

**Of Rural Margins and Unbridled Hope:**  
**Toward a New Awakening**  
By The Reverend David L. Ostendorf

*Preface.*

I share this piece, this offering, because it represents and reflects what I believe needs to be at the heart of the call of the Christian community in the days and years ahead—that is, a return to the Word and the world in every sense of that meaning, building from the proverbial bottom-up toward a truly radical faith.

I suspect that many readers may quickly bypass this piece, given its rural flavor. Rural is, after all, not central to the contemporary church, regardless of its theological or political bent. My hope, however, is that for that reason alone, its focus may pique interest, or at least curiosity. Can anything “progressive” truly come from the rural red margins?

To be blunt, I really do not like, nor do I use the term “progressive Christianity.” It strikes me as yet another un-useful twist in the old-line liberal road that dead-ended some years back when “mainstream Christianity” loosed its moorings in the Word and in the world, and got educated, credentialed, and denominationalized.

Does the term mean that all “other” Christian belief is “regressive?” Is it yet another effort to separate and distinguish from the “Christian right”—evangelicals who have allegedly usurped both theological influence and political power that once rested in “our” (largely white and middle-upper class) hands? Is it a polite way of ascribing, describing, and constructing a “new Christian left,” whatever that is? Questions linger that must be addressed.

Having grown up in a working class union family with deep roots in the church and in the faith, and having organized for over three decades with people, communities, and congregations across the nation on social, economic, and racial justice issues—particularly in its rural areas—I have become a serious skeptic of the degrees of separation Christians of all traditions and ideologies impose on one another.

The historical record of the church in this nation does not lean toward the “progressive” spectrum, having been part and parcel of the social, economic, and political power structure from the beginning—largely Constantinian in form and function in an emerging culture it longed to (and did) influence and shape. During those periods when “the common people” rose up in response to both political and theocratic powers the church was largely absent, as it is today. “Progressives” of the Christian bent were themselves extraordinarily limited in and by their world view, with little or no inclination to address the racist structures that strangled (and still strangle) real “progress.”

Christianity is a *radical* faith grounded in a baptismal call that prompted the outsider John the Baptist, upon being asked by the baptized “what then shall we do,” to send them back into society to change it from the inside out, to turn it upside down. You don’t get Jesus without John. You don’t get the realm of righteousness and justice without being “on the ground,” doing the hard work of building and unbuilding and upbuilding with the people—even those with whom one may not agree on many matters.

My concern about current efforts to shape a twenty-first century “progressive Christianity” is that the outcome will look a lot like a dressed-up version of the fading old mainline liberalism, with its mantra of welcoming all except those who don’t agree with the ever-lingering “us.”

My own experience tells me that the future of the faith lies in a different place, on the margins with the people and communities that “progressives” are often quick to dismiss. The truly radical Christianity of this young century might look like the work of those marginalized rural and urban folk of many faith traditions, classes, and races who *are* coming together around the Word to address—across all the spectra of imposed theological and political differences—the most fundamental issues of faith and justice and community life that they see and experience and feel deeply in their own place, a fulfillment of democratic aspirations and, indeed, a new Pentecost exploding in our midst and in our own time.

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For over thirty years it has been my privilege to work and organize with rural people, churches, organizations, and communities across the nation, and I believe I have finally come to a one-word descriptor—at least for now—of rural America. That word is...“stuck.”

“Stuck” has many connotations. It can be a first cousin to complacency, perhaps even to resignation. It can imply a longing for the familiar, as in a freed people camped in a desert, wishing they were back in Egypt making bricks for Pharaoh. “Stuck” can be a comfort zone, as in disciples desiring to stay put on a mountaintop with Moses, Elijah, and Jesus, rather than go back down into the valley. “Stuck” can be fear of what lies ahead, as in followers sleeping in the garden as a beloved teacher prepares for arrest, trial, and death. “Stuck”—one syllable, doesn’t go anywhere.

In rural America “stuck” has a litany of looks and feels. The rural diaspora has spun eighty percent of all Americans into metropolitan areas; half into suburbs. You know the litany: farm consolidation, industrial agriculture; empty Main Streets, overflowing malls; scarce jobs, low pay; limited health care, distant doctors; shrinking taxes, struggling schools; aging membership, worn-out leaders; church mergers, multi, multi-point parishes; abundant fear of an even more uncertain and foreboding future. Stuck.

I myself can get stuck in this morass—because it’s always easier to describe a problem than it is to address it, always easier to get comfortably mired by the paralysis of analysis than to develop solutions and take action. It’s all too big. Too complex. Too out of our control. Too overwhelming.

In 1995 I spoke at a national denominational gathering on the heels of Oklahoma City, where church leaders from across the country came together to develop strategies to counter the hatred that fueled that deadly attack. It was there in a small group setting that quickly ran itself into paralysis that I came up with the *Ostendorf Maxim* of mainstream church response to contemporary problems: “Everything is related to everything; therefore, nothing will be done about anything.”

Sometimes I just want to say to the rural church and rural communities: *Move! Move forward! Get over it!* Since the *late-eighteenth century* rural America has been relegated to the margins of this nation’s social, economic, cultural, and political life, a shrinking, diminishing border on an ever-larger quilt. It’s time to move on!!

Some years ago John Tunis wrote agonizingly of “the rural church problem” in the *Andover Review*:

The pressing question is no longer whether the church in the country is the same living institution which we have reason to believe it was in former generations, but is it now beyond the power of a willing and consecrated ministry to do anything to restore it. There are influences of the civilization to-day which are checking, if not weakening, the country town itself. A constant drain on its resources is made by the life of the larger cities, and there is no reason for hoping that the drain will cease.

That was in 1888. 1888! For well over a hundred years we have been grouching about “the rural church problem” and the demise of rural America. We’ve got to move on! Too many of us and too many of our people long for what is gone and will not return, stuck between memory and hope, more comfortable in the former, most uncertain about the latter. We are institutions that have become institutionalized—locked up in ourselves, with ourselves, in our past. Too many of our congregations—and our denominations—are more intent on surviving than thriving. Too many of us are lone-ranger pastors, unable, overwhelmed, or unwilling to recognize that it has been decades since *The Lone Ranger* went off the air.

On the other hand, it is from the rural margins that significant and substantial change—unbridled hope—has exploded onto the American scene. From the 1790s to the 1840s, American Christianity was transformed by the Second Great Awakening, which shook the old New England church establishment to the core. Frontier Baptists, Disciples, and circuit-riding Methodists birthed an insurgency of populist lay preachers, rough-hewn, evangelical, and “uneducated” by the standards of Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians. Camp meetings, vernacular preaching, charismatic worship, and free-wheeling Biblical and theological understandings undercut Calvinism, doctrine, rules and regulations, and the

assumed entitlement of power and prestige of the old-line churches and seminaries. Sound familiar??

This was a *rural* uprising, democratic in character, dynamic and unstoppable, populist and passionate, fed and led by ordinary people, a strain of American Protestantism that is, of course, still strong and still controversial. But then the Second Great Awakening got groggy. Methodists and Disciples and Baptists went to seminary, got credentialed, ordained, and denominationalized, entrenched, not unlike the establishment they had risen against. Churches of the South lined up behind slavery, and became their own white religious establishment.

But the aspirations and faith of the people could not be suppressed. *Unbridled hope cannot be suppressed!* Toward the end of the nineteenth century one of the most democratic uprisings in this nation's history—the populist movement—mobilized rural peoples to redress rampant economic exploitation by the railroads, grain companies, and banks. This populist insurgence *also* had deep religious roots, but *insignificant church involvement*. While the church stood on the sidelines the people persisted and moved forward; the language of faith was the richest and most passionate expression of the aspirations of a rural people hungering for social and economic justice. Their "unselfconscious literalism" enabled them to understand fully the nature of the Kingdom of God, the realm of justice in history and in their own time, and to lay claim to the Bible for the reconstitution of a society that was grinding them under.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the agrarian and labor insurgents of the Populist era were often held in contempt by the established churches. In reality, those churches were by then so aligned with government and the elites of the marketplace that their role and destiny were firmly set. The leaders of these churches were themselves members of the dominant class, usually far-removed from the frontier struggles of dirt-poor farmers and workers and—with few exceptions—simply did not relate to the express needs and demands of the people.

By lifting up these eighteenth century religious insurgencies, perhaps I, too, am stuck in over-glorified renditions of an unrepeatable past. *But unless we do understand the historic record, we will not be able to envision the possibilities of moving out of the current morass, or beyond our paralyzing fears*. We will not be able to see or to live into a different future with rural people, churches and communities. We will not get un-stuck.

The challenge that lies before each of us, all of us, is to seed a new awakening, to unleash the forces of unbounded hope and faithfulness still wrapped in the democratic aspirations and possibilities of rural people and communities. And that new awakening will—and must—grow in the twenty-first century out of a new community of faith, alive, engaged, and exuberant on the rural margins, in the settlements, villages, towns, and cities of the American countryside

Until 2003 or so the population of Walnut Grove, Minnesota—the town of *Little House on the Prairie* fame—stood at about 600. The sweeping prairie landscape made it a strong and traditional agricultural community, but the rural exodus made its storybook fame considerably larger than its contemporary reality.

Then a curious thing happened. Hmong elders from the Twin Cities decided that Walnut Grove would be a good place to live: today some 200 Hmong call the community home, their children filling classrooms and bringing new energy to quiet streets. The town grocery store is now Hmong-owned: different food, different race, different culture, different ways. You can imagine the initial impact: apprehension and uncertainty, locked doors and wary glances, anticipation and unknown possibilities.

Two weeks ago in Walnut Grove pastors and leaders of five churches and the growing Hmong community gathered to begin addressing key church and community issues identified in 325 one-on-one listening sessions they completed with residents in recent months. There were eighteen people at the table that bitterly cold Saturday. After lunch the work began, as always, with Biblical and theological reflection, the foundation of a growing, shared commitment to engage anew in community life.

All the myriad responses of the church and community interviews—aimed at building relationships and discerning pressing issues—had been harnessed by the Leadership Team into broad categories: communication, or the lack thereof, particularly with regard to the town council; inter-cultural relationships; and economic betterment.

Concrete responses to address these concerns also came out of the interviews, *out of the people themselves*, and not just from those leaders at the table. Recommendations would be drawn up for the town council to improve communication with the community; participation by residents in council meetings would be organized. A community cleanup day, followed by a picnic, would bring long-time residents together with the Hmong community, to build stronger relationships. A proposal to restore a recently eliminated economic development position for the community would be advanced. The need for a hardware store in town prompted discussion about pooled resources that might yield new business and new employment.

Unstuck. Walnut Grove is getting unstuck *because the church is taking its life in and with the community seriously, grounded in the word of God unfolding out of the lives of diverse people at a common table*. Pastor Bonnie Lomen began laying the groundwork for this Renewing Community effort with clergy colleagues, church and Hmong leaders last fall, seeding and unleashing energy, faithfulness, and vision for a different future, a sense of new possibility for a town seeking to be a community.

On rural margins across the country unbridled hope is fueling such possibility—in poor and remote places like Milan and Green City, Missouri; in larger towns like Emporia, Kansas and Cleveland, Tennessee.

In these places the Word of God—its transformative power unleashed from within the people through their regular and consistent engagement in participatory, contextual Biblical and theological reflection—drives mainline Protestant, Catholic, Pentecostal, evangelical, and non-denominational pastors, lay leaders, and churches to transcend their differences and fears, and work together to engage anew in community mission, community life.

Interpreters assist Spanish-speaking families in the health care system. A public transportation system serves low-wealth, working class neighborhoods, providing new access to the clinic and hospital. Workers go to a Community Development Credit Union to cash checks and secure loans instead of to exploitative payday loan operations. Adult dropouts get their high school diploma in an innovative education program. Thousands of people gather in a multicultural festival. All of this and more is, I believe, sign of the new possibilities for the renewing and renewed church, engaging in mission, building community.

However, let me be clear: this is mission *with*, not *for* others.

This is engagement rooted in the development of trusting relationships with those we usually define as “other”—other churches, other faith traditions, other cultures, other economic classes, other races.

This is engagement that shatters the safe and comfortable definitions and delineations we put upon one another—conservative, liberal; fundamentalist, mainline; right, left; red, blue—and compels us to take seriously, at last, that we might, indeed, be one.

This is engagement that moves beyond the upper echelons of hide-bound, institutionalized ecumenism and the rigidities of historic denominationalism, toward a truly radical incarnation of faithfulness.

This is engagement grown out of a foundational commitment to listen to and act in response to the voices of the peoples of faith—a new democratization of the church that can yield, at last, common purpose, clear vision, and creative change.

This is engagement that is hard, slogging work, a new way of doing and being in ministry, a new way of discipleship, a new way of leadership, a new way of evangelization, a new way of being and becoming the church.

This is engagement that, in its fulfillment, counters injustice and shrivels principalities and powers as it builds toward the realm of righteousness. It is not easy, but it must be done.

The church in rural America has tremendous assets to seed and spread this engagement; what it all-too-often lacks is the creative imagination and the relentless, faith-filled will to make it so.

There is no reason whatsoever that those of our congregations, families, friends, and neighbors who are part of the far-flung rural diaspora—those who have gone to the cities and suburbs—should not be invited to participate with us in the journey toward a new awakening. Their roots run deep in our communities, and perhaps they await only the invitation to join us by giving of their resources and leadership as we move into vibrant new possibilities.

There is no reason whatsoever that we cannot experiment with new forms of church life—in shared ministry centers, for example, where pastors and churches of an entire community or county have offices in one physical place, and work regularly together to advance shared ministries and mission.

There is no reason whatsoever that we cannot rebuild our communities with the creative support of the vast wealth that lies at our fingertips. In rural Nebraska alone some \$94 billion will pass to the next generation in the coming decades. Community foundations in Nebraska, Minnesota, and other states are committed to securing that wealth for the larger good.

There is no reason that judicatories, denominations, and seminaries cannot be compelled—yes, compelled—to support their churches in rural America in this journey. Quite frankly, I do not believe they can or should lead the journey, and we should not expect (or want) them to do so. That does not let them off the proverbial hook, however. They are not responsible for us, but to us, to our congregations, to our communities. If you want them as partners in the journey, you need to make it happen yourselves.

The hard, slogging work before us on this journey from rural margins toward unbounded hope, toward a new awakening that could infect a nation—creative, faithful engagement that moves beyond “stuck”—is possible only to the degree that it is grounded in the dynamic, prophetic, saving Word of God, alive and exuberant among the peoples of God.

Our calling is to help override the lingering trepidation and fears of the rural peoples of God in this time, this place, this century *by eliciting with them and bringing into reality a new vision of what life in the beloved community might be, even in our lifetimes, even in our small places.* It is to particularize and make concrete on rural margins the poetic images of the realm of God’s righteousness.

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One of my favorite poems is Carl Sandburg’s *Prairie*, a portion of which I carry in my wallet to remind me of my roots and my dreams:

O prairie mother, I am one of your boys  
I have loved the prairie as a man with a heart  
shot full of pain and love  
Here I know I will hanker after nothing

So much as one more sunrise or a sky  
moon of  
fire doubled to a river moon of water.  
I speak of new cities and new people  
I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.  
I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down,  
a sun dropped in the west.  
I tell you there is nothing in the world only  
an ocean of tomorrows—a sky of  
tomorrows.  
I am a brother of the cornhuskers who  
say to sundown: tomorrow is a day!

My brothers and sisters, tomorrow is a day!

Tomorrow is a day to start anew, to build the church for the new century, to launch a  
new awakening!

Tomorrow is a day to rekindle hope in rural communities, in all communities, with and  
among the peoples!

Tomorrow is a day to rejoice, to build, to celebrate, to create, to craft and live a new  
and imaginative life!

Tomorrow is a day, my friends!!

Tomorrow is a day!!

Thanks be to God!

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