

Denominational Research Report

Exploring Rural/Non-rural Differences among United Methodist Churches and Clergy in North Carolina

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August 7, 2011

Published version:

Miles, Andrew, and Rae Jean Proescholdbell. 2011. "Denominational Research Report: Exploring Rural/Non-rural Differences among United Methodist Churches and Clergy in North Carolina." *Review of Religious Research* 53(3):371-372.

Available at: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs13644-011-0030-5>

Description

Despite the fact that nearly one-third of churches in the United States are located in predominately rural areas, researchers have paid little attention to rural churches and the experiences of their clergy. What little empirical literature does exist typically examines rural churches without providing data for comparisons to churches in other locations. This study uses church records and a survey of 1,726 actively serving United Methodist Church (UMC) clergy in North Carolina to examine rural/non-rural differences. Analyses were restricted to clergy serving in churches (N = 1,505), and those with non-missing data for each outcome. Three unique ordination statuses exist within the UMC: elder, local pastor, and pastors recalled from retirement (retired pastors). Churches were coded as rural based on clergy descriptions of the areas surrounding their primary congregations (e.g., "rural or open country"). Church size was measured as number of members.

Selected Findings

We hypothesized that rural and non-rural churches would have fewer members and less income due to less job opportunity and lower wages in rural areas. Data revealed that rural churches had lower average offerings and averaged \$116.22 less in budget per member compared to non-rural churches, a difference which corresponds to .36 standard deviations (SD) of the total range of per capita budget values, and that rural churches averaged 119 members vs. 298 in non-rural areas. Significant per capita budget differences remained even after taking into account church size (number of members) and ordination status, suggesting a persistent link between rural location and lower church income. We also found that local pastors and retired pastors were more likely to serve in rural churches, with 61.8% of local pastors and 68.1% of retired pastors working in rural areas.

Exploratory analyses revealed that church size and ordination status largely explain rural/non-rural differences. For example, rural church members attended church at a higher rate (46.3% vs. 40.0% of total membership), and rural churches paid fewer benevolences. However, these differences disappeared once church size and ordination status was accounted for, suggesting that these trends may exist in small churches headed by local or retired clergy in both rural and non-rural areas.

We also found that clergy serving in rural churches reported praying more often each week and higher levels of spiritual vitality. Spiritual vitality was assessed using a new measure with two sub-scales, one that captures feeling God's presence in one's life, and another that measures feelings of God's presence in one's ministry. While most clergy reported fairly high levels of spiritual vitality, rural clergy

reported scores that were .30 SD higher for feeling God's presence in life and .25 SD higher for feeling God's presence in ministry. However, these differences and the higher levels of prayer disappeared when controlling for ordination status and church size, suggesting that rurality contributes less to clergy spiritual vitality and prayer practices than does being a local or retired pastor and/or serving in a small church.

Thus, UMC pastors and leaders may be interested to know that differences they once assumed to be due to the rural setting may be more accurately attributed to church size or pastor ordination status. Nevertheless, important rural/non-rural differences may still exist among the many constructs that we did not measure, such as pastoral effectiveness, congregants' satisfaction with their pastors, and the expectations that rural congregants have of their pastors. Future research should investigate the extent to which these findings generalize to UMC churches in other locations, and to other denominations.