



The Little Church Back Home¹

FIGURE 1.—Rural church, typical of North Dakota's open country churches.

By Courtney B. Cleland²

Changing farm conditions affect the local community, and the "little church back home" is no exception. Since 1926 the number of open country churches in North Dakota has declined 40 percent. This trend has been balanced, however, by important gains in the number of village³ and, especially, of city churches³.

Almost everyone knows that the farm population in North Dakota is declining. The 1950 census takers counted 254,487 farm people, which represented a 22 percent loss in 10 years. Since 1950 no doubt the decline has continued, as the 1954 census of agriculture showed a further decrease in the number of farms and farm operators. (Total population of the state was up to an estimated 642,000 in 1955 because cities and villages registered good gains.)

The church is one of those social institutions, along with the school and local government, which feels

the impact of population changes the most. Facts about the much discussed "church boom" in the United States are by now well known—more church members, more congregations, more ministers and more financial support than ever before in history. But these are national trends. It would be overlooking an important point not to recognize that the churches in farm areas, in many cases, have had to cope with problems just the opposite of these national "trends."

Table I indicates the changes in location of North Dakota churches

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³In this article a "village" is defined as a place of less than 2,500 inhabitants; a larger place is a "city."

TABLE I.—Number of North Dakota Churches by Location of Church, 1955, 1936, and 1926*.

Location	1955	1936	1926	Change, 1926-1955	
				Number	Percent
Open country	523	740	877	-354	-40%
Village	1,338	1,186	1,227	+111	+9%
City	238	171	168	+70	+42%
State total	2,099	2,097	2,272	-173	-8%

*Sources: Donald G. Hay, *Social Organizations and Agencies in North Dakota*, North Dakota AES Bul. 288 (Fargo: 1937) for 1926 and 1936 data; and the *Religious Census of North Dakota* for 1955 data.

from 1926 to 1955. The 1936 data are also included because in that year the impact of the drouth-depression crisis was at its height. Since the number of churches in 1955 was practically the same as that reported in 1936, it is evident that most of the decline in the total number of churches came during the decade 1926 to 1936.

There have been, however, drastic changes since 1936 in the location of

churches. Rural churches are not becoming fewer as much as they are becoming concentrated in village or town headquarters. The village churches have reversed their trend toward loss which appeared to be under way from 1926 to 1936, and now number more than ever. But the really large gain, in percentage, has been in the urban churches, which are those located in the places of more than 2,500 population.

TABLE II.—Distribution of Churches by City, Village, and Open Country for Largest North Dakota Denominations, 1955*

Denomination	Number of churches	Percentage located in		
		city	village	country
Baptist—North American	36	6%	83%	11%
Congregational Christian	72	13%	76%	11%
Evangelical United Brethren	66	9%	76%	15%
Lutheran Bodies:				
American Lutheran	100	6%	55%	39%
Augustana Synod	29	28%	55%	17%
Evangelical Lutheran	501	4%	46%	50%
Missouri Synod	133	10%	68%	22%
Lutheran Free	88	8%	40%	52%
United Lutheran	11	36%	27%	37%
Methodist	156	8%	85%	7%
Presbyterian U. S. A.	101	7%	87%	6%
Protestant Episcopal	35	37%	54%	9%
Roman Catholic	336	7%	81%	12%
State Total, all 63 denominations ..	2,099	11%	64%	25%

*Source: *Religious Census of North Dakota*, 1955.

Comparisons for all denominations that had more than 3,000 members in 1955 are given in table II.⁴ One denomination alone, the Evangelical Lutheran, accounts for almost half of all the open country

churches in North Dakota. In fact, the four largest Lutheran bodies among them account for 70 percent of all the open country churches. The bulk of Roman Catholic churches are located in villages. The same

⁴See "Note on Religious Statistics" at the end of this article.

is true for the Presbyterian, Baptist-North American and Methodist groups. The Protestant Episcopal is the most urbanized of the denominations with 37 percent of its churches located in cities.

While they indicate the relative rurality of different denominations, the data in table II tell nothing about the interrelated organization between town and nearby country churches of a particular denomination. In evaluating the effectiveness of any given group, this relationship would be an important matter. Practically all the major denominations have given considerable study to the problem of developing a workable pattern of organization which would integrate the work of their rural and urban churches. It is also true, of course, that a very large number of farmers belong to, and rather regularly attend, a village or city church—a church which, in fact, may be closer to the farm home than any open-country church.

The average membership per church is a measure that reflects the trend of reorganization and consolidation among churches. It is

obvious that an adequate, varied program of church activities cannot be supported by a handful of members, and most denominations today wish to avoid being "spread too thin." Table III indicates what the trend has been since 1936. Many denominations are making real headway in increasing the average number of members in their church organizations, though still short of the theoretical ideal of 1,000 people per church.

Because of the lack of a uniform definition of "church member," comparisons among faiths should be made with caution. Roman Catholics and most Lutheran groups count as members all baptized persons, including children. Most Protestant bodies include only adults, or persons beyond 13 years of age, as members.

Showing the average number of churches per minister, table IV is of value for indicating the work load upon the individual minister or priest. From the congregation's viewpoint, these data also reflect the frequency and adequacy of activities offered in the church pro-

TABLE III.—Average Number of Members Per Church for Largest North Dakota Denominations, 1955, 1950, and 1936.*

Denomination	Average membership per church		
	1955	1950	1936
Baptist—North American	100	81	98
Congregational Christian	99	82	66
Evangelical United Brethren	79	77	59
Lutheran Bodies:			
American Lutheran	255	213	134
Augustana Synod	201	199	121
Evangelical Lutheran	234	193	141
Missouri Synod	196	166	144
Lutheran Free	104	121	118
United Lutheran	382	228	422
Methodist	128	123	99
Presbyterian U. S.A.	133	107	81
Protestant Episcopal	88	77	95
Roman Catholic	417	407	348
State average, all denominations	196	173	147

*Sources: Religious Census of North Dakota, 1955 and 1950; U. S. Census of Religious Bodies, 1936.

TABLE IV.—Average Number of Churches Per Minister, Largest North Dakota Denominations, 1955 and 1950.*

Denomination	Number of churches per minister	
	1955	1950
Baptist—North American	1.1	1.5
Congregational Christian	2.4	2.1
Evangelical United Brethren	1.9	1.7
Lutheran Bodies:		
American Lutheran	2.0	2.7
Augustana Synod	2.6	2.5
Evangelical Lutheran	2.9	3.6
Missouri Synod	1.8	1.8
Lutheran Free	2.8	3.3
United Lutheran	1.2	1.5
Methodist	2.2	2.3
Presbyterian U. S. A.	2.0	3.2
Protestant Episcopal	1.8	3.0
Roman Catholic	1.1	1.2
State total, 63 denominations	1.6	1.9

*Sources: Religious Census of North Dakota, 1955 and 1950.

gram. A country church which must share its pastor with several other congregations can expect only the minimum in services.

Although most denominations have succeeded in reducing the average number of churches per minister, there still remain about 16 churches for every 10 ministers or priests in North Dakota. As recently as 1950, however, there were about 19 churches for every 10 ministers, so that the improvement in just five years has been noteworthy.

Statistics, of course, cannot reveal the complete story of either the problems or the progress of the rural church in North Dakota. Further study is needed to evaluate further the effects of population change upon this important aspect of community life.

Note on Religious Statistics

Reliable religious statistics in this country are hard to acquire. Unlike Canada and some other countries, the U. S. Census does not query citizens about their religious affiliation, and hence there are no official data which are based directly

upon interviews with the people themselves. From 1906 through 1936, the U. S. government published the **Census of Religious Bodies** every 10 years, using statistics provided by the headquarters of the organized denominations. The **Yearbook of American Churches**, published by the National Council of the Churches of Christ, has provided similar data for the country as a whole, but not for states or smaller areas.

Religious census data are thus based upon the standards and record keeping of the organized denominations, which are known to differ considerably. Reporting methods vary in accuracy from careful checking to outright estimates. Most seriously, there is no uniform agreement on the definition of a church member. Some groups have a policy against publishing any membership figures at all. These limitations should be kept in mind when analyzing church statistics.

In 1950 and again in 1955, a **Religious Census of North Dakota** was published by the North Dakota Interchurch Council, again relying

upon the data provided by the churches themselves.⁵ The 1955 statistics used in this article were the latest available as of Sept. 1, 1955. It may be that some groups in separate reports have already published later figures than the ones used here. However, there was no way of avoiding this seeming inconsistency, because the various religious bodies make their official reports at different times of the year. A standardized questionnaire form was mailed to all North Dakota groups some months before publication of the census, and considerable follow-up work was done in order to make the returns as complete as possible.

Because of space limitations, this article shows data for only the 13 largest denominations (which had at least 3,000 members in the state in 1955). A copy of the complete census for all 63 reporting groups can be obtained, while supplies last, from the North Dakota Interchurch Council, 13 Roxy Building, Fargo, North Dakota.

Results of the 1955 census showed 192,767 Lutherans (distributed among 12 different Lutheran bodies) and 140,048 Roman Catholics. Eighty-one percent of all the reported church members in North Dakota are accounted for by these two large groups. Adding the Methodists (19,902), Presbyterians (13,437), two Congregational groups (9,815), five Baptist bodies (7,974), and the Evangelical United Brethren (5,213) to the Catholics and Lutherans brings the total to 95 percent of all reported church members in the state.

Among the interesting small groups are a number which reported only one church each in 1955. In alphabetical order, these were the

Amish, Christian Reformed, Followers of Jesus, Four-Square Gospel, German Reformed, Greek Orthodox, Harperites, Hutterites, Islam-Moslem and Mission Covenant.

The denominations with two or more churches, but none with more than 3,000 total members in 1955, included the following (all larger denominations are listed in the tables accompanying this article): Adventist, American Unitarian Association, Assemblies of God, Baptist-American, Baptist-Conservative Association, Baptist-General Conference of America, Baptist-Southern, Christian Missionary Alliance, Christian Science, Church of Christ, Church of God (Anderson), Church of God (Cleveland), Church of the Brethren, Church of the Nazarene, Community Churches, German Congregational, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical and Reformed, Evangelical Free, Jewish Congregations, and six Lutheran groups: American Evangelical, Suomi Synod, Icelandic, Lutheran Brethren, United Evangelical (Danish) and Wisconsin Synod. Additional denominations were: Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite General Conference, Mennonite Old Order, Holiness Methodist, Wesleyan Methodist, Moravin, Mormons, Bible Presbyterian, Orthodox Presbyterian, Reformed Church in America, Reorganized Church of the Latter Day Saints, Salvation Army, Ukrainian Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox.

There were a total of 63 organized church groups which provided data for the 1955 census. Other known groups with work in the state, from which figures were not obtained, include Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahai and the American Sunday School Union.

⁵Members of the committee which conducted the 1955 census were Dr. C. A. Armstrong, state superintendent of the North Dakota Interchurch Council; Professor Courtney B. Cleland, North Dakota Agricultural College; Robert Huey, Fargo Chamber of Commerce, former employee of the U. S. Census Bureau, and Dr. A. G. Martin, district superintendent of the Evangelical United Brethren Church.