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Is The Little White Church To Go?

State's Scattered Places Of Worship May Consolidate, Maryland Ministers Think. Good Roads, Automobiles, Better Preachers And More Activity Mark Trend.

By BETTY M. SNYDER.

THE little red schoolhouse has fallen prey to the trend of modernization. Long sung and lauded as the foundation of American education, it has served its day and been supplanted by the centralized school with its elaborate system of busses to convey distant pupils.

Along with that little red schoolhouse was usually mentioned in the verse of a decade or two ago the little white church snugly sifted in its grove of whispering pines.

A strongly sentimental attachment for the tiny rural church of his childhood glows in the average American heart. He remembers with a certain affectionate sadness the place where he learned his first Sunday-school lesson. The church of his youth holds as secure a place in his memories as the school where he learned his letters.

What is to become of that small rural church? Is it to follow the path blazed by the tiny schoolhouse and pass into extinction?

The decline of the country church, which has proved so disturbing to national denominational leaders during the last fifteen years, is reviewed in a report made public by the Institute of Social Research. Figures are given to show that nearly a third of the members of village churches throughout the United States are farmer folk who have forsaken their country churches for those in nearby villages.

IN the Middle Atlantic and Middle Western regions village churches have almost as many members living in the country as the country churches have members. In the Far West the total membership roll of the country churches is only one-third of the country members enrolled in village churches.

Even in the South, where the tendency is less marked, three out of every ten country people belonging to churches have united with village organizations.

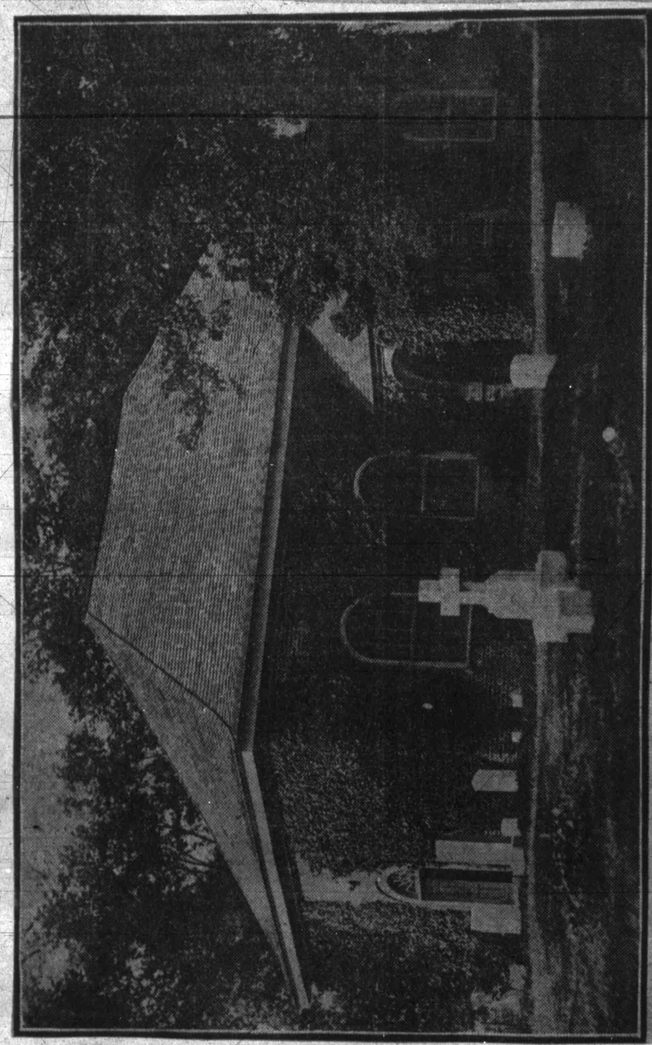
"This movement villageward has had a marked influence on rural religion," says the report. "It has meant fewer in attendance at country church services and more irregular services, diminishing funds and, therefore, a still more poorly paid leadership.

"True, there are exceptions. In all but twenty-five communities there were found country churches. The South, as a region, has not succumbed to the tendency of country churches to decline to the same degree as other regions.

"The question of why country people preferred village churches to country churches was answered in all regions in the same way. The village church has a better preacher, a better building and frequently better music than the church at the crossroads. The automobile and improved roads have made it possible for the more prosperous to come to the center and enjoy these advantages and secure the satisfaction that comes from worshiping with numbers of people."

HOWEVER, conditions as set forth in this report do not prevail in Maryland. The State is peculiarly tenacious of old religious customs and it is the rule that the country church continues to hold its own and in many instances to grow.

Country churches in Maryland may be small, but in most denominations they continue active. The congregation may number but fifty souls, but these make up with enthusiasm their lack of numbers and the church continues to exist.



St. James' Protestant Episcopal Church, Anne Arundel county, is typical of the rural churches scattered over Maryland counties. This structure was erected in 1764 and its communion service has been in continual use since 1702.

Near Baltimore are a number of such small churches where the congregations remain in spite of the lure of the city churches. In many such people who have moved into the city to work retain their memberships in the rural churches and continue to attend services there.

It was in 1839 that the Presbyterian Church at Franklinville, Harford county, was founded. Small the congregation is, but it continues very active. The church not only is holding its own in regard to membership; it is installing modern improvements. There are electric lights and a new organ to testify to the flourishing condition of the congregation.

ANOTHER of the rural Presbyterian churches which continues active is the Chestnut Grove Church. This draws a membership of 147 from a five-mile radius. Organized in 1853, the church has held out serenely against the tide of modern churches in nearby towns.

Maryland is reluctant to lose its old churches. They are deeply rooted in the sentiment of the people who prefer to retain their own places of worship even if the congregation numbers but very few. Consolidation, which has done so much to remove the old-time rural churches in other sections does not meet with favor in Maryland.

"My ancestors helped build that church. My grandfather and my father were local preachers there. I was baptised and married there. My relatives are buried in that graveyard. I can never feel at home in any other church." This seems to be the sentiment of many of the rural people.

In the western counties the tendency to remain affiliated with the rural church is particularly evident. Frederick county, by way of illustration, is dotted with small churches. Enterprising looking buildings are they for the most part. Neatly kept, with graveyards that are in well-nigh perfect order, these small buildings stand as proof that religion in rural Maryland is not dying out.

IT is the custom for the people who move from the country communities into Frederick or some of the county's small towns to keep their church memberships and to go back to what they consider their "home church" each Sunday.

Denominational leaders in Maryland refuse to view with alarm any national figures showing that rural religion is dying out. Such, they say, is not the case in this State.

Rather do they look forward to the time when Maryland people will realize that the State has too many churches and will begin a series of consolidations. The Methodist Episcopal Church, through its department of rural work, is particularly interested in securing merging of country churches.

Maryland has numerous small churches scattered over its counties. It is not unusual to find fifty churches within an area of a few miles with a total population of several thousand. It is to eliminate such duplication of effort that leaders in many denominations are advocating merging of churches.

"THE time must come," said the Rev. H. W. Burgan, superintendent of the Baltimore district of the Methodist Church, "when the small churches will consolidate. The present generation is quite satisfied with the condition of the small churches, but the younger people are learning that they are not adequate. It is principally for sentimental reasons that the older people cling to their rural churches.

"In many instances their families have attended those churches for generations, their dead are buried in the adjoining graveyard, their very lives are wrapped up in the institution of that church.

"But the younger people are learning newer ways of service. They are going away to training schools, they are attending summer Bible schools, they are studying modern methods of teaching Sunday-school. And they are beginning to realize that modern methods cannot be employed in a small church. A building which has one or two rooms, as most of the rural churches have, cannot be adequate for a well-conducted Sunday-school.

"In Annapolis a church of thirty-one rooms was built recently. A church of this size may not be necessary in a small community, but certainly there must be more than two or three if the church is to be conducted to the best interests of the congregation.

"It is to the younger generation that the church looks for help in consolidation. They will come to realize how important modern equipment is and when that is weighed against sentiment the modern idea will win out.

"IT is a slow process. We meet many obstacles in doing away with the small rural churches, but in time they will be supplanted by consolidated churches. These may be consolidations of several churches of the same denomination in a district, or several denominations may join in building one church.

"Several plans have been tried out by churches wishing to merge. In some communities where there were churches of two denominations, the weaker sect agreed to close its church, provided the other denomination would withdraw from some other district."

Conditions which necessitated a large number of small churches have changed. When most of the rural churches were built Maryland had only dirt roads and traveling was an arduous undertaking. Three miles meant a long, hard trip driving behind a plodding horse, or even traveling horseback in very bad weather.

With the coming of motor cars and hard roads this difficulty was eliminated, but by this time the people were so firmly rooted in their attachment for their church that they continued to attend it regularly.

Specialization is entering into religious training as into every other form of modern endeavor. Ministers are being trained particularly for city or rural work according to their aptitude and choice. The result, religious leaders believe, will be a better type of leadership in the country districts, a growing interest in things religious and an increase in the scope of churches.

THE days when a minister considered long residence in a rural district a sign of incompetence are passing. The Methodist Church, said Mr. Burgan, is trying to find men who are interested in rural conditions, who like the country and prefer to work there. It is the church's hope that these men will go into the rural communities with the intention of staying there.

In years gone by it was considered a promotion for a minister to be moved from a rural to a city charge. Not alone for financial reasons did a minister want to go to the city. True, he usually was paid a much larger salary there than in his country charge. But there was an intangible something about the very word city which appealed.

The man who went from a country parish to a city church was considered fortunate and was envied by his less happy brethren.

Efforts are being made to raise the salary of the rural minister, to improve his living conditions and to make his field of work attractive and interesting to him. The Methodist Church has formed circuits where one minister serves several churches. Church authorities profess themselves well contented with the results. In some sections of Maryland a minister serves as many as seven churches. In others he has two, or three under his charge.

THE rural church is an important factor in community life in Maryland. In many districts it is the ruling influence in social life. Where the church has a hall it is used for all sorts of gatherings. Grange, farm bureau, women's clubs, parent-teacher associations meet there. It is the scene of suppers, fairs and bazaars.

There has been a feeling that the same spirit which has given the country store a staggering blow would be directed at the churches. Rural storekeepers all over the country are bemoaning the fact that with the coming of the automobile their trade has been cut down. The farmers use their automobiles to go to the nearest town to do their buying rather than trade at the country store, as in other days.

Particularly is this true on Saturday nights, when the lure of the movies in the town vanquishes the crossroads store, which may be much nearer, but has none of the small town's entrancing glitter and crowd.

It is one of the inconsistencies of rural Maryland people that they do not seek religion where they look for entertainment. The automobile makes the road to church quicker and more comfortable, but the road still leads to the rural church.

AN experiment in adapting religion to modern rural conditions is being carried on at Hopewell, Ind. Under the leadership of Rev. John Ferguson a sort of community project is being conducted there.

This church is in every sense a rural one. The church, the manse and the school constitute a group of isolated buildings. Not only are religious services conducted there but all sorts of community enterprises are carried on. Special courses of study are given for the women of the community. Various clubs and societies have been formed and the result is a flourishing rural community with a central place of interest. Even a weekly newspaper is published.

Many and loud have been the lamentations of various people interested in religious progress in the rural communities, who have decried modern inventions as leading away from church attendance. An entirely different view of the situation is taken by the Rev. Bruce H. McDonald, executive secretary of the committee of national missions, Baltimore Presbytery.

Mr. McDonald views the radio particularly as an asset to the country church.

"Many a farmer who wasn't in the habit of going to church," he said, "has tuned in on a church service Sunday morning simply because the most powerful station on the air happened to be broadcasting it. He then became interested in the minister's message and in church attendance. We often find that he begins to go to church after his interest was aroused first by listening to his radio."

That Maryland in time will be forced to give up her old country church is acknowledged by leaders of nearly all denominations. But that this will mean a dimunition of interest in religion is denied. Rather is it taken as an indication of advancing interest in matters religious and an increase in its influence upon the lives of the rural citizens.