

Flourishing: Rural Communities and Land in Global Perspective



Introduction to This Issue

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We, the members of the International Rural Churches Association (IRCA), and other organizations nationally and globally that advocate for congregations and communities engaged in God's mission and ministry in small town and rural (STaR) contexts, are grateful that you are delving into this issue. I am the outgoing chair of the IRCA, having been elected at Lincoln, New Zealand, in 2018 and serving an extended term due to Covid-19 that culminated in the quadrennial (become quintennial) meeting of the organization in Dubuque, Iowa, in 2023. Since 1989, I have served and advocated for STaR congregations and their communities. Since 1995, in varying capacities, I have taught the sociology of STaR contexts and particular skills needed to serve faithfully and effectively in ministry in such contexts. Since 2015, I have had the privilege of serving on faculty at Wartburg Theological Seminary where I teach STaR ministry. I have travelled extensively internationally and engaged with STaR congregations in many parts of the world. My origins are not in the STaR context. I am urban born. But in my thirty-five years of ministry experience, I have grown to understand and deeply appreciate the significance of STaR

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The title of this issue, *Flourishing: Rural Communities and Land in Global Perspective*, reflects the theme of IRCA's quadrennial gathering in 2023, "Flourishing: Land, People, Community." The word *flourishing* was chosen with intention both as encouragement to seek out and celebrate rural realities that are flourishing, but also as aspirational to encourage work toward God's intent for the flourishing of all God's land and people. This issue includes a collection of articles that give a snapshot of the state of rural and small-town contexts globally. Let me provide some broader lenses through which to engage the material in this issue.

From a geographical viewpoint, the world is predominately rural. Seventy-one percent of the earth's surface is water and 29% is land. Of that land, approximately 71% is habitable for humans.

Prior to 2007, as projected by the United Nations, a majority of the world's population lived in non-urban settings. It was less than two decades ago that the global population shifted from majority rural to majority urban. Depending on how "urban area" is defined, which varies from country to country, urban areas occupy just 1 to 3% of the world's habitable land. By extrapolation, at least 97% of the world's habitable land is non-urban, or what many call rural, typically small-sized communities or very low-density populations spread across the landscape outside of the urban areas. It is important to note that 50% of the world's habitable land is used for food production.¹ Much the same can be said of the United States. 97% of the United States' land mass is non-urban, but just 19.3% of the population lives in rural areas.² The population shift from majority rural to majority urban in the U.S. was first noted in the 1920 census. Roughly 52% of the rural land mass of the U.S. is used for agricultural production. So, from a geographic perspective, our world and our nation are predominantly rural. From a population perspective, our world and our nation are predominately urban. In terms of feeding the global population, urban and rural, the rural context is vital.

How one defines *rural* is important and sometimes problematic. As described above, there is a fundamental dichotomy between rural and urban. It should be noted that, with a census approach, *rural* is not actually defined. *Urban* is defined and what is leftover, by default, is *rural*. But where to draw the urban line from a census perspective is often a matter of debate. In the U.S. since the 1910 census, an urban area was defined, in part, as having a population of at least 2,500 people. With the 2020 census, that number was doubled to 5000.³ Of course, many people living in larger urban areas looking at a community of 2500, or even 5000, would consider that rural or perhaps "small town," which is not a census designation (I will address this below), but certainly not urban.

When we look at the question of what is urban from a global viewpoint, the question becomes even more complex. For example, Sweden defines urban as "built up places with 200 inhabitants or more and where houses are at most 200 meters apart." India's definition is a place with "1) 5000 inhabitants or more; 2) at least 75% of the male working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and 3) at least 400 inhabitants per square kilometer." A final example from Zimbabwe: "Places officially designated as urban as well as places with 2500 inhabitants or more whose population resides in a compact settlement pattern and where more than 50% of the employed persons are engaged in non-

agricultural occupations."⁴ There are broad variations in census definitions of urban as documented by the United Nations. It is noteworthy that a frequent component is the inclusion of the percentage of non-agricultural occupations as a defining factor.

As alluded to above, there is a tendency for those living in large urban areas to look beyond the boundaries of that urban space and describe what is beyond as rural in an unnuanced way. That is reinforced by a census approach to defining community context. The U.S. Census Bureau does nuance the definitions of communities going upward from the urban baseline of 5000. For example, a community of 50,000 or more is designated as metropolitan. A community of between 10,000 and 49,999 is designated as micropolitan. A county that has some or all of a metropolitan community within its borders is called a metropolitan county or metro-county. Counties that do not contain some or all of a metropolitan community are designated non-metro counties, or by default rural counties. Non-metro counties of the U.S. constitute 72% of the nation's land.⁵ Those of us within the "rural context" take a more nuanced approach to describing ourselves. We make distinctions between country/rural, townships, towns, and cities amid the projected designation of rural.

When I began my ordained service in 1989, I served two small congregations. One was in the countryside surrounded by corn and soybean fields. They understood themselves as rural. The other congregation was situated in a community of 100 population. The people who attended from that community understood themselves as townspeople. Those who attended from outside that 100-member community understood themselves as rural people. And together we were a small town and rural congregation. You have noticed my use of the descriptor *small town and rural* with the acronym STaR instead of just rural. This acronym was coined by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in the late 1990s in part to honor the distinctions made within "non-urban" contexts. Other mainline denominations have also sought to honor these distinctions often using the phrase Town and Country to do so. I currently live in a community of just over 1200 people in northeastern Iowa. This community does not qualify as urban even under the previous definition of the U.S. Census Bureau. Yet, this community is the seat of county government. There is a kindergarten through twelfth grade school that serves a large geographic area and a small regional hospital. Its importance far outweighs its size. Looking from the outside in, one perhaps projects a null identity—non-urban, non-metro. But viewed from the inside out, it is a vital place in the county and region.

1. Based on data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

2. "America Counts Staff. What is Rural America?" Washington, D.C., U.S. Census Bureau. August 9, 2017, revised October 8, 2021. Accessed June 1, 2024. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2017/08/rural-america.html>.

3. "Urban and Rural." Washington, D.C., U.S. Census Bureau. September 26, 2023. Accessed June 1, 2024. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html>.

4. Hannah Richie, Veronika Samborska, and Max Roser. "Urbanization." OurWorldInData.org. September 2018, revised February 2024. Accessed June 2, 2024. <https://ourworldindata.org/urbanization>.

5. Defining rural areas: "Non-metro" is based on counties. U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service. February 29, 2024. Accessed June 2, 2024. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail?chartId=58274#:~:text=Nonmetro%20counties%20include%20some%20combination,ERS%20Links>.

Another lens by which to understand STaR contexts, is to view them through the primary economic foundations of their communities. These economic endeavors are often based on the extraction and export of natural resources that produce things that all society either needs or desires. There is a statement that has taken on something of a proverbial nature: rural America provides food and fiber for society. In recent years, fuel has been added to the list. As stated on the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Development website, "Rural America is important to our nation. Its communities are innovative and resilient. And, rural America has an abundance of natural resources that help ensure our country has the food, fiber, and fuel it needs to power our economy."

There are five economic endeavors particularly prevalent in STaR contexts. They are farming, ranching, fisheries, timbering, and mining (which includes wind and solar generation as the newer expressions of fuel production). The first three are centered on food production, which harkens back to the earlier observation that 50% of the world's habitable land and 52% of the U.S. land mass is dedicated to food production. Many people in STaR contexts involved in these industries see their place and their vocation as vital to the whole of society. At the same time much of the rest of society tends to overlook or diminish the significance of those contexts. As the Anglican Old Testament scholar and ethicist Christopher J. H. Wright states in his book *God's People in God's Land*:

All that we can count as material goods originates from what grows on, feeds on, or is dug out of the soil of our planet. Even in our modern industrial and highly technological world, we depend on the efficient use of well-maintained farmland to keep us fed and clothed while we go about our creation and consumption of wealth in other ways many steps removed from direct contact with the land.⁶

Sometimes we are unaware and unsympathetic to the work others are doing on our behalf in STaR contexts. As I assert in my book, *Everyone Must Eat: Food, Sustainability, and Ministry*, if for no other reason than the primal necessity of food production and consumption, the so-called rural-urban divide can and should be bridged.

A final lens worth noting is a biblical-theological one. If you are reading this journal, you are a theologian in some form so I will not belabor the point. But contend that God cares about what happens in STaR contexts globally, not just generally in the sense that God cares for all that God has made, but with some particularity to the context. Deep within the codes of the Pentateuch are specific admonitions regarding how the relationship between land and people should be managed for the sake of the flourishing of all, such as Leviticus 19:9-10: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your

field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God." Another text is Deuteronomy 20:19: "If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?"

These admonitions are very specific to the production and consumption of food and the STaR context. The prophets, especially the eighth century BCE prophets—Isaiah, Amos, and Micah—are called upon to confront the wealthy and powerful in the urban settings of their time regarding their abuses of those tending the land beyond the urban center. To point, Isaiah 5:8-10:

Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing: Surely many houses shall be desolate, large and beautiful houses, without inhabitant. For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah.

It is significant that God declares even the productivity of the land will be impacted when land ownership consolidation and displacement of people from the land takes place. Another example from the prophet Micah 2:1-3: "Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people, and their inheritance." Justice for the land and those tending it have long been of God's concern.

Jesus was born of a STaR context. The context provided much of the imagery for his teaching parables. And the metrics Jesus applied were not focused on size and number. The metrics of the gospel are grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness, which can be fruitful and vital in any size community. God cares about STaR communities and congregations globally.

Ann Fritschel contributes a Bible study on Isaiah 35 that explores the meaning of flourishing in the Hebrew Bible, and within the literary and socio-political contexts of the Book of Isaiah. The Babylonian Exile was a time of intense theological questioning. Isaiah 35:1-10 provides a vision to move from acclimation to present into God's glorious future. There is hope despite our present reality, grounded in God's being, action, and promises. The people of God move forward into an uncertain future, knowing God is with them on their journey into the future, as those called to bear witness to and to participate in God's transformation of community and creation.

Gil Waldkoenig creatively introduces readers to the realm of and research on soundscapes. Soundscapes are the aural environments around us. Human noise increasingly mars natural soundscapes and inhibits listening. The biblical and Reformation

6. Christopher J. H. Wright, *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land, and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 3.

teaching that faith comes through hearing confronts the contemporary challenge and invites us to perceive that the gospel of Jesus Christ echoes in and with God's good creation.

Heather Major argues that rural churches are ideally placed to engage in rich, embodied, and incarnational ministry and mission within their local communities. The author uses stories from her research experiences to illustrate the challenges and opportunities facing rural churches, inviting people to reflect on their own contexts. The article concludes with a series of recommendations, based in the experience of Scottish churches, that may be adapted by other rural churches as they explore the messiness of partnering with God in holistic, embodied, and contextual rural ministry and mission.

Bishop Prasada Rao provides an overview of the history, colonization, class struggle, and caste system Southern Asia and Eastern Asia, with special attention to India. The author discusses Christian missions to Indian subcontinent and the significance of the church unification movements, leading to the formation of the Church of South India and the Church of North India. Indian Christian theologians have made remarkable efforts to understand religious plurality and social justice. The churches continue to face both challenges and opportunities.

Dan and Kerry Wiens analyze the multifaceted challenges facing many farmers across Africa. The article relates the experiences of the authors in providing wholistic "Farming God's Way" training for small scale farmers in Ethiopia. The instruction is based on Inundo Development model farm in South Africa that serves as a resource for all those seeking training in sustainable, Christ-centered methods of agriculture.

Catherine Christie reflects on trends and challenges facing rural communities and churches in Canada. Writing from the perspective of a small prairie community in southwest Saskatchewan, the author introduces major themes: declining population, corporate farming, and migration patterns. Rural churches are adapting in creative ways to these circumstances through both local initiatives to build faith community and across the Internet.

Robyn McPhail and **Kim Hee June** provide regional information about the state of rural churches in Oceania and South Korea. Topics include rural chaplaincy in Aotearoa New Zealand, connecting scattered communities in Saltbush, promoting democratic practices in Fiji, advocating for change in the Pacific, and revitalizing ministry for a declining population in South Korea. Building church community at a distance through digital ministry is an encouraging development.

The work of four organizations supporting the ministry of the church in small town and rural communities in the United States is summarized in another article. **Dave Ruesink** reports on The Rural Church Network and Rural Social Science Education. **Roger Grace** introduces the Rural Chaplains Association and **Randy L. Wall** provides insights on ministry in rural communities from the United Methodist Rural Advocates.

We have two **Currents Focus** articles in this issue. **Victor I. Vieth** examines how Lutheran Study Bibles published by the ELCA, LCMS and WELS address the sexual assaults of Dinah and Tamar, Lot's decision to offer his daughters to be raped, the sexual exploitation of Bathsheba, and other accounts of trauma. Applying a commonly accepted definition of "trauma-informed," the author shows the need for writers and publishers of Lutheran Study Bibles to develop a deeper understanding of trauma and to write more sensitively on topics that can be triggering to readers who have experienced sexual assault. Unless seminaries develop trauma-informed theologians, clergy and Bible scholars will continue to misunderstand and wrongly apply God's word to those who have endured and those who have inflicted trauma.

Abram Kielsmeier-Jones addresses child liberation theology, interacting with R.L. Stollar's *The Kingdom of Children: A Liberation Theology* and drawing from an interview with Stollar. The article begins with a summary of child liberation theology, with its urgent call to action in a world where "children are burning." The author then explores crucial aspects of enacting child liberation theology: identifying microaggressions toward children, reading the Bible with actual children, seeing Jesus as a child, advancing child protection, reading Jesus' liberation of children, educating oneself for liberation, ensuring that adults practice "guided partnership" with children, and not growing weary in advocating for children's well-being.

While writers for **Preaching Helps** don't deal directly with rural concerns, several of the lectionary texts deal with food and feeding. This is the year when five summer Sundays are devoted to bread—barley loaves from a boy's lunch feeding thousands and Jesus to be the "Bread of Life" in language that is both life-giving and confusing to his disciples (and to us). Even as we focus on bread, we are painfully aware of those who have no bread including Palestinian people in war-ravaged Gaza. The introduction to **Preaching Helps** presses the question: Can anything interrupt holy war?

Rural places can often be overwhelming and isolating but sharing our stories with each other and the wider world can make a difference. There are people involved in rural ministry and mission across continents and countries; it is a joy to see these articles from different contexts. It is important to take steps to raise the profile of people and organizations that are supporting rural churches and communities. As you read and reflect on the stories shared in these pages, I encourage you to look for opportunities to listen to the stories of people in rural places. The IRCA is making plans for another international conference in 2026 and an online prayer event inviting people to share about what is happening in their local contexts. You would be welcome to join us.

Mark Yackel-Juleen, Issue Co-Editor

Heather Major, Issue Co-Editor

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