traditions and Rural Ministry was presented at a Queen's Theological College Symposium on Rural Ministry in 2004. Within a short time this bi-annual event became known as the R. Alex Sim Rural Ministry Symposium.”<sup>11</sup>

The Alex Sim Rural Ministry Symposium was held for many years with an ecumenical steering committee organizing speakers and venues.

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10. Clifford A.S. Elliott, *Apples of God to Gladden the Heart: Selected Writings* (Toronto: Clifford A.S. Elliott, 2000), 80.

11. Joyce Sasse, “Gleanings from a Prairie Pastor,” Centre for Rural Community Leadership and Ministry, 23. <https://www.circle-m.ca/gleanings-from-a-prairie-pastor---by-joyce-sasse>. Alex Sim was born in Saskatchewan in 1911 and grew up in rural Ontario. He was involved in the founding of the New Canada Movement in the 1930s, rural Folk Schools, and the National Farm Radio Forum. He has worked with the Rural Learning Association to foster a regeneration of rural community.

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We pray for many rural communities across the country that are in great stress. There has been drought across much of the country. Drought has resulted in crop failure, and also wildfire. Many communities across the north and in British Columbia and Nova Scotia have been evacuated because of wildfires. Churches communities are important supports for their wider communities during such times of need.

Even in the midst of difficult times, those of us in rural ministries rejoice in our awareness of community and the presence of God in the beauties of the world. Joyce Sasse states:

My studies in the Rural Church Movement have led me to believe the following values are held in common by rural people around the world. Awareness of the Presence of God: Creation is recognized as a gift from God by those who feel they work as co-partners with God. This is so integral to their lives, “God-talk” for many grassroots people does not need to be verbalized. It is as if one is connected to the Creation by an umbilical cord.<sup>12</sup>

We pray: “God, you show your care for the land by sending rain, you make it rich and fertile. You fill the streams with water; you provide the earth with crops. You send abundant rain on the ploughed fields and soak them with water; you soften the soil with showers and cause the young plants to grow. What a rich harvest your goodness provides! Wherever you go there is plenty. The pastures are filled with flocks, the hillsides are full of joy. The fields are covered with sheep, the valleys are full of wheat. Everything shouts and sings for joy” (Psalm 65:9-13).

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12. Sasse, “Gleanings from a Prairie Pastor,” 15.