



(Why Ministry in Forgotten Communities Matters)



A
**BIG
GOSPEL**

IN SMALL PLACES

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InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com.

Taking a Fresh Look at Small Places



SINCE 2016, there's been an increased curiosity about rural areas and small towns in the United States—the parts of the country largely responsible for the election of President Donald Trump.¹ The current curiosity is mainly from those who live in the big places, the cultural centers, and the major cities, and it generally runs along the lines of “Who *are* these people who voted for Trump? And *why* did they vote for him?” A flood of articles about rural America and its problems have appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, and other publications. J. D. Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, about his roots in small-town Appalachia, has become a bestseller. Academic researchers, such as Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow, have been busy trying to explain rural America to the rest of the nation.

The renewed interest in small places isn't limited to the United States. On June 23, 2016, the United Kingdom voted for Brexit (the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union). Voters in small places influenced the result: more than half of voters in the English countryside chose to leave the European Union while big

cities throughout the UK voted to remain. Commentators drew parallels between the influence of rural American and British voters.² And once again, similar questions were raised: who are these people, what do they care about, and why did they vote as they did? Other commentators have drawn attention to a strong urban-rural divide in Europe and the ways that divide has contributed to heated debates about immigration and to the increasing influence of nationalistic politics.³

THREE REALITIES OF THE RENEWED INTEREST IN SMALL PLACES

For the time being, the city mouse is more curious about his odd country cousin. The Trump election, the Brexit vote, and the subsequent fascination with the small places represent a significant turn of events.

This phenomenon reflects massive global shifts. Until recently in human history, there was no particular fascination with small places simply because almost *every place* was a small place. In 1800, more than 90 percent of the world's population lived in rural areas. To understand *rural*, you could simply talk to your neighbors or reflect on your own experience. Even after the global migration to cities accelerated, the countryside was still important enough that it wasn't usually deeply misunderstood or altogether forgotten. Rural and small-town life has been the main reality for most of the world for most of its history. No longer.

The renewed interest in small places presents a unique gospel opportunity. Despite rapid worldwide urbanization, the global rural population is currently about 3.4 billion people, nearly half the world's population.⁴ I wrote much of this book in Northern Ireland, where my wife's family lives: around 37 percent of Northern Ireland's population is rural. Rural England has a population of around ten million—about 19 percent of the overall population.⁵ New England, where my family and I live, has many

rural areas with tremendous spiritual needs. A 2017 Barna study on the spiritual landscape of New England found “a movement that is quietly revitalizing Christianity in the diverse urban centers of New England, while the broader population of New England remains unreached and spiritually adrift.”⁶

This is true the world over: many rural people do not know Jesus. This means that if the nations are to be reached with the gospel, followers of Jesus can't stay in the cities and suburbs. We must venture into and minister long-term in the small, forgotten places. Perhaps the current interest of our broader culture will spark curiosity among those who long to bring gospel hope wherever there are people. Encouragingly, since 2016 there's been increased evangelical interest in rural areas and small towns. Numerous articles and some excellent books and conferences are calling for rural church planting and renewal efforts. Several new rural ministries and networks have formed (including Small Town Jesus and the Acts 29 Rural Collective), and there's been increased visibility for organizations like the Vineyard's Small Town USA initiative, the Rural Home Missionary Association, and Village Missions.

But most likely the renewed interest from our broader culture will not last. The fascination will fade as the 2016 election grows more distant and the national media focuses on other matters. While the current cultural interest regarding small places is indeed a gospel opportunity, it is only an *opportunity*. It's a springboard, not a pool to swim in. Christian interest in the small places must be energized by something deeper than media interest. In the past generation or two, the Christian subculture has followed the broader culture's lead in minimizing or ignoring small places. If we're only interested in small places because our broader culture is, we'll lose interest as soon as it does. I've heard Christian advocates for rural ministry try to rally excitement by making it cool again. But squeezing small towns into skinny jeans and flannel isn't good enough. Trendy things (by definition) don't last. An

enduring, tenacious passion for small-place ministry must be sourced from abiding realities like the character of God and the nature of the gospel. Our broader culture's current interest offers an opportunity to look afresh at the small places—but we must look with gospel vision. What will we see when we do?

DEFINING TERMS: WHAT COUNTS AS A SMALL PLACE?

I've been using the term *small places*. The title of this book is *A Big Gospel in Small Places*. So it's important to explain what I mean by that term. I certainly don't mean *small* in a geographical sense. More than 90 percent of land in the UK is natural or farmland, by some estimates rural areas cover more than 75 percent of America's land area, and rural areas cover much of the rest of the world's land area.⁷ Instead, when I refer to small places, I'm using the term in a nontechnical sense to refer to countryside and communities that are relatively small in population, influence, and economic power. I'm speaking of towns many people have never heard of, like Monson and Pepperell. I'm thinking of places like Lusk, Wyoming; the Rhondda Valley of Wales; and South Royalton, Vermont.

We can think of small places and big places on a continuum, with any given settlement of human beings falling somewhere along that line based on factors such as population, cultural influence, economic power, and degree of isolation from large urban centers. All the way on the "big place" end of that spectrum are the world's forty largest cities, which account for two-thirds of the world's economic output and shape global trends in fashion, education, entertainment, sports, and much else besides.⁸ Somewhere in the middle are the suburbs and exurbs that surround these great cities. On the "small place" end of the spectrum are towns like my hometown Monson and even smaller communities, such as the 429 Maine townships that don't have any local municipal government or even a normal name—places like T3 R4 WELS or T5 ND BPP. The unorganized areas of Maine account for more than

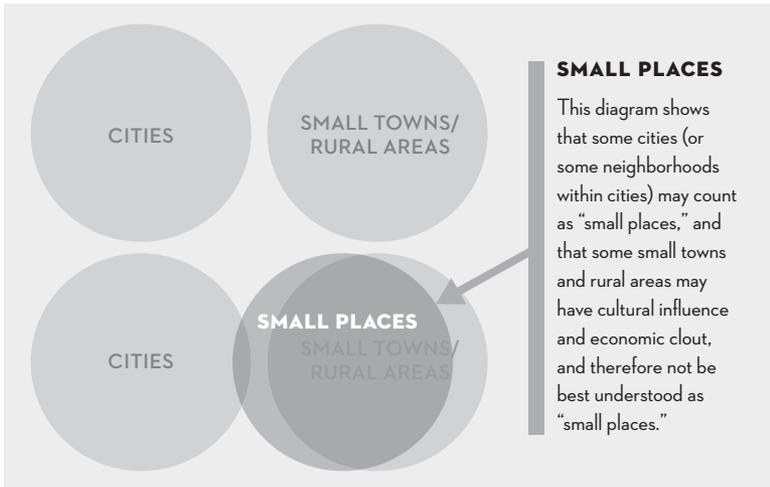
one half of its land area but contain a total of only nine thousand year-round residents. They're *very* small places!



This continuum is helpful for three reasons. First, it reminds us of the many differences between various small places (what some have called “multiple ruralities”). Though I’d plot both Monson and Pepperell on the small-place end of the spectrum, their differences are significant. Equally, an isolated agricultural town in the Midwest plains will be different in character from a small college town in the Northwest or a remote African village. These differences matter for life and ministry. We’ll explore their impact later in the book.

Second, as we consider the smallness or bigness of a community based on its population, economic power, and cultural influence, we find communities of large population and high density that are nonetheless quite limited in their economic power and cultural influence. A friend lives in an economically depressed region of Manchester, England, an area that has attracted many immigrants. Though Manchester is the third-largest metropolitan area in the United Kingdom, this part of the city is relatively small in economic power and cultural influence. It may fall somewhere closer to the small-place end of the spectrum than we’d initially think. Conversely, some places small in population nonetheless have an outsized cultural influence. In the United States, two of the eight Ivy League universities are in small towns: Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire (population 12,000), and Cornell in Ithaca, New York, (population 30,000). My wife graduated from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, located in a small, picturesque town of seventeen thousand. Both the university and the golf course (which regularly hosts the British Open) have a global influence. There are certainly elements of bigness in these places.

Because there's a very sizable overlap between small places (as I'm defining them) and small towns and rural areas, I'll often use those terms nearly synonymously in this book. That's because almost all small towns and rural areas qualify as small places, while relatively few cities do. But my repeated use of the term *small places* will be both a reminder that some small towns are *larger* (in influence and economic power) than might first appear and an invitation for those in poor, uninfluential parts of the city to see the elements of *smallness* in their places.



Third, the continuum also helps us see that any given place can contain mixed elements of rurality and urbanity—it may not be all one or the other. The current emphasis in the field of geography “resists an urban-rural binary,” seeing more of a range of “urbanness” and “rurality.”⁹ If you think about it for a moment, you can see why. There’s an arbitrariness involved in any statistical definition of *metropolitan area*, *urban*, *rural*, or *small town*. Is the definition based on population? If so, just how big must a particular cluster of people be in order to qualify as a small town or as urban? The same arbitrariness is involved when using other criteria. It turns out that demographers and government agencies

use different definitions. A United Nations report on world urbanization acknowledges that “there is no common global definition of what constitutes an urban settlement” and that the definition “varies widely across countries.”¹⁰ These varying definitions lead in turn to varying definitions of *rural* because demographers usually define *rural* negatively, as “whatever is not urban.” Even within the United States alone more than two dozen definitions of *rural* are used by federal agencies! Defining what constitutes a small town is equally arbitrary.¹¹

But neither the arbitrariness of statistical definitions nor the sheer number of available definitions means we should stop using them. If we want to measure urban and rural populations and realities (and we should), then we have to define the terms somehow. The arbitrariness of the definitions does suggest, however, that perhaps they shouldn’t be our only way of evaluating the nature of a place. A thick description that takes into account appearance, feel, and rhythm of life also matters. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, a scholar of rural America, notes that “the issue of how a place feels guides people’s perceptions of the difference between rural and urban as much as any other factor.”¹²

Of course it does. Most people develop their impressions of a place by spending time in it, not by researching what the US Census Bureau says about it. Brad Roth, a pastor in Moundridge, Kansas, suggests in his book *God’s Country* that “rural identity has more to do with how rural people experience the world.”¹³ We could say that *rural* and *urban* are quantitative (numbers, densities) and qualitative (perspectives, ways of life).

My town of Pepperell is an example of a place that’s not neatly definable. Its population of twelve thousand and its proximity to Nashua, New Hampshire, and Boston disqualify it as rural or small town according to some definitions. However, few who visit Pepperell would call it a city or even a suburb. It looks, feels, and behaves like a small, New England town. There’s a distinct

downtown area, a white-steepled church, and a local diner. We have community rituals, including our outdoor summer concerts at the bandstand and our New England-style town meetings (which get contentious at times). We lack the accoutrements of a city or suburb: no mall, no cinema, no big museums or cultural centers, no Starbucks, not even a high school (we regionalized years ago). While Pepperell is certainly not as far along the continuum toward *small place* as Monson, it's relatively small and maintains a strong degree of rural, small-town character. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council classifies Pepperell as a "country suburb."¹⁴ The *country* part may explain why I see a tractor drive past my house early some mornings.

I think most of us will be able to intuitively grasp whether a particular community falls more on the small place or big place end of the continuum. In this book I'll refer to various statistics and numerous studies of urban and rural areas. The relevance of these statistics to the place where you live will depend on where your community falls on the continuum. As I've pointed out, demographers define *urban* and *rural* variously, and I won't note their particular criteria every time I quote a survey or statistic. That would be distracting and unnecessary. The picture I'm painting and the case I'm making will hold true regardless.

The bottom line is that no matter which definitions we choose, there are billions of people living in small places around the world today—and *that* matters a lot. Those billions need Jesus and won't hear of him unless someone goes to them with the gospel (Romans 10:14-15). I've heard people mention the low percentage of small-town/rural dwellers in order to justify a prioritization of urban ministry. But consider that 16.4 percent of the world's population are atheists, agnostics, and religiously unaffiliated.¹⁵ We all know it's urgently important to reach them, even though they constitute a relatively low percentage of the overall population. Percentages aside, the numbers add up to

many souls. As Donnie Griggs reminds us, the total population of American small towns alone is about thirty-three million people, which is more than the populations of Morocco, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Peru, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, Nepal, Mozambique, Ghana, North Korea, Yemen, Australia, Madagascar, Cameroon, Angola, Syria, Romania, Sri Lanka, Cote d'Ivoire, Niger, Chile, Burkina Faso, Malawi, the Netherlands, Kazakhstan—you get the picture. (The list continues with more than a hundred other countries.)¹⁶

CONSIDERING PLACE

We're building a theological vision for small-place ministry centered on the gospel, and we'll begin by thinking about *place*. A helpful way to deepen our understanding of small places is to increase our awareness of the often flawed attitudes of our broader culture toward them. Understanding our culture's misperceptions will help ensure that our own instincts and actions don't simply follow its lead but are informed by the Bible and sound theology. In chapters two and three, we'll discover that small places are both better—and worse—than we think.

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