

# Introduction

The vast majority of people in the United States of America live in metropolitan areas, but the vast majority of the land in the United States is rural. Over half of all churches in the USA are in small towns and rural areas across the country, not in cities. Almost every pastor in the country will at some time in her career serve a small town or rural church. Rural places such as the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and the Midwest not only make up a significant portion of the U.S., but the people who live and worship there hold a particular wisdom and face unique challenges. Rural places are different and rural places matter. What happens in rural churches significantly affects the whole body of Christ, but they are largely devalued and marginalized by the metropolitan centers of power. Rural churches have been largely overlooked in pastoral care literature. This book is an attempt to bring attention to the significance of that gap and to begin to fill it. Rural churches and communities are different from the norm, uniquely particular in context, and hold a particular wisdom from which the rest of the church might benefit.

The rural context raises questions for the practice of pastoral care in those communities. What should a pastor recommend to a person in the congregation whose grief has moved into depression when the nearest mental health center or psychotherapist is three hours away? Where do a pastor and pastor's family find support and friendships when so many of the townspeople are members of his own congregation? How does a minister help a victim of domestic violence when the sheriff in this rural county is the abuser's brother, the nearest women's shelter is 100 miles away, and the abuser sings in the choir of your church? How does a pastor challenge the environmental and safety practices of the local mining company when it provides the only jobs in town and at the same time provide care for the mine's employees who are ill or injured because of those practices?

In one small community, a developer purchased some of the farmland and announced his intention to market the land to commuters who work in the city not far away. On the one hand, the subdivision will bring much-needed revenue and life to the community; on the other hand, the town may lose its sense of community as city folks move to the country. There is fierce debate over how to respond to this potential change, and emotions are running high,

ranging from excitement to fear to grief to anger. On Sunday mornings, these same people sit together in worship trying to figure out what it means to love and care for their neighbor in the midst of such conflict, in a town where everyone knows the name of every other resident. The pastor finds herself caught trying to provide care to folks who are in opposition to one another about the vision they hope for in their church and community. As a community leader, she is also being pushed to take a stand on the issue. How will this church and this community practice care for one another, the care to which Christians are called?

The situations suggested above point toward the difference it makes to be located in a small town or rural community. Pastoral care in these places is challenged by the physical isolation, lack of anonymity in the community, changing economic realities of family farming, and the expectation that small-town pastors should be active community leaders in addition to pastoral caregivers. The situations are not unique in one sense; churches in cities and metropolitan areas will struggle over similar pastoral care issues of finding resources, setting good boundaries, and caring for the sick while challenging political powers. However, while such situations arise in other areas, small towns and rural communities experience these situations in ways that are quite different from metropolitan areas, and the significance of those differences means that pastoral care requires different theoretical grounding and different practical responses in each context.

The differences also lead to unique and useful insights for pastoral care in all places. This wisdom arises in part from the need to be creative in response to physical distance from neighbor and services. It also arises from the challenge of a unique kind of closeness, social visibility, and lack of anonymity. In small towns the glaringly apparent connection between individual well-being and social systems, perhaps especially economic, means that country churches have developed certain wisdom about what it means to care for both at the same time. Rural and small-town communities have a heightened sense of community and interrelatedness; this is both a great challenge and a great gift. In living with the tension between challenge and gift, these communities have a depth of understanding about this thing called “community” that so many of us seek. They have a wisdom about the land and the relationship between care and leadership in a community of faith, and a wisdom about diversity.

### ENRICHING MINISTRIES OF CARE

Loving care for the neighbor, stranger, and for self is an essential aspect of Christian ministry. Our purpose in writing this book is to enrich that ministry

of care, not only for rural churches but for the ministry of the whole church. This text is designed to assist pastoral caregivers, whether ordained or lay, to draw from the particular wisdom about pastoral care that arises from rural and small-town contexts. We use the term *pastoral* not to suggest that someone needs to be ordained to provide care within the context of the church. Instead, the word *pastoral* points to the fact that we are talking about care offered within the context of a community of faith that has theological resources from which to draw. Pastoral care is unique among other forms of care by its location within this community of faith and its interest in faithfully seeking to live by the values, beliefs, and practices of that community.

This book will also promote a congregation's ability to provide pastoral care in any context. Care is context specific, yet practices and principles are often appropriate across contexts. We believe that the rural context offers wisdom born out of an appreciation for its people's unique gifts, as well as out of the limitations and peculiarities of what it means to be rural in the United States. We believe that this text will assist all pastoral caregivers in every context as we learn from the local knowledge and wisdom of communities in rural settings. This text is not written only for those who find themselves in a rural parish; it is written for seminary students, pastors, laypersons, and pastoral care specialists who want to reflect on pastoral care and who are open to the particular wisdom and challenges to be gained from rural communities. Throughout this book, we encourage you to look at your context for ministry and to think about what studying pastoral care in rural communities might suggest about how to contextualize your own care, whether rural or not. To be confronted with different context or culture often makes one more aware of one's own.

We also intend to challenge the perception of rural United States as an idealized place on the one hand and a minimized place on the other. We value what rural communities and rural churches have to offer. We also believe that the particularities of rurality have been largely unattended to by constituencies that depend on what happens in rural areas even as they render it invisible or meaningless. Many pastors, and denominations, see rural ministry as a training ground for new pastors or a transition ground for retiring pastors. More than 80 percent of the people in the United States live in cities, and most of the people in churches are city people. However, more than 80 percent of the land in the U.S. is rural land, and most of the churches in the U.S. are in small towns and rural areas. There are more congregations, and therefore more pastors, in rural regions and small towns than in metropolitan areas. An overwhelming majority of pastors will, at some point in their ministry career, serve small-town and rural churches, though they will likely have been raised and trained in cities

and suburbs. What happens in rural churches and communities is crucial to the well-being of us all.

### WHAT IS RURAL?

You will immediately notice that in this text we use multiple terms—*rural*, *small town*, *town and country*—to describe the context to which we refer. It is surprisingly complex to define what constitutes a “rural” community today. In part, that is because there are many types of rural communities, ranging from upscale, technology-oriented, smaller population centers to what might strike you as a ghost town because first the railroad and then the highway went in a different direction. In response to the term *rural*, many people in the U.S. conjure up an image of “pastoral” landscape, small farms set in a landscape of rolling hills and a few cows. They may include a small town where you can leave your doors unlocked and share communitywide picnics. When pressed a bit, they may also begin to include the not-so-pastoral image of mining towns, but rarely will they also move to include the ski resorts of the Rockies or the Native American reservations of the West and Southwest. Part of this book’s intent is to unsettle preconceived notions, positive and negative, about what “rural” is. We want to expand the imagery and break down stereotypes because we believe that the category “rural” is a worthwhile category for study. We believe there is enough commonality that runs through “rural” that it is useful and meaningful to think about “rural” congregations and communities, even though there is a lot of variety and difference across kinds of rural places.

Though we understand the limits of any typology in that boundary-setting is always a construction of, more than a reflection of, a reality, this section sets out some of the means by which we define “rural,” the types of places that can be included in that definition, and the lenses through which this book approaches the discussion of “rural” congregations and communities.

Most researchers and statisticians use one of the U.S. federal government definitions of rural, but even those are not consistent. John Cromartie and Shawn Bucholtz point out that government definitions can be based on “administrative, land-use or economic concepts.”<sup>1</sup> In all cases, setting the line between urban and rural or metropolitan and nonmetropolitan begins with defining urban and then designating what is left as rural. Rural is that which is not the norm; the place “other” than where most people live and work. Administrative boundaries, like county lines, are drawn by municipal and jurisdictional bodies. Land-use bases involve looking at population size and density; for instance, for many years rural meant any town or county with fewer

than 2500 people in residence. When ties to a common economic base are taken into account, a small town, by population, that borders a city or is close enough that most workers commute to the city is not defined as rural but rather as part of a metropolitan area. Recently the government added a new category to the mix, “micropolitan,” which uses the economic base along with a population restriction that refers to what the popular culture might refer to as a “small city,” one with a population between 10,000 and 50,000.

Why does this kind of boundary-setting matter? First, thinking about the decision-making principles and practices for setting definitions of what constitutes rural and nonrural reveals some of the paths for thinking about difference and similarity between places and thus why place matters. Second, these boundaries become crucial when decisions are made about resource dispersion and what kind of public assistance is made available. A small town tied economically to a larger city center may have access to health care in a way that another town of the same population size may not. This book uses a variety of terms to refer to places under the umbrella of “rural,” but in general we are not referring to micro- or metropolitan areas. Using a diversity of terms helps to reveal the need for a wide contextual lens where one place is not the same as the other.

It has been said, “If you’ve seen one rural place, you’ve seen *one* rural place.” Setting lines of demarcation based on administrative, land-use, or economic ties is but one aspect of defining what we mean by rural. Several rural researchers propose typologies for thinking about different kinds of rural communities. These breakdowns into types of rural are generally trying to engage the different economic and cultural realities in each type. Some rural communities are built on the natural beauty of the area, like the ski resorts of Colorado. Some are large open-space farm communities, like the small towns of Iowa. Some towns and the people who live there are barely surviving, like those in the Appalachian hill country. Some are in transition as metro- and micropolitan expansion reaches further into the countryside. Below we will highlight some of these different kinds of rural communities that will be given more contextual depth in the following chapters of the book.

On the surface, some rural communities actually do look like the farm landscapes many imagine. These are land areas of large open spaces, sparsely populated with economies based on agriculture, timber, or mining. One group of rural researchers, the Carsey Institute, identifies these communities, primarily located in the Great Plains in the center of the country, as “declining, resource dependent.”<sup>2</sup> What once might have been solid middle-class self-employed educated families working the land are now declining populations as food-

production methods change and the land becomes depleted. While some of these small towns are now attracting immigrant workers with low-skill, low-paying jobs in places like meatpacking plants, in general the residents are an aging homogeneous group. Church, school, social involvement, and trusted neighbors characterize the foundation of, but declining reality, in these regions.

Yet many seek out this picture of rural life, minus the land-based work, as some of these formerly “resource dependent” areas are attracting “exurbans,” those who work in metro- or micropolitan areas but want to live “in the country.” Often those in this group are hoping to find the safe, clean, honest, and trustworthy community that has fed our imagination of rural for at least a century. Yet they also bring “urban values” and may find it difficult to find a place in a community that generations of a family have called home before them. Others seek out the scenic or outdoor recreation areas of the country, such as the Rocky Mountains. These “amenity”<sup>3</sup> based areas attract economically well-off active retirees and young adults and are growing at a fast pace. They may rely on a strong tourism-based economy that also creates a population of low-wage service workers. The exurban and the amenity-based communities are growing with people who in some way want to “get back to nature,” whether it is through the scenic beauty of lakes and mountains, outdoor activities, or acreage and a vegetable garden.

Surprising to many who think of poverty as an urban core problem, most of the places entrenched in poverty are in nonmetropolitan areas. The vast majority of these “persistently” poor areas are in the South; many are the remains of former Appalachian mining towns and are substantially African American. The people live without adequate infrastructure, minimal education, and little job opportunity. Families may live in these areas for generations, while in the changing farm communities of the Midwest young adults leave out of a sense of possibility, opportunity, and resources. The young of chronically poor rural communities often see little hope for a different future, whether in the hills of their grandparents or in the cities they see on television.

### THINKING ABOUT PLACES

Different rural communities described above only begin to give a sense of the rich diversity in rural USA. Each kind of place carries its own sets of gifts and challenges. As we think about these places, identifying kinds of questions or possible frameworks for analysis can guide us toward interpretive breadth and depth. What kinds of things are we looking for and seeking to understand as we approach a contextualized pastoral care in rural areas?

Rural sociologists Cornelia Flora and Jan Flora propose that we ask about the community's resources or capital.<sup>4</sup> Community capital is any resource that a community has that can be invested to create new resources. They identify natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built capitals. In farming communities the land, natural capital, is transformed into financial capital. In scenic places, the consumption of natural capital is transformed into social capital and built capital as the wealthy seek out these places for recreation and construction. Some towns may not have much financial capital to invest, but they may have the human capital of labor force ready and willing to work in even low-paying jobs. They may have the cultural capital of a commitment to hard work and civic involvement. Church leaders can use this approach to name the strengths of a community and congregation that can then be strategically capitalized upon.

Paul Cloke, a British rural studies scholar, describes three frameworks for conceptualizing "rural."<sup>5</sup> The first is a "functional" framework that basically follows the pattern of the typologies presented above, depending on land use, population, and spatial boundaries.<sup>6</sup> The second and third frames move beyond function to examine the workings of power and the construction of meaning. Understanding a place includes more than researching demographic and economic trends, it also involves investigating the culture of a place. What norms, practices, institutions, and worldviews are operating in the community? Where are they held in common and where are the conflicts between them? Cloke's "political-economic" frame invites us to think about rural communities as they are produced by political-economic forces beyond the spatial boundaries of rural/city. We might ask how what happens in rural areas is shaped by or in response to what happens in the rest of the country and to what extent political power from outside coerces certain effects in rural communities. Changing demands for food and fuel, driven by the demands of free-market economies that depend on the large population areas of the country, may radically change the realities of food production in rural areas. Conflicts over water rights and environmental preservation reflect political power struggles as well. Who owns and/or controls the water? Of course, the reverse move must also be considered: How does, or can, rural wield power in the larger political economy?

Rurality is also a socially constructed reality that requires another means of interrogation, Cloke's third frame. What do we *mean* by rural? What happens when instead of "rural," we say "country" or "town" or "village" or "wilderness"? Looking at rural from this lens asks us to consider the meanings that become attached to rural life. These meanings come from both within and outside the rural community. When someone is described as being "from

the country,” it means more than physical location; it implies certain qualities and characteristics, positive and negative depending on who is saying it to whom. Romanticized farm life and the unsophisticated “redneck” are two images constructed out of certain mores and practices that may function to keep power in place through processes like commodification and discrimination. These meanings are not “chosen” per se but are continually present in self and other representation, experience, practices, and decisions. These meanings come to frame how we see self and other, rural and urban, and they may be interrogated by the church and others based on how they function for good or ill.

With globalization and increased access to technology, other questions that must be asked are: How is “rural” being urbanized and how is “urban” being ruralized? In this book we argue that there are in fact differences between rural and urban, metro and nonmetro, and yet we are not claiming that rural and urban should be constructed as dichotomies or that they do not intertwine. Postulating “rural” requires us to think about particular dynamics of “hybridity” and multiplicity that are at play in any community. Cloke’s definition is particularly helpful here: “Rurality can thus be envisaged as a complex interweaving of power relations, social conventions, discursive practices, and institutional forces which are constantly combining and recombining.”<sup>7</sup> The church’s practices of care will be enriched by considering all these aspects as they impact persons’ lives in any context.

### CONTEXTUAL PASTORAL CARE

To care for one another is to actively respond to and engage each other in life’s journey in ways that lead to increased love and justice in the world. The theological assumptions that ground our understanding of care begin with the claim that God creates us in a deeply interconnected web of relationship in which we are all dependent on one another. In and through this relational existence we come to know God as love and come to understand the Christian call to “love one another.” This love is not a warm feeling, although it may include that; it is active and participatory engagement in the whole of life of other persons and of the global society. It involves individual healing and social justice making. Human flourishing demands attention to persons and societies; what happens in the world shapes and impacts persons and what happens to individuals affects the whole world. As Larry Graham reminds us, care for persons also requires care for the world.<sup>8</sup> In a deeply relational existence, a person cannot be known outside his or her context, and healing requires change in the person *and* in the world.

This text develops in consonance with an emerging contextual approach to pastoral care. In 1993, John Patton described a “communal contextual” approach to care that stressed the importance of the whole community as both practitioners and beneficiaries of care.<sup>9</sup> This paradigm for care emphasizes human interrelatedness and mutual responsibility that is at the core of what it means to be human created in the image of God. As will become evident throughout this book, rural communities, in part because of their lack of multiple specialists, are especially attuned to relying on one another for care, rather than the pastor or other professional alone. It is also apparent that in small towns, churches and pastors are expected to care for the whole community, not just their own church community. In some ways, town and country churches can exemplify the best of “communal” pastoral care, an example that could be instructive for others who would like to engage in this form of pastoral care.

When the community is the heart and soul of care, contextual analysis becomes an increasingly significant resource for care. In more recent years, many have stressed the importance of taking context into account in order to provide meaningful pastoral care. What do we mean by “context”? Context is all that which surrounds any particular person, church, or community, or any particular problem. Much like “culture,” context is the whole web of meanings, practices, and institutions that shape, hold, and perhaps create, the particular. Pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey defines culture as a “distinctive way of life” for a particular group of persons, including “the ideas, values and meanings embodied in situations and practices, in forms of social relationship, in systems of belief, in mores and customs, in the way objects are used and physical life is organized.”<sup>10</sup> This should not be taken to mean that culture or context is monolithic or static. Culture is always changing, adapting, and responding to new events and new people. To speak of rural context or culture is not to suggest that there is *one* rural; there are many rurals. There is also something we can identify as a rural way of life, something that seems to be recognizable across rural differences. In the following chapters, we will encounter many diverse forms of rural life. Our intent is not to suggest that there is one kind of rural: we stated above our intention to break through some of those reductionist stereotypes. When we talk about rural in a general way, we encourage you to also think about the particularities or differences between one rural and another. Lartey reminds us that “every human person is in certain respects 1) like all others, 2) like some others, and 3) like no other.”<sup>11</sup>

In many respects, the path toward this text reflects our commitments to contextual pastoral theology and care, and it echoes the kinds of commitments we heard from the many town and country ministers we consulted along

the way. We are three different people, with differing perspectives, but a shared commitment to the well-being and wisdom of marginalized peoples. We believe that care for the sick, the stranger, and the outcast requires standing in solidarity with and advocacy for those who are often excluded from leadership and decision-making power. While we do not claim to have perfectly succeeded in overcoming the hegemonic powers at work in our own contexts and in our lives, we have tried to offer at least a partial step in that direction.

### OUR OWN CONTEXTS

In light of our commitments to contextuality, it seems appropriate to say something of the contexts in which we, the three authors, are located, especially as that relates to our rurality, or lack thereof. We are a trio of academicians teaching in denominational seminaries who are also ordained clergy in our respective denominations, and have served as pastors of local churches.

*JEANNE HOEFT*

*I am a city person. I was born in a large Midwestern city and have lived in several of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States; however, my parents were raised in small Minnesota towns. I grew up with two contrasting images of rural that in some way reflect the stereotypes of the idealized and denigrated rural that permeate U.S. culture. On the one hand, my mother often declared that as a young person she couldn't wait to get out of the country and into the city. Rural could be a place of too much closeness and lack of sophistication. On the other hand, I experienced my mother's family farm as one of the more stable, peaceful places in my life. I also enjoyed the visits to my paternal grandparents' small town where everyone knew who I was and I was allowed to walk freely to the park or market.*

*In my first appointment as a pastor in a small southern city, the members of the church were from families of the rural areas around the city. I quickly realized that they spoke a language and lived out of a worldview that I did not really understand. I began making excursions with them to areas where they were experts in the land and community, to a culture that was new to me and that I needed to understand. I asked a lot of questions and they were good teachers, confounding many of my preconceptions about "country" people. When I began teaching pastoral care, I found that most of the students were from the rural Midwest surrounding the seminary and would be going back to serve churches in those areas. It was not long before I discovered my own lack of knowledge of their context, the lack of attention to rural in pastoral care literature, and the difference that a rural context makes. My students began to teach me about what*

*it means to do pastoral care in town and country churches where, among other things, they have limited access to services, multivalent relationships with church members, and shape the calendar as much by the seasons of planting and harvesting as by the liturgical season. I needed a textbook that spoke to their context more directly.*

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#### SHANNON JUNG

*I must have been predestined to be a Professor of Town and Country Ministries at Saint Paul. Growing up in rural Louisiana at an open country church, I went to the Belgian Congo when my parents were called to be dental and educational missionaries. My graduate work was done in Christian ethics in Nashville at Vanderbilt, and I was ordained in 1973. I have preached in countless smaller-membership congregations and always felt a particular rapport with them.*

*Twice, when I was teaching college, I served as a part-time (but full!) pastor of rural congregations, one in Bluff City, Tennessee, and also at Dilworth, Minnesota. For some years, I directed a Center for Theology and Land at the University of Dubuque and Wartburg seminaries, and that gave me an opportunity to do some writing on rural ministry and the best practices that exemplary rural congregations taught me.*

*Since 2005, I have taught courses in leadership and mission in town and country ministry at Saint Paul School of Theology, Kansas City. My doctoral work in ethics has proven to be very compatible with teaching how to read rural contexts, and also to considering the impact of economic and environmental issues in rural communities. I am very interested in and writing on the ethics and spirituality of eating, a rural specialty. My social location raises questions about how leadership and pastoral care are related for rural congregations and communities.*

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#### JORETTA MARSHALL

*I am a professor at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. I grew up in a small Midwestern farming community of 150 people, and my father's family farm was located on the edge of the neighboring town, about two miles away. We spent lots of time at the farm, and my uncles continued to live on that farm and the surrounding farms until the family farm was sold during the crisis of the 1980s. The church we attended was the only one in that community and was the social context for much of my early formation. My understanding of ministry and church has been shaped and nurtured in that context. Although I have lived in urban and suburban settings for the last twenty-five years, I carry a deep and abiding love for rural life. At the same*

*time, I am aware of the changing dynamics of rural communities and am fearful of the idealization or romanticization of what rural has come to represent. Adequately training pastoral caregivers who value rural communities and those connected to them is central to my call as a pastor and teacher.*

This book is written by three different people trying to speak with integrity from our individual perspectives and yet also speaking to commonly held values and theological understandings, especially the value of the rural church. You will no doubt notice differences in our voices, in our emphases, and in our slightly differing theological perspectives. We hope this will enrich the text and offer you a layered, thought-provoking reading of the challenges and gifts of rural communities.

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### LISTENING TO RURAL CHURCHES

We could call the process by which our work on this text proceeded as relational or “conversational.” As we began this project, our commitments to contextual pastoral theology and to the participation of multiple voices from the local context itself directed us first to places where people of the church were already focusing on the gifts and challenges of rural ministry. As teachers and scholars we bring that perspective to the question of meaningful pastoral care in rural communities, and while that is important, it is not the only view or necessarily the most important. Trying to be mindful of the way power works through defining what counts as important, we talked to those currently involved with rural ministry. In each case, we sought to listen to the ideas and concerns of the town and country church and to ask about what they saw as the wisdom and needs of rural communities as they sought to practice a ministry of care. After a brief description of our consultants in the project, we will outline the themes that arose from those conversations and that provide the framework for this text.

In the first phase, we consulted with larger groups who were already gathering around the issue of rural ministry. At the Town and Country Consultation at Saint Paul School of Theology, we talked with pastors and denominational leaders who meet annually to learn from one another. We met with the Rural Chaplains Association, a primarily United Methodist group of rural pastors, lay and ordained, as they explored the intersection of rural ministry in the U.S. and Mexico. The Rural Church Network is an ecumenical group of denominational agency leaders and scholars who invited us into conversation about the future needs of rural churches and communities. In the

second phase of the journey toward this text, we identified seven town and country pastors, lay and ordained, who are committed to the value of rural ministry, represent some of the diversity of small-town and rural USA, and are known as effective creative leaders. These individuals served as our conversation partners, keeping us grounded in the contextual concrete. The group, men and women, from Lutheran (ELCA), United Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches included:

- An ordained pastor of a Cooperative Parish of four churches in a small Ohio town where the largest growing industry is tourism but in which poverty is nevertheless persistent.
- A local lay pastor, serving a church in a northern Colorado town (pop. 2500) whose residents depend on ranching, agriculture, and tourism for their livelihood. This small town sits in the Rocky Mountain high plains about fifty miles away from even a Walmart.
- An ordained pastor of a church in a small Kansas town of about 6000, about an hour away from a metropolitan area. Earlier in its history the town was a railroad town, but now many residents work at the state hospital located there or commute to the nearby city.
- An ordained pastor of a four-point parish in North Dakota, not far from the Canadian border. One of the churches is located in the county seat (pop. 1300), while the others are in rural communities of less than a hundred residents where many farm people and others are benefiting from a recent oil boom.
- A part-time bi-vocational pastor of a mining town (pop. 1200) in the Appalachian Mountains. The church was once known as a black church but now has a racially mixed congregation that emphasizes hospitality to the “lost and outcast” in a town that continues to struggle economically.
- A pastor who was raised and trained for ministry in Mexico and currently is a missionary for the National Hispanic Plan of the United Methodist church. He also serves as pastor of a primarily Spanish-speaking church in the Southwest near the Mexican border.
- A former missionary to Argentina and pastor of a two-point charge in Iowa and chaplain to the meat plant in the area. The plant has brought an increasing Hispanic/Latino population into this land of family farms.

### **EMERGENT THEMES**

In our conversations with the persons and groups named above, we identified four themes that inform and expand the thesis of this text that rural churches

are unique and hold a wisdom from which the rest of the church might benefit. The themes below give more substance to the specific ways in which rural is different, unique, challenged, and gifted. In many cases, the themes represent areas that are both gift and challenge. It is in the tension between gift and challenge that the rural wisdom about care, discovered or reinforced as we prepared for this text, seems to emerge. While the particulars of these themes become manifest in different ways in different communities, we did hear them emerge in some way across difference. We will give a brief introduction to these themes here, but they will be developed further in the following chapters.

**1. Care is shaped by place.** As contextuality has increasingly emphasized social location, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and so on, context is becoming a central category of analysis. What smaller communities tell us is that physical location, or place, also matters to identity, worldview, and way of life. Rural or small town is in large part a matter of geographical location, and the people of these communities have a heightened sense of *where* they live as much as *how* they live. Two of the ways that geography forms rural communities are location in relationship to other towns and cities, and the way in which either location or the land itself determines the usually singular economic basis. Accessibility to services such as health care is directly tied to distance from cities and towns. Land-based economies of mining, farming, timbering, oil production, and tourism in rural communities are more or less the single basis for economic thriving of a community, such that any changes in that base are not easily absorbed. There may still be an appreciation of the land and nature present to a greater degree than in urban or suburban places.

**2. Care engages community.** There is a sense of interdependence in rural communities that pushes care beyond a particular congregational membership to being offered by and for the whole community. There is an embedded understanding that pastoral care belongs to the ministry of the church and not to the appointed or ordained leader of a congregation. The local community embodies care in ways that are unique and particular in meeting the challenges of living. This communal care is fostered in part by geographical location, lack of anonymity, and, for many, a long history with their neighbors. In small towns it is not just the pastor who is responsible for care, but there is a sense of mutual responsibility that assumes the whole church will be involved in caring for any of those in need in the community.

Community is a difficult concept in this context. It is used to describe a group of people who live and worship in close proximity, but it is also used prescriptively to describe an ideal toward which this group of people seeks to be related to each other. Rural and small towns do have a particular wisdom about

community in both senses, and about the challenges of living up to the ideal, which leads to the next theme.

**3. Pastoral care and public leadership intersect.** The interconnection of sociocultural issues and individual or family needs is perhaps more apparent in small towns and rural areas than elsewhere. Pastors and church leaders have a unique role beyond the particular congregation as public theologians and community leaders who engage in a practice of care for the community as a whole. Their voice and presence are noticed in a world where anonymity is almost impossible. Their public theology shows up at school board meetings, in the local diner, or at the funeral home in ways that make their voice more expansive than many pastoral leaders experience in suburban or urban settings. The local pastoral leader often becomes a dominant voice or representative within the community at large. Pastors can have a distinctive role in convening the community for discussion and action. They can interpret what is happening in the wider area and serve as culture producers<sup>12</sup> and spiritual and/or moral directors. The pastoral leader may be the one who names the responsibility of the community to care for the past and the future or the one who presses for dialogue in the midst of diversity. Visibility, multileveled relationships, and lack of proximate colleagues also pose unique challenges and provide wisdom about the place of pastors in the community from which pastors in other settings can benefit.

**4. Care responds to the multiple diversities in community.** Rural communities have insight into issues of diversity in ways that are unique and distinct. The challenge of insider/outsider is ever apparent in rural communities in that they are much less homogeneous than many in urban or suburban contexts perceive. Difference is experienced through diverse racial and ethnic populations; class diversity that is experienced close to home, in the same pew or just down the street; and theological diversity that can either divide a community or create a rich space for celebrating the multidimensionality of God. In addition there is often a tension between newcomers and old-timers that sometimes creates an insider/outsider community. The presence of the “other” is often felt as a challenge to that ideal of community held by many who live in small towns. With the growth of new populations in rural areas, their own future will depend on finding a way to live in harmony and mutual productivity. Old-timers may need to learn not only to like and appreciate new residents but also to include them and learn from them as fully contributing citizens. How these communities wander the journey of inclusiveness is instructive to the church and to other communities.

## FLOW OF THE BOOK

In Part I, Chapters 1 through 4 move through the four themes identified above in more depth, providing a pastoral theological lens for thinking about concrete issues of care. These themes are meant to be understood as unique to rural communities and small towns but also as bits of practical wisdom for the whole church, metropolitan and nonmetropolitan alike. Chapter 1 argues that healing and transformative care is shaped by place. Place—the land and the meanings associated with it—shapes identity, can foster a sense of connection to God, and calls us to consider the basic human need for *home*, for belonging somewhere. Community in rural contexts highlights the strengths and limitations of closeness, and Chapter 2 discusses the need for healing and transformative care to engage the whole community. Local churches, including their formal and informal leadership and the congregation as a whole, are agents of care for the church and the larger community. Pastoral care is more than the ministry of the pastor; it includes the day-to-day practices of ordinary care engaged in by the whole church. Pastors also act as carers for the community, not only the congregation; healing and transformative care includes making theology public, bringing a theological voice to the larger community.

In Chapter 3, we suggest that rural contexts demonstrate that pastoral care and leadership intersect. Healing and transformation require care and leadership, both within the congregation and in the community, and without both we miss the deep intersection of the personal and the political, individual and social, in people's lives. Leadership organizes and mobilizes congregations and communities toward change, but it must include a perspective of love and care for all. Leadership, in the interest of care, will be relational, collaborative, and patient. This is noticeable especially in times of rapid change, such as with the influx of newcomers into small towns. Diversity is always present. If the church is to move toward healing and transformation, care must be taken to move toward inclusion and respect for difference, the focus for Chapter 4. Caring with others asks us to watch our own generalizations and to give significant attention to issues of power and privilege that can fracture communication and community.

Part II is meant to demonstrate how these guiding themes can shape pastoral care in particular situations of poverty, violence, and illness. While the scenarios presented in these chapters are located in small towns, these situations are certainly not unique to rural communities and small towns. It is our hope that pastors and congregations gain insight into the uniqueness of pastoral care in rural places but also find new ways to care in all kinds of places. Care in all kinds of places could benefit from understanding healing and transformation

for a just and loving world as being shaped by place, engaging community, intersecting with leadership, and attending to diversity.

## Notes

1. John Cromartie and Shawn Bucholtz, "Defining the 'Rural' in Rural America," ed. U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Amber Waves* (Economic Research Service, 2008).
2. Lawrence C. Hamilton, Leslie R. Hamilton, Cynthia M. Duncan, Chris R. Colocousis, "Place Matters: Challenges and Opportunities in Four Rural Americas," Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire (2008).
3. This is a term used both by Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2008); also by Hamilton et al., "Place Matters."
4. Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora, *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2012).
5. Paul Cloke, "Conceptualizing Rurality," in *Handbook of Rural Studies*, ed. Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden, and Patrick Mooney (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 20–21.
6. *Ibid.*, 20.
7. *Ibid.*, 24.
8. Larry Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds: A Psychosystems Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).
9. John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).
10. Emmanuel Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 31
11. *Ibid.*, 34.
12. Jackson W. Carroll and Becky R. McMillan, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Pulpit & Pew) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).