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**CAN RURAL CHURCHES IN CENTRAL VALLEY CALIFORNIA EXPAND
THEIR ROLE OF SOCIAL SERVICES FOR THE
COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE?**

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Can Rural Churches in Central Valley California Expand Their Role of Social Services for the Communities They Serve?

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Introduction

The 1996 federal welfare reform legislation established a new plan for partnerships¹ between government agencies and local faith-based organizations² interested in banding their forces together in the fight against poverty. Still, the Center for Public Justice (2000) revealed that most states have been dragging their feet on adopting the Charitable Choice language to their law books conveyed in the National Charitable Choice Report Card. Moreover, only about 30 percent of the states have pursued partnerships, according to the first two Charitable Choice implementation studies conducted by Amy Sherman (2000, 2002).

The current policy debate in both government and academic circles about the expanded role of local congregations to provide more long-termed, intensive services including substance abuse treatment, crime reduction, delinquency prevention, and health programs, as opposed to traditional, short-termed emergency relief services such as food and temporary shelter continues to raise both legal and administrative questions. However, the debate thus far has primarily focused on the constitutionality of funding faith-based organizations with more private, rather than public interests.

Recent scholarship on congregations does support the idea that congregations have for some time provided social services to disadvantaged people without regard to religious philosophy or affiliation, race, gender, etc. (Alexander, 1991; Ammerman, 1997; Cnaan; Kasternakis, & Wineburg, 1993; Cnaan & Wineburg, 1997; Rogers & Ronsheim, 1998; Wind & Lewis, 1994; Wineburg, 1990-91). In this way, congregations can and should be considered as viable social service providers. Nevertheless, as policymakers call upon all congregations to expand the range of services to the poor and needy in their communities, they must be mindful of the challenges already facing smaller rural congregations. To date, most of the research on congregations focuses on large, urban churches in metropolitan areas. Very few have examined congregations in rural America. Rural congregations already confront the challenge of providing services to a geographically dispersed rural population. This means anti-poverty efforts may look quite different from those in urban settings as illustrated in a feasibility study of faith-based welfare reform in Mississippi (Bartowski & Regis, 1999a, 199b) and two ethnographic studies examining church leaders and lay members perceptions of poverty and welfare reform and analyzing church-based anti-poverty policies and practices in rural communities (Amato-von Hemert, 1998, 2000). Therefore, it is absolutely vital that we examine the involvement of congregations located in many of our most distressed neighborhoods in America. Understanding the present role of rural congregations and their capacity (or

lack thereof) to expand will allow policymakers to make well-informed decisions about the types of partnerships that warrant public funding support; those that require more indirect relationships; and those partnerships that should be avoided.

Research Objectives and Methodology

In light of the ongoing debate about Charitable Choice, this study aims to address one fundamental question: *Can rural churches in Central Valley California expand their role of social services for the communities they serve?* At the heart of this question is a broader concern about the capacity of congregations, in general and smaller congregations, in particular to increase their services beyond what is currently offered. Before one can intelligently address the capacity question, one must understand the existing role that congregations currently play (or does not play) in the community. This exploratory study embarks on this effort by providing qualitative data drawing from in-depth interviews with pastors (formal) and lay members (informal), participant observation, and individual church, as well as organizational documents from seven churches within one Pentecostal/Apostolic denomination in five rural Central Valley cities: Corcoran, Hanford, Lemoore, Tulare, and Wasco.

This study not only investigates the current dynamics of service provision in local rural congregations, but also examines church leaders' and lay members' awareness of Charitable Choice in the wake of welfare reform, in addition to their perceived projection of their churches ability and willingness to work collaboratively with state and county government agencies. I begin the paper by describing "rural areas" as a way to understand the complex nature of the environment in which the subject churches operate. I then offer a rationale for studying the selected cities in rural California. Finally, I highlight the preliminary findings from the interviews as they relate to the interview instrument (See Appendix A).

Defining "Rural Area"

In order to have a more knowledgeable discussion about the congregations studied, understanding the rural context and what constitutes a "rural area" is absolutely key. It is important to clearly explain terms used. For instance, one study of rural California counties defines "rural counties" as those with populations fewer than 250,000 people. Another source defines "rural areas" as those having no incorporated community with a population greater than 50,000 people. Still yet, another definition was crafted following the establishment of the California Rural Health Policy Council (CRHPC) on March 8, 1996. Grantland Johnson, the California Health and Human Services Agency Secretary, established CRHPC to improve and enhance long-range health systems throughout rural areas in the state. Consistent with the Office of Statewide Health and Planning, CRHPC formally defined "rural areas" as medical service study areas (MSSA) that have a population density of less than 250 persons per square mile and not wholly containing an incorporated area of greater than 50,000 persons. This definition was derived

from U.S. Census classifications of urban and rural areas, as well as comments and recommendations from the public.

In the current project, three of the cities under study (Corcoran, Hanford, and Lemoore—situated within Kings County) clearly fall within the boundaries of the previous CRHPC definition, however, the city of Tulare (located Southwest in Tulare County) and the city of Wasco (located Northwest in Kern County) would be questionable rural areas due to overall county population statistics. Even though these two cities fall within counties considered more urbanized than rural, I argue that they are located within rural areas based on other demographical data such as minority population and percentage receiving government assistance, per capita personal income and population density relative to other neighboring cities within the county and surrounding rural areas. Likewise, mean travel time to work, access and availability to health care, transportation, and other public services are other criteria I considered in determining the rural characteristics of both cities. Hence, Tulare and Wasco appropriately are rural cities located within emerging urbanized counties.

Why Rural California?

The pervasiveness of social problems appear to be more visible in urban areas due to the majority of social science research conducted in these settings and perhaps the vast amount of media coverage emphasized in urban places making high crime rates, homelessness, violence, etc. seem commonplace. Certainly, population studies in general and social demography studies, along with population economics and poverty research, in particular, supports the notion that a higher concentration of people in a particular geographic location leads to a higher incidence of experiencing various social problems. This is not to say, however, that identical problems do not exist in rural areas. The situations play out quite differently in rural counties, for instance, and may be more severe, since resource scarcity and lack of technical capabilities by and large hit rural areas much harder than in urban ones (Weber and Duncan, 2001).

In fact, according to the CRHPC, rural areas encompass 13 percent of California's population and 80 percent of the geography. Viewed from the impact of welfare reform, both the average welfare caseload and monthly variation of welfare caseloads are much greater in rural and agricultural California counties than in urban counties (Survey Research Center, UC Berkeley, 1999). Moreover, in a recent study on the rural dimensions of welfare reform and poverty, Weber, et al. (2002) argue that low-income families in rural areas often face personal as well as structural conditions that hinder their success of transitioning from welfare to work. In reality, considerable structural barriers (e.g., fewer and lower-wage jobs, longer distances to services and jobs, limited or no public transportation, and lack of child care

options—to name a few) are unique to rural areas and add to the complexity of the problems experienced by rural residents.

Even though rural areas are exceedingly diverse across and within American states, they all share one common characteristic: relatively low population density. This characteristic shapes the economic prospects of rural communities and regions, and the capacity of local public and nonprofit sectors to provide community services. A report on rural California counties conducted by the California Energy Commission notes that small rural counties have an average population density of 40 persons per square mile, which is one tenth of the population density of 412 for larger counties within the state. Additionally, the same study reports that the average per capita personal income for smaller counties (the lowest at \$14, 553 in Kings county) is \$22, 578—that is, eleven percent lower than the statewide average of \$25, 368 per persons. In this vein, understanding the differences between urban and rural areas and how the demographic and economic characteristics of these counties produce these differences is key. The distinctions help researchers accurately explore various social problems and their implications for social policy development, in general. More importantly, this contextual information sets the stage for understanding the difficult surroundings in which rural churches function.

Preliminary Findings from Seven Rural Churches

As noted earlier, each of the seven churches are affiliated within a single Pentecostal/ Apostolic or “Oneness”³ denomination. I formally interviewed all church leaders (N = 7) in a semi-structured format; this allows for all respondents to answer the same set of questions, but also permits the interviewer to follow up using the probing technique if necessary. These in-depth interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Observational data was gathered by direct observation and participation in appropriate congregational activities including worship services; bible study; food, clothing and holiday package distribution; board meetings, district and regional fellowship meetings, national conferences and an international convention. I also reviewed individual church documents, as well as organizational documents. This “triangulation” approach is said to enhance the validity and reliability of qualitative research (Newman, 1998). Moreover, “triangulation” ensures accuracy of interpretation by combining several data collection strategies or data sources in the same design. On average, three to five conversational interviews with lay members at each church (N=30) were conducted during my observation of service programs in action. Although the formal interview instrument was shortened and slightly modified to accommodate conversation-style interviews with lay members, the interviewer—as much as possible—maintained a heightened awareness of the formal questions. Personal contacts with subject congregations facilitated access to each church. Following is a first look at the results from the

interviews, observation and documents review. Be aware that these are preliminary findings and a more thorough examination of the data must be conducted.

1. Tell me about your church and what you believe the purpose of its existence is.

More times than not, the majority of the respondents said that the primary goal of the church (which after closer analysis they interpreted to mean their organization as a whole) is to “further the spread of the Gospel and to give support to each other.” Interestingly, all seven pastors assertively hold that their existence is “for the propagation of the faith.” When asked for clarification, one pastor declared, “we, as the body of believers, Christ being the head, have an evangelistic mission to share the good news of salvation with the world and that’s why we exist.” As observed in the fieldwork, this potential organizational and local church goal did not influence the delivery of service to any individual who requested assistance. However, members did strongly encourage individuals to “turn [their] lives over to Jesus since he is truly the one answer to all problems, no matter what that is.” Informal, interviews further uncovered this philosophy in their outreach efforts (of what they call “evangelism”).

2. What type(s) of social service programs (i.e., ministries) does your church currently offer? How active are these programs? At whom are they targeted and who staffs them? Is your church involved in any collaborative projects with other churches or organizations? If yes, with whom and what projects?

Pre-tests of the interview questions revealed the difference in concepts I used to identify and convey information versus those used in the church setting to express certain ideas. For instance, a couple of pastors noted that the use of “social service programs” would be an unfamiliar and even foreign phrase to their colleagues. They each suggested a more suitable term such as “ministries” since this is how they refer to services offered. From interviews and church documents of one church (in Lemoore), services ranged from transportation to and from church, to monthly food support for families within the congregation, to helping members with rent, to visiting inmates at nearby prisons and county jails. Additionally, another pastor (in Hanford) said, his church offers counseling on a variety of issues for all family members, monthly youth and elderly activities, and “the most important” is spiritual development opportunities for members through formal classes. Services vary across congregations, but in general, each church has family counseling services (individual or as a group); some type of material support such as food, clothing, or cash assistance, youth and/or elderly ministries; “music and sacred arts auxiliaries,” which “shares the Gospel in different artistic and dramatic art forms.” In addition, every church supports the denomination’s international missions.

As far as current activity of programs, the majority of the lay members agree, “[their] churches are not as active anymore” as far as outreach ministries (i.e., direct evangelism) to non-members; “but [they] really support the members.” One woman recounts,

“We used to go out every Saturday and knock on doors in the community and hand out food baskets with a message that says ‘Jesus loves you’ and the church’s telephone number and address if the person needed to talk, but everyone knows us by now. If we want to break new ground, we’d have to drive twenty minutes to half an hour away into the next city. This doesn’t make much sense for us to do that because we have sister churches handling those areas. So, we basically continue our bake sales, car washes, and barbeque cookouts for fundraising events...We don’t do much evangelizing, these days.”

This sentiment is generally shared by other lay members and several pastors. The pastors believe that the church has lost its credibility due to its own shortcomings. In fact, the Pastor in Wasco shares his perspective in the following excerpt:

“The church is supposed to be the agent of change for community transformation, but we are struggling ourselves; how are we supposed to lift up our community? We are a small church with very limited resources and every church in our district faces the same problems. The membership for each church ranges from 20 to 60 persons at most and we take up about \$25 to \$40 every Sunday. This is less than \$100 a month for offerings. We also have tithes and weekly services meeting offerings, but the total income for the church on a good month is \$500. Many of us [pastors] have to work full-time jobs in order to support our families and the church.”

From this passage, one gets a clear picture of the economic hardship experienced by these churches. With regards to the target audience of programs, the pastors assert that their main priority is to serve their members, but they are open to helping anyone. Interestingly, the pastors raised the concern of not being able to adequately assist the Spanish-speaking families that come through their doors and from my observations many of them end up turning them away because of the language barriers.

The members of each church staff the programs. When asked if outside volunteers are utilized, every pastor responded in the negative. They prefer to know who is involved in their ministries because “everyone needs to be on the same page as far as doctrine is concerned.” Individuals interested in serving in the church must be members of the church and those who are not and desire to volunteer are usually in the process of becoming a member.

Regarding collaboration with other churches and/or like-minded organizations, several pastors spoke about the lack of support due to weak relationships with other church leaders in the city. Specifically, the pastor in Corcoran mentioned,

“We tried to reach out to other churches within the city by mailing out flyers about an upcoming “Church Appreciation” service, and we didn’t receive one response...Not, one response! Not even a call to say they couldn’t come. So, it is apparent that the pastors in the city are not interested in our events. So, we decided to just invite our churches in the district.”

Several other examples showed a strong disconnect between congregations within each city.

Nevertheless, churches within the denomination come together regularly to draw upon one another’s resources and to support one another emotionally and spiritually. For instance, every month, an all-day “fellowship meeting” brings together eight to ten churches for corporate Bible study, worship, and

meetings for pastors, pastor's wives, ushers, youth, and the music and arts ministry. Every fifth Saturday of the month, two to three districts join together for a regional service similar to the monthly fellowship meetings, but on a larger scale. Further, councils are hosted annually for every state, national conferences are held three times a year (in the Spring, Summer, Fall), and international conventions are held abroad every two to three years. These member services bring together hundreds of local churches for the spiritual development of individuals through teaching workshops on a variety of topics, opportunities for leaders at different levels of ministry to meet and discuss their issues; youth activities for different age groups; and corporate evangelism and outreach services.

3. Which of the church's ministries would you say have been most successful and which are not? What do you think contributes to the success or failure?

Most of the pastors did not think of their ministries in terms of success or failure, so there was some difficulty responding to this question. This is did not appear to pose as a problem during the pre-test, but one in which I faced during the course of conducting interviews. After much discussion, most of the pastors claimed that they had not experienced any failures besides their inability to minister to large Spanish-speaking families. Even then, the pastors admitted to "going through the children to get to the parents, since many of them are bilingual." The pastors genuinely seem to believe what the pastor in Tulare made plain, "any work done unto the service of Jesus Christ cannot be viewed as failure."

4. What do you think about government-funded, church-based services? Do you think your church might be interested in applying for a grant to establish new programs or expand already existing services?

The majority of the pastors do not have favorable attitudes towards working along side government agents. Every pastor expressed concerns about losing control of what they can and cannot do. However, most of the pastors said they might be interested in applying for and receiving government funding if there was a guarantee that government would not try to control them. Lay members seemed more optimistic about the prospects of working with government agencies. Many think that it's generally a good idea, but do not have faith that their church will get "entangled in these sort of relationships because the pastors would most likely not allow it."

5. Have you heard of "charitable choice"? If yes, what do you think about the legislation? If not, explain what charitable choice is and proceed with the follow up, what do you think of the idea?

Taken as a whole, the majority of pastors had not heard of Charitable Choice, and very few lay members were knowledgeable about the law.

6. Suppose your church was given a grant from the government to provide new services (or additional services). How do you think the church would use those funds? What kinds of services would your church be able to provide and/or be interested in providing?

Responses to these final questions are very rich in details, however the remaining length of this document does not permit an adequate discussion. Thus, I will retain this information for the longer version of this paper.

Conclusion

Taken in light of the preliminary findings, I revisit the guiding research question: *Can Rural Churches in Central Valley California Expand Their Role of Social Services for the Communities They Serve?* Based on this research, my answer is simply no. The stories of the pastors and lay members depict on-going and courageous efforts in serving the diverse needs of mainly their members in low-income, isolated communities. Pastors shared their economic struggles and questioned their ability to “lift up the communities out of the conditions they live in, especially their Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters,” as one pastor declared. These concerns can be viewed more broadly as a potential result of economic hardship experienced by rural residents in severely depressed regions. As discussed earlier, people who live in sparsely rural areas face unique barriers that are associated with low-population densities; churches are not exempt. These results have serious policy implications that will be addressed in more detail at the conference.

Notes

¹I use the term “partnership” more broadly to include different forms of collaboration between private, not-for-profit, and public sectors. I am however aware that inter-organizational relations scholars interested in government and non-government relations differentiate several dimensions of partnership in the literature.

²I refer to “faith-based organizations” in the broadest sense as religious or religiously-affiliated not-for-profit entities.

³Interviews and church/organizational documents explain that “oneness” refers to the non-Trinitarian doctrine and liturgy of water baptism (following the Biblical passage, Acts 2:38) in the Name of Jesus only, rather than the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the baptism of the Holy Spirit (following the Biblical passage, Acts 2:4). Oneness Pentecostal theology, thereby, states there is only one person in the Godhead, one must be baptized to be saved, and speaking in tongues is a necessary sign for salvation.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your church and what you believe the purpose of its existence is.
2. What type(s) of social service programs (i.e., ministries) does your church currently offer? How active are these programs? At whom are they targeted and who staffs them? Is your church involved in any collaborative projects with other churches or organizations? If yes, with whom and what projects?
3. Which of the church's ministries would you say have been most successful and which are not? What factors do you think contribute to the success or failure?
4. What do you think about government funding churches that provide human services? Do you think your church might be interested in applying for a grant to establish new programs or expand already existing services?
5. Have you heard of "charitable choice"? If yes, what do you think about the idea behind the legislation? If not, explain what charitable choice is and proceed with the follow up, what do you think of the idea?
6. Suppose your church was given a grant from the government to provide new services (or additional services). How do you think the church would use those funds? What kinds of services would your church be able to provide and/or be interested in providing?