The Problem of Over-Churched and Unchurched Areas in Douglas County

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THE PROBLEM OF OVER-CHURCHED and Unchurched Areas in Douglas County

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Place of Church Attendance of Douglas County Farm Families, 1940

Open Country 26.3
Towns 68.9
Do Not Attend 4.8

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Figure 1. Attendance Areas in Douglas County of Village and Open Country Churches

Legend:

△ Open country church
△ Open country church with resident pastor
□ Village center
○ Number of churches in village centers

-0- The number within each area is the total population of the area as of 1940 (not including village population)

Figure 1 shows the attendance areas in Douglas county, of churches located in the area. It will be noted that churches in village centers serve considerably larger country areas than do churches located in the open country. Six hundred and seventy-seven, or over two-thirds of the 982 farm families attended church in towns and villages. Two hundred and fifty-nine farm families (26.3 percent) attended open country churches, while the remaining forty-six (4.8 percent) did not attend church.

Twenty-six churches were operating in Douglas county in 1940. Seventeen of these were located in the five towns and villages of the county, Armour and Delmont each having five of them. Corsica had four churches, Harrison two and New Holland one.

Of the nine open country churches three had a resident pastor, the others being served by pastors from town or village churches. This fact, together with the limited membership and infrequency of services, makes for inadequacy in the programs of open country churches. The population of each of the areas served by country churches is shown in Figure 1 to be much too small to support an active church even though (and this situation is probably never realized) everyone within the area was a church member.
Figure 2. Denominational Preferences of Farm Household Heads in Douglas County by Tenure Status, 1940

Legend: 
- Lutheran
- Christian Reformed
- Congregational
- Dutch Reformed
- Catholic
- Evangelical Reformed
- Others
- No Preference

Of the 982 farm household heads in Douglas county, 867 or 87.9 percent expressed a preference for some denomination. The Lutheran church was preferred by 31.6 percent of all household heads. The Christian Reformed denomination followed closely as the choice of 26.9 percent of the total. Thirteen and two-tenths percent named the Congregational church; 11.6 percent chose the Dutch Reformed denomination; 9.5 percent expressed a preference for the Catholic church; and 2.1 percent chose the Evangelical Reformed. Five other denominations were included in the remaining 1.2 percent of those expressing a church preference. Only 4.1 percent of all household heads expressed no preference.

A comparison of owners and renters reveals that the Lutheran denomination had the larger following in the owner group, while the Christian Reformed church led in the renter group. Thirty-nine and seven-tenths percent of the owners chose the Lutheran church as compared with 27 percent of the renters. Thirty-one and three-tenths percent of the renters chose the Christian Reformed denomination as compared with 27 percent of the owners. The Dutch Reformed church was the choice of 13.2 percent of the renters as compared with 9 percent of the owners. The Congregational church was about one percent larger among the renters. The percentage for the Catholic denomination was practically the same in both groups. About two percent more owners than renters expressed no preference. It is significant that a very small percentage of both groups failed to express a denominational preference.
Nationality background has always been one of the chief factors determining church preference. Douglas county was settled by large numbers of foreign born persons who, with their children, show a strong tendency to perpetuate the church of their native land. Over nine-tenths (90.8 percent) of the Hollander group, which comprised over 40 percent of the total, expressed a preference for one of the Reformed churches; 63.4 percent of these chose the Christian Reformed denomination and 27.4 percent chose the Dutch Reformed church. More than one-half of both the German and the Scandinavian groups expressed a preference for the Lutheran church. In the British group 55.3 percent chose the Congregational church and 29.2 percent chose the Catholic denomination.

Douglas County has a very small percentage in the mixed group. In this group the Congregational and Catholic churches predominate.

Table 1. Denomination Preference of all Farm Household Heads in Douglas County, by Percentages, 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Lutheran</th>
<th>Christian Reformed</th>
<th>Congregational Reformed</th>
<th>Dutch Reformed</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Evangelical Reformed</th>
<th>All Others</th>
<th>No Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollander</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scandinavian</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed and others</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4. Predominant Nationalities and Denominations by Townships, Douglas County, 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Township</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Joubert)</td>
<td>Holl. 96.9</td>
<td>Chr. Ref. 89.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Holland)</td>
<td>Holl. 82.2</td>
<td>Chr. Ref. 66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Walnut Grove)</td>
<td>Holl. 68.6</td>
<td>Chr. Ref. 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Garfield)</td>
<td>Ger. 57.4</td>
<td>Luth. 62.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Washington)</td>
<td>Ger. 100.</td>
<td>Luth. 88.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Township</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Clark)</td>
<td>Holl. 91.7</td>
<td>Chr. Ref. 86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Iowa)</td>
<td>Holl. 79.5</td>
<td>Chr. Ref. 57.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Grandview)</td>
<td>Holl. 61.2</td>
<td>Chr. Ref. 41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Valley)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Lincoln)</td>
<td>Ger. 98.6</td>
<td>Luth. 58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Chester)</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Cong. 51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Independence)</td>
<td>Ger. 63.5</td>
<td>Cong. 48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Belmont)</td>
<td>Ger. 89.2</td>
<td>Luth. 61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ger. 83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Luth. 41.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- Chr. Ref. - Christian Reformed
- Holl. - Hollander
- Cong. - Congregational
- Luth. - Lutheran
- Ger. - German

Top line indicates nationality percentage
Bottom line indicates denomination percentage
"Mixed" means that no denomination or nationality has more than 20% dominance

Figure 4 further indicates the definite relationship which exists between nationality and denominational preference. In this chart the predominant nationality and denomination are given for each township of Douglas county in which one nationality and/or denomination clearly dominates. To be considered dominant nationalities and denominations were required to have at least 20 percent more members than any other single nationality or denomination. The percentage figures represent the proportion which the farm household heads of the predominant nationality and denomination were of all household heads in the township.

The Hollanders predominated in the six townships of the western half of the county. In five of these the Christian Reformed church was dominant and in the sixth one the Dutch Reformed church was dominant. In the two extreme western townships of this group over nine-tenths were Hollanders and the Christian Reformed church had a following of almost ninety percent of all household heads. In six of the remaining eight townships the Germans were dominant. In five of these the Lutheran church was dominant. In the remaining one the Congregational church dominated.
Figure 5. Denominational Preference of Farm Families Attending Church in Douglas County Towns, 1940

Armour

Corsica

Delmont

Harrison

New Holland

Legend:  
- Christian Reformed  
- Lutheran  
- Catholic  
- Dutch Reformed  
- Congregational  
- Others  
- Methodist  
- Evangelical Reformed

More than two-thirds of all farm families in Douglas county attend church in town centers. Figure 5 shows the proportionate distribution of denominational preference of farm families attending church at the various villages of the county. In New Holland the Christian Reformed church accounted for all of the farm attendance. The Christian Reformed church was also the leading denomination in Armour, Corsica and Harrison. The Dutch Reformed church ranked second in both Corsica and Harrison with percentages of 36.27 and 31.5 respectively. In Delmont the Lutheran church drew over 50 percent of the farm attendance; the Evangelical Reformed 16.6 percent; the Congregational 15 percent; the Methodists and Catholics each 5.8 percent. The Catholic church had 28.8 percent of the farm attendance in Armour.
Figure 6. Church Membership of Farm Household Heads in Douglas County, 1940

Of the 867 farm household heads in Douglas county who expressed a church preference, 756 or 87.2 percent were church members. This is a comparatively high percentage due, no doubt, to the predominance of the Reformed and Lutheran churches in Douglas county. The five leading denominations, Lutheran, Christian Reformed, Dutch Reformed, Catholic, and Congregational totaled 94.6 percent of the membership. About one-third of all members belonged to the Lutheran church. Twenty-eight and two-tenths percent belonged to the Christian Reformed church and 14.7 percent of all families were members of the Dutch Reformed church. The Catholic church had 10.8 percent of the membership, while the Congregational church almost equalled it with 8.8 percent. Four and one-tenth percent were members of other denominations.

The Lutheran church ranked higher in membership in the owner group, while the Reformed churches ranked higher in the renter group. Forty-three and two-tenths percent of the owners were members of the Lutheran church compared to 33.8 percent of the renter group. In the owner group 19.9 percent were members of the Christian Reformed church and 10.6 percent were members of the Dutch Reformed church. In the renter group the Christian Reformed church enrolled 27.2 percent of the members and the Dutch Reformed 10.6 percent. The percentage for the Catholic church was the same, namely, 10.6 percent in both groups. Ten and three-tenths percent of the owners were members of the Congregational church as compared to eight percent of the renters.
Figure 7. Ratio of Membership to Church Preference for Leading denominations, Douglas County, 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Membership</th>
<th>Preference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dutch Reformed</td>
<td>96.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Reformed</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>81.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregational</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average for all</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: [ ] Membership  [ ] Preference

In Douglas County, 80.3 percent of all farm household heads who expressed denominational preference were members of some church. It is evident that some church denominations are able to enroll a much larger proportion of their preference group than others. The Dutch Reformed church ranked highest with 96.5 percent of its preference group having membership. The Catholic church enrolled 88.9 percent of its preference group; the Christian Reformed church, 81.4 percent; the Lutheran church, 81.3 percent and the Congregational, 51.9 percent.

It is evident that the Dutch Reformed, the Christian Reformed, the Catholic, and the Lutheran churches are able to retain a comparatively large percentage of their following as members. There are several reasons for this. Those churches carry on an intensive educational program for the children in catechism and church doctrine. The importance of actual membership is also stressed through baptism and confirmation. Consequently, persons reared in these churches are more apt to become members than are persons who are reared in churches which do not stress the importance of membership.
Figure 8 shows the percentage of farm household heads in each township of Douglas county who expressed a denominational preference, along with the percentage who were members of some church. A study of this map shows that the percentage of household heads expressing church preference in each township is uniformly high. The percentage of those claiming church membership varies considerably, however. Over nine-tenths of the persons expressed a denominational preference in all of the townships. In 10 out of the 14 townships the proportion was over 95 percent. Walnut Grove ranked highest with a percentage of 100 percent. In this township the proportion claiming membership was 75.7 percent. In Washington township 95.7 percent of the household heads expressed preference and 90 percent claimed membership.

The relatively high ratio of membership to preference in Douglas county is doubtless due to the predominance of the Dutch Reformed and Lutheran churches -- denominations with an exceptionally high recruiting record.
Suggestions for Solving the Problems of Over-churched and Unchurched Areas in Douglas County

Douglas county is distinctly over-churched in that it has a considerably greater number of churches than the population can adequately support. The National Home Missions Council recommends a ratio of one church per thousand of the population. On this basis, Douglas county, with a population of 6,348 in 1940 should have approximately six churches. The actual number of churches, however is twenty-six, or nearly five times as many as the recommended figure. The following suggestions are made for solving the problems of over-churched and unchurched areas in Douglas county.

II. Town Areas

Paradoxical as it may seem, over-churching in towns is partially responsible for an unchurched condition there. Either over-churching within a denomination or denominational overlapping has the effect of reducing adequate financial support. Without sufficient finances it is impossible for a church to maintain a program sufficiently vital to attract the unchurched. As C. Luther Fry has expressed it, "A weak and ineffectual church, like the abandoned church, is a burden upon religious faith. It is a feeble symbol (a dying epistle one might say, known and read of all men) that religion as there exemplified approaches impotence." Furthermore, the existence of a large number of small sects, each with a conflicting creed is apt to have a tendency to produce contempt for the Christian religion on the part of the unchurched. The first step, therefore, would be to cut down denominational overlapping by one of the following methods of ecclesial.

a. Denominational Exchange - This is an arrangement whereby two denominations agree to an exchange of churches in two different localities. Members of a weak church in a given locality agree to merge with a strong church in another denomination. In another locality the opposite process may be carried on within the same two denominations.

b. Undenominational - in this type of union the uniting churches sever all connections with denominations.

c. Federated - This is an arrangement whereby two or more denominations maintain a joint local worship but each of the united bodies continues to keep affiliation with its own denomination.

d. Affiliated - When this type of union takes place, a loose connection is maintained for certain purposes with some denomination.

II. Country Areas

Since practically all farm families in Douglas county live within eight miles, or easy driving distance of town churches, the solution to the problem of reaching unchurched farm families will probably not be found in organizing additional open country churches. Town churches, which already serve two-thirds of the county's farm families, are in a better position by virtue of the better equipment and superior programs to interest the unchurched than are open country churches. However, it will probably be necessary for them to make special and well-planned efforts to appeal to the unchurched farm people if the latter are to be brought into the church. This might be done through visiting gospel teams, church-sponsored vacation Bible Schools in rural school buildings, county evangelistic services, and special Rural Life Sunday programs.