

THE RURAL CHURCH

BY GEORGE FREDERICK WELLS,

Assistant to Executive Secretary, Federal Council of the Churches of Christ
in America.

Social organizations which maintain religious worship and thereby purpose to embody and develop the religious and moral life of communities having not more than 2,500 inhabitants, may be called country or rural churches. Churches in the open country located in the most rural of districts where there are no villages belong to this class. Such are chapel churches by the cross roads, and those in agricultural hamlets and in villages and towns which have small manufactures, high schools, the beginnings of wealth and a degree of social selection. It is becoming less true that a church must be made up of farmers in order to belong to the country church class. More and more people employed in cities are seeking country homes and the open-hearted cordiality of rural worship. On the other hand, well-to-do rural people are bringing their church life to conform to the town or urban type. Many country churches are made up exclusively of people who work in factories, mines and quarries, or who engage in commercial pursuits. In general, we may say that country churches are those in communities where rural conditions persist and dominate.

The first decade of the present century has witnessed a rapid increase of attention to the functions and problems of the country church. In all ages the evangels of religion have been the pioneers, not only of religious teachings in newly settled territories, but they have been the pioneers of organization for all forms of social work. The increase of attention to organized religion among rural people is not only a recognition of the great power and importance which the institutions of religion have attained, but it shows a deepening sense of need that we make sure that the country church shall not lose her place and leadership in the social advance of modern civilization as a whole. What are the marks of progress in the field of the country church?

I

We are approaching the time when it may be said that we have a literature on the subject of the country church. The following books have been written which, if taken together, give one a view of the present situation from the literary standpoint.

The leading book thus far upon the religious phase of the country church problem is "The Country Town," by Rev. Wilber L. Anderson (Baker & Taylor Co., New York, 1906). Kenyon L. Butterfield's "The Country Church and the Rural Problem" (University of Chicago Press, 1911) is a most helpful and inspiring treatment of important phases of the question. "The Church of the Open Country," by Warren H. Wilson, Ph.D. (Missionary Education Movement, New York, 1911) as a textbook for use in classes of young people, will prove most helpful. "The Day of the Country Church," by Rev. J. O. Ashenhurst (Funk & Wagnalls Co., New York, 1910). "Rural Christendom," by Charles Roads, D.D. (American Sunday School Union, Philadelphia, 1909), and "Institutional Work for the Country Church," by Rev. Charles E. Hayward (Free Press Association, Burlington, Vt., 1900) are the three books which come nearest to setting forth the country church problem from a distinctively church point of view. No country church book-shelf would be complete without three biographical books of rare merit. They are Professor E. S. Tipple's "Some Famous Country Parishes" (Eaton & Mains, New York, 1911), Rev. A. F. Beard's "The Story of John Frederic Oberlin" (Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1909), and the "Letters and Memories of Charles Kingsley," by Fannie E. Kingsley (J. D. Morris, Publisher, Philadelphia).

Other books which have decided value in this field are "Chapters in Rural Progress," by Kenyon L. Butterfield (University of Chicago Press, 1908); "The Rural Life Problem of the United States," by Sir Horace Plunkett (Macmillan Co., New York, 1911); "The State and the Farmer," by L. H. Bailey (Macmillan Co., New York, 1908); "Quaker Hill, A Sociological Study," by Warren H. Wilson (156 Fifth Avenue, New York, 1907); "The Country Life Movement," by L. H. Bailey (Macmillan Co., New York, 1911); "Rural Versus Urban," by John W. Bookwalter (Knickerbocker Press, New York, 1910) and "The Vision of New Clairvaux," by Edward Pearson Pressey (Sherman, French & Co., Boston, 1909).

The fourth volume of the "Cyclopedia of American Agriculture" (Macmillan Co., New York, 1909), which embodies the sociological portion of that monumental work, has not yet had its full use by those interested in promoting the interests of the country church.

The most complete country church bibliography thus far published is "Writings on Practical Country Church Problems" in the *Homiletic Review* for August, 1909 (Funk & Wagnalls Co., New York, 30c); a more recent list is "A Select Bibliography on the Country Church," (*Gospel of the Kingdom*, November, 1910, Bible House, New York, 5c). "A Selected Bibliography on the Country Church Problem," which is an annotated list of writings prepared by a committee of The New England Country Church Association (Prof. H. K. Rowe, Newton Centre, Mass.), is a third valuable help to the student of the question.

II

A beginning has been made in the application of the scientific method to the study of rural religious conditions and problems. It may be stated as a rule that the rural problem approaches solution, from one standpoint at least, only in so far as use is made of the scientific method.

In this connection, recognition must be given to the invaluable services of Rev. Henry Fairbanks, Ph.D., of Vermont, who, in 1886, made reports of first-hand investigations in his native state which surpass in value the mere house-to-house canvass and statistical reports given in denominational year books. In fact no reports of investigations thus far made are more interesting than these.¹

Samuel W. Dike, LL.D., of Massachusetts, by a series of articles published in the *Andover Review* on the religious problems of country townships did a piece of practical sociological work which has not yet been surpassed.² Rollin Lynde Hartt and President William DeWitt Hyde of Bowdoin College, by their writings and practical interest gave great encouragement to the movement toward an intelligent analysis of the causes of rural decline and the means of wholesome living in the face of deplorable odds due to the necessity of meeting new conditions.

¹Two pamphlets, "*The Needs of the Rural Districts*" and "*The Problem of the Evangelization of Vermont*," may be secured by writing to Dr. Fairbanks, at St. Johnsbury, Vt.

²See *Andover Review*, August, 1884, January, June and September, 1885, for this valuable series.

We are able to-day to report some advance upon these early New England beginnings. The Department of Economics and Sociology of the Carnegie Institution at Washington, in 1906, reported some valuable facts and conclusions from rural social studies³ The Country Life Commission appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt in the last year of his administration did work which marked an epoch in rural interest.

In 1909, an investigation was made of overlooking and overlapping among the churches of Colorado. This was one of the first of the investigations made by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America in its capacity as a central congress for the promotion of social and religious work by more than thirty leading Christian denominations.⁴

The Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, by studies made under the auspices of its Department of Church and Country Life is making a leading contribution to the scientific observation of life in the open country. Though these investigations are made under church auspices they bear the economic point of view. The Federation of Churches of Wisconsin, in 1910, reported the beginnings of one of the leading country church investigations yet to be made.⁵

III

The third mark of progress in the field of the country church is found in an increasing number of active organizations and associations, the purpose of which is to help the church to its vital place in rural community welfare. One of the first of these is the New England Country Church Association of which Professor T. N. Carver of Harvard University, is president. It holds annual gatherings for conference and free expression of opinion and conviction in regard to the best means of meeting country church problems.

The County Work Department of the Young Men's Christian Association, which has about seventy-five international, state and county secretaries employed and equipped at an annual expense of about \$350,000, is working by various means, in co-operation with the churches as far as possible, to discover, train and enlist

³ "The Country Church and Its Social Problem," in *The Outlook*, August 18, 1906.

⁴ "Co-operative Advance in Home Missions," Federal Council, 215 Fourth Ave., New York.

⁵ H. A. Miner, Madison, Wisconsin.

leadership for active social work in rural counties and districts. *Rural Manhood*, the publication of this association (124 East 28th Street, New York), is proving of great service to many rural workers.

Pennsylvania Rural Progress Association (Mrs. E. E. Powers, Pennsdale, Pa., Secretary) and the Illinois Federation of Country Life Progress (Miss Mabel Carney, Normal, Illinois, Secretary) as well as the Laymen's Christian Federation of Maine, are private associations which seek the co-operation of the churches with the schools, the Grange and other organizations in rural community building. These and other similar societies are exerting a leadership of great service in showing the possibilities of co-ordination and co-operation in which the country church should take a large part.

There are several inter-church federations of states which are co-ordinating the work of rural churches, remedying overlooking and overlapping and educating the clergy to the sociological point of view in their service. The problem of adequate support of country ministers is also being considered by some of these. The leading of these are the following:

The Massachusetts Federation of Churches, under the leadership of Rev. E. Tallamage Root (53 Mt. Vernon St., Boston Mass.) which publishes the periodical *Facts and Factors* and is making social surveys of typical rural communities. The Federation of Churches of Wisconsin of which Rev. H. A. Miner, of Madison, Wisconsin, has been the chief promoter, and the Nebraska Federation of Churches with Rev. P. F. Wigton, of Elgin, as executive secretary, are the leaders of this work in the Central West. Maine, Vermont, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, Illinois, North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, California, Washington and other states are rapidly developing their work under strong executive committees who are choosing secretaries for the promotion of their service. On a comprehensive scale the Home Missions Council and the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, are exerting force, hitherto unknown in the whole history of Missions toward the effective re-direction and stimulation of the more than 2,000 district superintendents, missionary bishops, conference secretaries, convention missionaries and 70,000 or more country pastors who are working in various

parts of the United States, all directly associated under the leadership of these inclusive movements.

The Neglected Field's Campaign of the Home Missions Council, in twelve or more states in the Home Missionary Territory of the Northwest taken by itself is an effort of infinite promise.

There are some distinctive church associations which are getting at the problem more directly. It is a decided advance when the churches as such recognize and utilize their capacity as the most effective of associations. The Department of Church and Country Life of the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church has already been mentioned. Rev. Warren H. Wilson, Ph.D., 156 Fifth Avenue, New York City, is its superintendent.

Mr. E. L. Shuey, of Dayton, Ohio, is chairman of the Committee on Country Churches of the United Brethren Conferences of his district. The Committee on the Study of the Rural Church Problem of the Pacific coast, of which Rev. A. E. King, North Yakima, Washington, is chairman; the Committee on Rural Life of the Oklahoma Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, of which Rev. B. C. Wolf, of Kildare, Oklahoma, is president; the Committee on Rural Conditions of the Baptist State Conventions of New York, of which Rev. R. A. Vose, of Owego, New York, is chairman; the Country Church Commission of Cleveland District, East Ohio Conference with Rev. N. W. Stroup, of Cleveland as president; the Committee on Rural Churches of the United Presbyterian Church, of which Henry Wallace, LL.D., of Des Moines, Iowa, is president, and Rev. J. O. Ashenhurst, of Pemberville, Ohio, is secretary, and the Bureau of Field Work in Christian Sociology of Drew Theological Seminary, of which Professor Edwin L. Earp, Ph.D., of Madison, New Jersey, is director, are among these organizations.

IV

The fourth mark of progress is indicated by the change of emphasis in recent work for country betterment. It is not considered that the greatest leader in the rural movement is the man whose secretarial position is most lofty or territory most extended. Instead, the greatest leader is the person who has laid the deepest foundation and built up the best rural life in particular parishes. The emphasis is rapidly being placed upon the local pastor, church

and geographical unit. The publication of the story of John Fred-eric Oberlin has had an excellent influence in this direction.

Articles like "A Study in Local Church Federation" in the *Methodist Review*, for July, 1910 (150 Fifth Ave., New York, 40c); "How a Country Church Found Itself" in *World's Work* for August, 1911 (Garden City, N. Y., 25c) and "Modern Methods of Church Work," by the Missionary Education Movement (156 Fifth Avenue, New York), indicate the growing prevalence of this emphasis.

The Home Missions Council has undertaken to ascertain facts concerning every rural and country neighborhood in the United States. Rural life as a whole cannot rise higher than its most needy though smallest social unit. "A Social Survey for Rural Communities," a social analysis and manual for the study of even the smallest of social units, as well as outline of possible activities for the growth and development of communities as published by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ (215 Fourth Avenue, New York) further emphasizes this wholesome tendency.

The two leading practical questions which have arisen in the country life movement as it relates to the church are, first, what is a normal program for the country church, and second, how shall an adequate working analysis of a rural or country community be made from the standpoint of the church. The latter question is answered by, "A Social Survey," which has just been mentioned. The first question is answered by the following outline. Both of these show the place from whence the movement as a whole is now anxiously looking for results. The Agricultural College, the Grange and the country school are more awake to the present rural situation than is the Home Missionary Society; the Missionary Society more active than the theological seminary; and the seminary more advanced than is the country church itself. The next ten years will see a decided reaction in behalf of a changed rural life made up of a countless number of highly developed and alive country churches and parishes.

The following program indicates the steps to be taken by the country church in its community service:

1. *Individuality*.—Every person has a religious and moral faculty. Likewise, every country community needs and should have the church. The church being the organ or faculty of the com-

munity for the spiritual life, there can be no true community life without the presence of the church and its ministries. It is the business of each community, in co-operation with the church at large, to provide the equipment to facilitate the expression and growth of the religious life of the community. This equipment is to include an energetic minister for the administration of the church, the preaching of the gospel and such leadership in community life as shall secure its highest spiritual welfare. In determining its relationship to the resources and problems of the community, the church may need the assistance of a scientific survey of its field.

2. *Service*—Churches' Work.—The country church, in common with all other churches, being an institution for realizing the moral and religious welfare and betterment of society, in the systematic exercise of its functions, provides for pastoral visitation, evangelism, temperance and other moral reforms, religious education and missions.

3. *Fellowship*—Churches Work Together.—Where country churches are related geographically to other churches in the same community, these churches in maintaining their internal integrity will mutually practice some method of inter-church unity whereby the comity, the inter-church association, the maximum service federation, or the one-minister federation will be realized, or they will, if the spiritual interests of the community need it, voluntarily proceed to form a single comprehensive church.

4. *Association*—Churches Working Together Co-operate.—Country churches in proportion to their inherent capacity to maintain a mutually helpful community relationship will be in vital and co-operative touch with the necessary social interests, movements and institutions in the community. Thus will be realized what is commonly known as the federation of rural social forces. By this means the church will inspire or promote when necessary: (a) The improvement of schools and their consolidation where needed; (b) Co-operation with the Grange and all movements looking toward better farming; (c) Needed recreations; (d) Public health and better living conditions. The fundamental social institutions thus federated will be able to eliminate the associations which unnecessarily exhaust the community resources.

5. *Substitution*—Churches Working Together Socially Substitute.—In instances where the structural and essential institutions

and agencies of a community are not fulfilling their functions, and cannot by direct personal means be stimulated to accomplish them, the church may temporarily and in behalf of needy classes, such as the marginal people, perform these functions by so-called institutional agencies.

6. *Unity of Solidarity.*—The Church is the religious and moral aspect of the whole community. We should keep to the few primary social institutions, bringing each to fulfill its function for the entire community rather than to multiply those which can serve only its unrelated parts. Every part of community life should be vitally related to every other part. The country church, when its internal, federal and community relations are normally realized and local solidarity is attained, will do its part in maintaining the vital equilibrium of all helpful community factors.

7. *Extension.*—The country church is vitally related to the church and society everywhere. In the face of needs and problems which cannot be met from local resources, the church may supplement its own strength by co-operation with non-resident forces. It is often advisable for the local church to secure the aid of specialists in the solution of difficult problems.