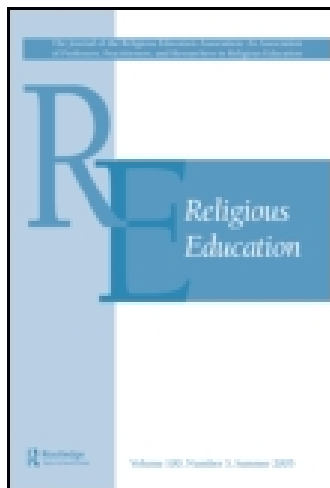


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Publisher: Routledge

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Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/urea20>

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Published online: 10 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: Orlo J. Price Ph. D. (1912) THE COUNTRY CHURCH, Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association, 7:5, 526-533, DOI: [10.1080/0034408120070512](https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408120070512)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0034408120070512>

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THE COUNTRY CHURCH.

CO-OPERATION FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP BETWEEN THE VILLAGE AND THE COUNTRY CHURCH.

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It is slowly but certainly coming to pass under the eyes of us all that country life and city life are not two wholly different kinds of social existence. Agriculture, that fundamental art of all the arts, which for so long was not dignified with a place among the arts at all, is fast falling under the sway of that wonder-worker, the man of science. The agriculturist instead of being the peasant, serf, "farmer," who, ignorant and unskilled, cannot live in the city with cultured men but must dig the earth, now takes his place alongside the engineer, the manufacturer and the professional man. For his work and his career rise or fall by the application of scientific methods to the use of soils, the breeding of plants and animals, the building of highways and the use of mechanical devices to save and intensify labor.

The habit of mind which characterizes the modern urbanite is not foreign to the modern farmer. Both know the value of the expert, both worship at the shrine of the microscope and the test-tube, and both reverence law more than they do miracle. Both are in touch with the world through the telephone, the daily press and the lyceum platform. The bicycle, the on-coming motor-car and the good roads movement are bridging the gulf which distance from the centers of population always created.

Before answering the question whether or no effective co-operation is possible between the country and the city church, a glance to discover what measure of co-operation already exists between city and country in economic, industrial and social lines may not be out of place. From the beginning the city has been the market place, although the manner of exchange of produce for wares, could hardly be called co-operation in the modern sense. In affairs of government there is real working together for common ends. The grange and other social organizations are sometimes instrumental in bringing about co-operative activities. However, let it be noted that the mod-

ern movement for rural welfare has little to say about co-operation between city and country. Its aim is rather to socialize the farmer along his own lines—to teach him co-operative dairying, fruit growing, storing, buying, selling, transporting, banking and schooling.

There are, however, notable cases of the city taking direct interest in, and seeking to develop the rural districts; a good example is the work of the Chamber of Commerce, of Binghamton, New York. Binghamton is a city of 45,000. The secretary of the Chamber of Commerce began with a study of methods and systems of management employed by successful farmers in the community. A good demonstration farm was secured and experiments were started under the secretary's direction on many farms. The problem of pastures was grappled with, and by the aid of the government, the various methods of treating pastures was thoroughly tested out. A cow testing association was organized; demonstrations in the care of orchards were systematically carried on. Corn clubs among the boys and girls were started. The rural schools were advised in their work and the teachers were assisted, wherever possible, in organizing the farmers in small clubs for the discussion of agricultural problems. The effort was made to co-operate with school authorities in having agriculture taught in the schools. Farmers were persuaded to join the Chamber of Commerce and thus assist in solving problems in the rural community.

Recently the writer sent out to some thirty more or less successful country or village pastors in Michigan a questionnaire, asking them a number of things regarding their work. The distinct trend of the replies was that the country church was a real problem and that the city and country church should co-operate; that now the city was getting the best blood from the country and giving nothing in return, and yet as to how this co-operation could be brought about none seemed able to say. It was their general conviction that one man should not attempt to be the pastor of a country and city church, the demands are too great. They did not find that laymen are as a rule acceptable as country supplies and yet the question of financing the country church appeared as a most difficult one. Most of the men who replied agreed that a change of method in country work was needed and that the church must become a social-center and must minister to the whole man in the rural community.

The facts concerning the present day condition of the country church have been pretty well studied and widely exploited. At best they are anything but hopeful. There are a few cases of conspicuous success which have been widely advertised, but they are not remarkable except for their rarity. I recently asked a superintendent of State Missions in Illinois to give me a list of twenty pastors who were doing good modern work. He sent me five names and remarked that none of these were doing anything striking.

The purpose of this paper is to show that in view of the conditions in our modern life the solution of the rural church problem in many communities lies in the closest co-operation for leadership between the village and the country church. There are many possible forms which this may take. I will name five typical forms.

1. The village church and pastor can take a friendly interest in the welfare of the surrounding churches of its own or other denominations, and hold itself in readiness to co-operate and assist in the work when opportunity offers. When the pastorate is vacant a supply can be sent, either some live layman, or some retired minister, or a group of young people. The country church can be invited in to attend socials and lectures, and vice-versa, the town people can go out for special rallies or social occasions to the country church and thus the two fields come into personal touch. Country and town will learn of each other's methods of work and will catch each other's ideals and points of view. More than this, as the young people of the country migrate to the city, they are not shy of the city church but find their religious home at once. This in itself would save to the church multitudes of youth now lost forever to organized Christianity. The pastors can exchange pulpits to the mutual advantage of themselves and their congregations. The use of each other's libraries, friendly discussions of their problems, would broaden both of them. Many a country pastor who is over-worked looking after several churches, may through the friendly interest of the city pastor, by advice, counsel and co-operation receive fresh impetus and encouragement for his work. It would be possible in many places for a group of these neighboring pastors to be invited in to spend the day for the purpose of discussing their problems, the newest books and for fellowship.

2. One pastor can carry on the work of two or more churches, one in the village and one or more in the country. In this case the amalgamation religiously speaking of city and country is much easier than in the first. Splendid examples of this are found everywhere. One pastor I have in mind has in less than two years practically revolutionized a prosperous farming community nine miles away from the county seat where his other charge is located. As an illustration of co-operation he took thirty men from his city Bible class out to the country community to aid in the formation of a men's Bible class which at the present time enrolls over seventy,—practically all of the men of the community. The people of these two neighborhoods are fast becoming evangelized and amalgamated. The difficulty of arranging the hours of public worship to suit both churches has often been an obstacle to the successful working out of this plan. But here comes in the need of recognizing the function of the church in the community. If the modern idea of the church, namely to minister to the whole man, social, intellectual, agricultural and economic as well as "religious" is kept in mind, it will be seen that the Sunday services are but a small part of the work. Even if the time of service cannot be set to please both communities at first, as soon as the church has shown its usefulness the people will adapt themselves to circumstances. This is not as serious a problem as it has seemed. Oftentimes one good preaching service a day is better than two; the time of the other one being occupied by some gathering of young people, social and religious.

One very interesting example of what a town pastor can do is seen in a neighboring county. The pastor goes each Sunday afternoon to preach in a country Grange hall. After several years of this work a church has been organized and now uses the hall for its meeting place. The usual order is here reversed, instead of the church taking on social features it has come to leaven a social group already formed. Another Michigan pastor writes that he has a regular preaching appointment in a Gleaners' hall. The American Unitarian Association reports a minister in Maine who has a circuit of some fifteen preaching stations in school houses, halls and private houses. Another is reported who extends his personal pastoral care into eight separate villages. He calls annually on 337 families, carries literature and tracts as well as his own personal word.

There is scarcely a community that has not a more or less adequate building where preaching of the right kind would be acceptable, but where a pastor could not be supported at present. An occasional visit of a minister with vision, breadth and sympathy would leave an inspirational message that would gradually change the community. As soon as the farmer can grasp the idea that religion means a life of service to his fellowmen and that the church is an organization for the uplift of the community throughout the week he will not consent to the dying out of his church for lack of a regular preacher.

3. A third method and one which the writer at the present time is trying out is for the city church to have an assistant pastor, one of whose duties shall be to act as pastor on one or more neighboring country fields. Nearly two years ago two village churches, one nine and the other eight miles distant, at the suggestion of a district missionary asked the city church to assume pastoral care of them. The responsibility was accepted and our assistant who up to this time had been giving his entire time to the city work, was released to spend one day a week on each of these two fields. After several months' visitation and a few services it was deemed wise to cease active work upon one of these fields on the ground that it was sufficiently covered by two other churches. Regular services were carried on in the other village and more or less regular pastoral work was done. The latter field seemed to take on new courage and hope at once and there has been a steady growth in interest and in the attendance upon the services. The people who for many years had not wished a Sunday school, of their own accord organized one and are carrying it on. The young people of the community have been brought together into a thriving chorus. Modern methods of conducting the finances are being adopted and solid foundations are being laid for future work. About one-seventh of the assistant pastor's time is given to this field. At present the church yields only about this proportion of the assistant pastor's salary besides keeping up its incidental expenses. The people are slowly grasping a new ideal of the church's place in their community, a tie is being formed between the country and the city; and the city church, too, has a sense of satisfaction in this work. It is in no way pauperizing the country church as they are paying for what they get. The work is slow but as one of my correspondents put it "country people need a time exposure." What is being done here can

be done in many cities and both communities and pastors will be broadened and enlarged by the service. Often an assistant can care for two or three such churches. It is folly to expect to secure pastors who are worth while who will live upon these fields until an amalgamation of religious forces can be effected, which in most country places is far distant. The social life of the fields thus managed can mingle, musical organizations can visit back and forth, union missionary and social gatherings and revival meetings can be held. More than this the business methods of these outlying churches and the teaching methods of the Sunday school can be molded and determined by the leaders of the city church. Thus the church ideals are kept fresh. One pastor writes that he publishes a paper for the benefit of his city and country fields to bring them into closer unity.

All this, of course, presupposes not only tact but a spirit of democracy and unselfishness on the part of the city pastor and church. It is not so necessary as has been generally supposed for a pastor to live upon a country field. Most men are too close to their work and are too much depended upon by the church for leadership in every small church enterprise. Rightly instructed, the farmer does not wait for the pastor to come and spend the day with him for he himself has a task assigned by the pastor to arrange for a neighborhood meeting to listen to an extension lecture on "seed corn." The young man does not wait to be hunted up each week. His job is to organize the young fellows for a community ball game or glee club practice. The mother has her task to get her neighbors together to talk over the last report of the National Mothers' Congress. The pastor attends some of these meetings though the people do not know when he is to appear. He is the general inspirer of those social activities which center about the church's big task of making a better community.

One weakness of the country church as of most city churches is lack of efficient organization. Writers on rural topics tell us that farmers as a rule are loath to acknowledge that they have any leaders. It is the pastor's business to discover and to train men and women who can lead others. He is to be the teacher, inspirer, and leader of leaders. He must be willing to see men try and fail and get them to try again. He is to see to it that not too much is loaded upon his own shoulders; he must be willing to see many things go undone

while he waits for the right leader to appear. This will require patience but in the long run is the most effective way.

4. The use of the laymen of the town or country church for pulpit or Sunday-school work is another method of co-operation. One Michigan pastor writes, "I have used ten different laymen effectively in this work and five of these are now pastors." The writer has had more than half a dozen laymen at one time on the list of available supplies and cared in part for five different appointments. The work has not been very satisfactory, and for the most part is possible only for a limited time unless supplemented by pastoral work. A neighboring pastor suggests that a good live layman from the city could raise three or four times as much money as his people are now giving. It would be interesting to see this actually tried out. The work of laymen as Sunday-school leaders is, in the opinion of the men questioned, far more acceptable than their work in the pulpit. "Unless," one man suggests, "you intend to do progressive work in the Sunday school." The obvious inference from this is, that where modern work is to be done, trained leaders must be had.

5. Another method which I am anxious to see undertaken and which is perhaps already in effect in some places, is for the local association of pastors in a town to undertake co-operatively the pastoral care of the surrounding country. County organizations of ministers are being formed in some places with the express purpose of seeing to it that the entire country population is reached with some gospel work. This will demand the realization of the new ideal of the federation of churches; it will pre-suppose elimination of sectarian rivalries for the possession of a given district. It will be found that some churches need to be encouraged to live and others to die. If a Chamber of Commerce can interest itself in better agriculture for the sake of a better city much more should the ministers of a given city interest themselves in the religion of the people surrounding them. The city merchant covers the road-side with his bill-boards that he may induce the farmer to come to town, the city politician canvasses the entire country-side, why should not the minister be as wise in his generation as these men?

It is easy to plan all this upon paper. The difficulties are many. Prejudice and social distinctions; jealousy between country and town; the individualism of the farmer; bad roads;

specialization of industries which rob him of his Sunday, as for instance the milk business; the tenants and the immigrant whose religious ideas are foreign to the American ideal. These are some of the obstacles in the country. On the side of the city church there is the lack of the missionary spirit; a total indifference to and ignorance of the problem; financial inability or unwillingness to do more than care for its own budget. Probably the greatest of the obstacles to effective co-operation is in the type of theology which prevails in the country. The agricultural class is conservative in theology and is fat feeding ground for faddists and bigoted sectarian leaders. In many a church ridden community the strong virile people will have nothing to do with the church because of its impractical and mediaeval teachings. A theology that will not lend itself to social service of the constructive sort, that does not prize the physical welfare of man; will avail little in the modern rural community. For this reason, if for no other, the country needs the influence of the city church. The religion that will win the wage-earner in the town gives some hope of winning the tenant class in the country.

The above named obstacles are similar to those which business and industry meets with as city and country come together. They are not insurmountable. Here as elsewhere it is chiefly the problem of the man. Given religious leaders in city or in country who are men of adequate ideals, and the element of time, and the problem is solved. Sometimes the solution will have to wait for the entire social structure to be reorganized. Economic co-operation in production and distribution, scientific management of agriculture; modern methods of education; all these may have to come before the day of efficient co-operation for religious leadership between the country and the village church can come completely.