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- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

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- Recently Published
- Browse by Topic
- Browse by Feature Type

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- About Leadership Education
- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

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- Articles »
- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
- Reflections »
- Sermons »

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## Quiz: The church in rural America

*Rural churches are losing ground as people and businesses migrate to metropolitan areas. But congregations in rural areas also have unique strengths. Take our quiz to test your knowledge of issues and trends facing congregations in rural America.*

by [David Briggs](#)

May 10, 2011

*Editor's note: Scroll down for quiz.*

The ideal of rural America beckons for those traveling on the road leading in and out of Bowbells, N.D., with vistas of amber fields set against unspoiled backgrounds of clouds and sky.

But the reality is a Main Street filled with shuttered storefronts and cracked sidewalks. Once there were competing food markets, restaurants and a hotel; what remains open are a gas station, a senior center, a bar and a couple of banks.

And the churches.

Bowbells United Methodist Church and Bethlehem Lutheran Church are near one another on Main Street, and St. Joseph's Catholic Church, an old stone church, is a block from downtown.

All three keep their doors unlocked 24 hours a day. This gives children playing in a neighborhood park a place to use a bathroom, and travelers stranded in a northern North Dakota winter a place to stay.

Beth Aufforth, a longtime member of Bowbells United Methodist Church, knows the stakes are high in keeping the church doors open.

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“It still means there is a town that exists,” she said. “As long as the churches don’t leave and don’t abandon us, there’s still life in us.”

What is increasingly uncertain, however, is how long some churches in rural towns like Bowbells will be able to hold out. One reason for this concern is the shift of population and businesses to cities and suburbs that has sapped the strength of rural communities generally.

But many rural church leaders also worry that financially strapped denominations are shifting their focus to churches in growing suburbs as [rural churches decline](#). They hope that denominations will re-imagine rural areas as a mission field and look to the many rural-church success stories, including new ministry models, parish partnerships and the rural church’s strengths in building a strong sense of belonging and empowering leaders.

In a [2010 survey](#) of nearly 1,000 rural church leaders, the United Methodist Rural Fellowship found rural congregations feel unheard in and misunderstood by the larger church. They seek more education and financial resources, more proportionate representation on church boards and an equal value placed on their ministry.

A central concern, the survey found, was a lack of qualified pastoral leadership. They seek support to have trained, experienced pastors who have knowledge and understanding of the rural context, the report said.

“I think we have it backwards,” one respondent said. “We need to assign the more experienced to the places where our denomination is suffering, and that is the rural and smaller church.”

Many of those who responded also said they would like programs, training, resources and materials designed for the rural church to support innovation and growth and to share best practices.

But there is hope.

Congregations in rural areas have many strengths, said Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce of the [U.S. Congregational Life Survey](#). Rural congregations do particularly well in such areas as helping worshippers grow spiritually, providing meaningful worship, involving people in the church, building a strong sense of belonging and empowering leaders, Woolever and Bruce reported in their book, “Places of Promise: Finding Strength in Your Congregation’s Location.”

Many United Methodist Rural Fellowship survey respondents said they believed their congregations were relatively healthy -- more healthy than the communities in which they were located.

And researchers have found plenty of success stories. New ministry models that include parish partnerships, re-imagining rural communities as mission fields and strengthening community outreach programs have built up rural churches, United Methodist News Service reported in its series [“Harvest of Hope: The Rural Church in America.”](#)

Another key to revival, church leaders told UMNS, is a willingness to let go of crumbling buildings and embrace new traditions in aspects of church life from music to evangelism.

Many congregations are embracing change. Bowbells United Methodist Church, for example, welcomed its first female pastor not too long ago and started a midweek family service.

Aufforth, and thousands of other rural ministry leaders, have a message for the larger church:

“We do exist. We have just as much at stake, even though we’re not as big,” she said. “We worship the same God.”