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Needs of Our Rural Youth

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What I have to say may sound like boasting to some, but I make no apology for doing a little bragging. After all, I am a native-born Texan and I am in Texas. I understand that bragging, on a modest scale, has been legalized in Texas and the bragging I will do is on the other fellow.

The topic assigned me is Needs of Our Rural Youth. I might discuss this by giving theories of my own and of others regarding what we consider those needs to be. Instead, as a reporter and observer of an unusual project in this field, I would like to review for you some case histories of what has happened in a number of rural communities during recent years. Then, as an editor, I would like to make some editorial comment on what I think those cases show.

The needs that I point out are those revealed by the boys and girls and men and women who live in the rural communities. The answers also were brought out by these same people. The editorial comment will be an effort to point out some ways that you and I can help other rural folks solve their problems.

American freedom is based upon a sincere faith in God and in Christianity. Today we are in trouble largely because our leaders have abandoned that faith, and because the people themselves have neglected the church and the eternal truths that the Bible teaches.

Nationally we have fallen into a state of spiritual and moral decay that is much more dangerous to our welfare than the soil erosion that has destroyed much of our land.

For the past decade you have seen, as I have, that many of our one-time strong rural churches have dried up and died; that consolidation has closed down many of our small rural schools that once served as meeting houses; that numerous farm homes have been abandoned; and that family life in both city and country is no longer what it ought to be.

Yet, all of us know that tremendous farm progress has taken place. Our cars, trucks and good roads make it easier for everybody to go where he wants to go. Farm income is up and the rarely-prosperous <sup>farmer</sup> today can buy all that he needs and most of his wants. Radio, television and convenient movie houses offer a world of ready-made entertainment, some of it good. Nearly every farm family today receives from two to a dozen magazines, and most of them receive daily and weekly newspapers. This is progress, and yet it is easy to observe that this progress has created many new problems in rural life. One serious loss has been the decay of the spirit of neighborliness.

Years ago, our pioneers had to be good neighbors. They depended upon one another to get in the crops, to care for the sick, to build a barn, to

provide entertainment, to borrow corn meal or a ~~share~~<sup>plow</sup>, and to keep the church and the school alive for the spiritual and cultural welfare of all. But in today's busy whirl too many folks have forgotten how to be neighborly.

We studied this problem, regarding neighborliness as a quality to be highly desired. We talked with agricultural leaders and officials at our A&M Colleges and concluded that we can have all of the present day progress we want and need, and that folks can be good neighbors, too.

Together, we worked out a plan that has verified our conclusion. It embodies nothing new, nothing that we had not been advocating before, but through the well-known American love of competition, we have been able to stimulate many dead communities to come alive, meeting the needs of young and old together.

For the past four years, the Farmer-Stockman has offered cash prizes in statewide contests conducted in Oklahoma and Texas with the fine co-operation of Oklahoma A&M College and Texas A&M College Extension Services. Time will not permit me to give the details, but we will <sup>gladly</sup> supply them to anyone who wants a copy. Briefly, the purpose of these contests has been to inspire people in rural areas to build better communities in which to live, to help themselves and to help each other by being better neighbors. Our slogan has been, "If you want to live in a better neighborhood, help build one."

Hundreds of communities have taken part in this Rural Neighborhood Progress Contest, and we have found the results both tangible and lasting. It has proved many things.

One that stands out is the way agricultural and material progress advances when the community's spiritual and social life is activated. Soil conservation, crop and livestock improvement, better homes and higher standards of living---these things come much more rapidly and more certainly where the people are united in Christian fellowship, determined to educate their children for greater opportunity. We have found that where people work together and play together, as our great pioneers did, not neglecting the finer things of life, they can make progress greater than they had dreamed of.

A professional soils expert told me a while back, after observing this program, "It took me 30 years to learn that the people are more important than the soil." He had learned the truth of the scripture, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and these other things will be added unto you."

Some examples may point up the way this works out. Five years ago there was no Sunday school or church in the little farming community of Goldsby in McClain county, central Oklahoma. But that was one of the many goals set up by the leaders when they decided to build a better community. They wanted religious training for their young folks, and inspiration for everybody. They started a Sunday school in the schoolhouse, along with a broad program of neighborhood goals. Within a year, using their own people, they had as many as 125 in attendance, from a community of less than 200 people. Besides this goal, they achieved remarkable progress in soil conservation, crop improvement, home improvement, school facilities and in other ways. And they are still building, because they are building upon the solid rock of faith.



I could take you to another rural Oklahoma community. Mostly tenant farmers, they had little to start with. But they too wanted to help build a better community. And because they started by uniting in religious worship helping their youngsters to enjoy wholesome recreation, and better school facilities, they have moved on to improve their farms and everything on them. From this little community, which was really a backward place the first time I visited there about two years ago, has come some county leaders and the young people now have their own program that gives them a glowing pride in the place where they live and hope in the future of America. They have faith.

In Southeastern Oklahoma there is a little rural community that had little money, poor farming and not much hope a few years ago. One of its leaders wrote us: "Some member of every family in the community had a prison record for illicit liquor operations. Then a couple of new families moved in, we decided to start a church and build a better neighborhood."

Within two years, this community had transformed itself. They built a church, complete with a youth center and for the first time in history a church bell rang out in that community. Today you'd never recognize it as a one-time bootleg center. You'd see it as a prosperous, progressive farming community. Why? Because they sought first the real and lasting things of life, and built their material program around their faith in God and in each other. Their boys and girls needed some things and they were provided right in their own community.

We can cite records of nearly 100 new churches or Sunday schools established in Oklahoma alone as a result of this program. In McClain

county, two communities, Stealey and Arnoldview, joined up to build a Baptist church during the past year. Abell, a prize winner in Logan county near Guthrie, organized a church and union Sunday school for the first time. It is now the hub of all community activities. Garvin Springs near Pauls Valley organized a Sunday school. Redmon Park near McAlester now has a fine Sunday school in a community that didn't even exist a year ago. The handful of people who started it had to get a list of names from the postman to find out who lived around them. Cold Springs near Hobart redecorated their church during the past year, as did many other neighborhoods. At Watova and in numerous other communities, active campaigns were carried on by the entire community to stimulate increased Sunday school and church attendance.

In addition, we have traced 27 new church buildings in Oklahoma directly to the influence of this program. This does not include some which have been helped through this plan but where the neighbors did not make a definite tie-in with their reports.

At Antioch and Roady in Garvin county new religious activities have come within the past two years. E. E. Pharoah, chairman at Antioch, says, "We have organized during 1950 Sunday school and church on a regular basis. We are proud of this program and feel it is one of the greatest benefits to have come to our neighborhood." In addition they have community singing--generally religious songs--as a midweek and Sunday evening activity.

A. C. Wade, chairman at Roady, told us: "Sunday school and church were not active until we entered the contest. We knew we weren't a good neighborhood and our neighborhood life was backward as a result. Well, we organized

church and Sunday school, and the entire life of our neighborhood has been changed. Now we have Sunday school and church and almost everyone in the neighborhood takes part. One outstanding thing is that the parents bring the children instead of sending them. This means the adult class has the greatest number."

In northern Oklahoma at a little community called Nardin, Mrs. Leon Lorg, secretary of the neighborhood club, said: "As we look back over the many things that have been accomplished, our hearts are filled with praise and thanksgiving for the great privilege which has been ours to co-operate and work together, whose aim is to do the will of our Heavenly Father. The beautiful unity, interest and love for each other has been the pattern set before us and has contributed much for our working together in our homes, our churches, our schools and elsewhere in our neighborhood."

In that particular community, the Methodist and Baptist churches have both made substantial improvements through this neighborly spirit. In Brownboro-Seawillow community southeast of Austin, Texas, both Methodists and Baptists were inactive. The Methodist building was falling down and the Baptists had no pews. They moved the Methodist pews into the Baptist building and they have a fine program of worship there today.

We have cases of folks of all denominations coming together to a Christian understanding in numerous communities. One that I recall is Pleasant Hill in Blanco county, west of Austin. There Baptists, Methodists, Arkadelphians, Catholics, whites, negroes and Mexicans have learned to work together for mutual progress. You would find it a pleasure to visit there,

because a spirit of good neighborliness prevails. You feel the spirit of Christianity.

This line of case histories could be extended almost as long as there are organized neighborhood groups in rural areas--and we know of 355 in Texas alone, most of which got inspiration from this plan.

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Olney, Coal county, Mrs. Teresa Baughman: "We now have Sunday School each Sunday and our enrolment has increased. At present we have around 60 enrolled. We feel that our Sunday School has been a real help to both old and young alike." Religious services are conducted in the school building.

Carselowey, Craig county, Mrs. Lizzie Crouch: "Of our church we are justly proud. During the (contest) year we organized our church and built a parsonage. The pastor conducted a revival just after summer youth camp. It did you good to hear those teen-agers stand up and testify to the joy of a life with Christ as their guide...We feel that our summer youth camp is one of the finest things we can do for our young people. The leadership of the Christian people, the mixing with other young Christians from other communities and states, the joys of fellowship with others in a common cause, are all fine.

"We teachers and parents feel we see a different atmosphere on the playground and at our gatherings from back to the time when we had no Sunday School, no church and no recreational activities. May we continue to see this spirit of goodwill."

I might add here that if any of you are interested in seeing some of these communities like I have been describing, you have an opportunity and an invitation to do so. Next week, <sup>on Thursday, May 24,</sup> there will be an all-day tour in the first prize community in Texas in Kaufman county, east of Dallas, and on Saturday night, May 26, there will be a similar community program and award presentation at Tin Top, west of Fort Worth. There also are still some award meetings set for Oklahoma. I will be glad to give names of communities and dates of coming events where work will be shown to anyone who will contact me after the meeting.

I don't want to leave the impression that we and the A&M Colleges are the only ones in agriculture who are taking an active part to encourage greater spirituality among our rural people.

Just a couple of weeks ago, 4-H club members throughout the nation observed National 4-H Sunday. The importance of prayer was the theme used to emphasize that one of the H's in 4-H stands for the heart.

In the National 4-H News, it was stated that "Calling this day 4-H Sunday is based on the hope that there will be a spire pointing heavenward within the daily sight of our young people. Loss of Christianity brings with it a loss of morality and a dulling of civic duty. A loss of worship would mean a loss of reverence for the greatest things in life."

The American Farm Bureau Federation, one of the nation's greatest agricultural groups, in its national meeting at Dallas last November, adopted this resolution:

"The Christian religion is the greatest force for human progress

this world has ever known. It has been the light to brighten man's pathway all along his progress. Today, with conflicting ideologies confronting us, it is of utmost importance that spiritual faith be the bulward of American life. In gratitude for the privilege of freedom of worship, and in recognition of the fact that our future depends upon adherence to religious principles, we urge our members to nurture and support the rural churches."

I asked one of my associates who has worked closely with our neighborhood program what he considered the greatest needs of our rural youth. He listed churches, schools and recreation. Then he added that the neighborhood program had demonstrated that these problems can be and are being solved by those who undertake them.

"Our rural boys and girls still need telephones, roads, adequate housing, attractive landscaped homes where they will be proud to bring their friends, and adequate health facilities still aren't a reality in our rural areas. They need, too, adequate financing so they can get a start in farming."

He reminded me that it takes \$15,000 to \$50,000 to get a start in farming nowadays, including land and equipment. That's a lot more than it takes to go into the grocery or filling station business.

You probably never regarded some of those things as needs of rural youth, but they are. And what's more we have found the rural boys and girls willing to work to get them. In our neighborhood organizations, we insist that at least one boy and one girl be made general officers of the community. And in many instances, they provide the spark of enthusiasm that their parents lack. This applies to church work, as well as to general community betterment.

For instance, in Hall community in southeastern Oklahoma, youths launched a complete recreation program, ranging all the way from pingpong to archery. They built a swimming pool, a basketball court, and a football field - right out in the country. They organized softball teams for all ages. Wouldn't you like to be a country boy again and live in a community like that?

Oldsters organized a Sunday school at Sims near Muskogee, but it was the youths who took it over and did a good job of building attendance. At Watova, young people got together and organized a youth choir and now church attendance is greatest the community has ever had.

It's hard to stop giving these examples, because every neighborhood is an inspiration itself. Where people work and play and worship together, you'll find good neighbors. And I consider all of these things essential in helping the people to live instead of just making a living. Recreation in rural communities is vital, but it must be a means to an end, and not the whole end in itself.

These instances I have cited deal with the spiritual side of community life, and rural boys and girls, because I think that is most important. But from the same program and the same communities I could cite similar outstanding results in the field of soil conservation, crop and livestock improvement, home improvement, rural roads, communications, telephones, electrification and all of those other things that go to make up better living. As I said in the beginning, these things dealing with the material side of living come much easier and more certainly in the rural community when the

people are united in Christian fellowship, providing the mutual encouragement that each needs through wholesome recreation and development of cultural opportunities.

The needs of rural youth are the same as the needs of any other youth, though there may be some difference in the way the needs are supplied. Movies in the city may provide needed recreation for the urban youth, while the rural youth must use his own talents to provide an evening of entertainment....but the same need is filled.

The main need of any individual is to learn to live in harmony with his neighbors - and the only way he can learn this is to have sufficient social contact to learn acceptable ways of behavior. He cannot learn to lead a group unless he is a member of a group; nor can he learn to follow a leader unless he has a leader. Youth needs opportunity to gain experience - practical experience - in those avenues which make well rounded, happy personalities.

One of the first factors in providing this experience for youth is a Christian home, where he can experience daily the satisfaction of Christian, democratic living. This Christian home helps him fill another need, which is status in his community and among his friends. A family and home of which he can be proud will help any individual meet others with confidence. Youth in particular needs a sense of "belonging", a sense of importance to his family and friends. Church groups, club activities, school activities, and community activities in which the youth actually participates - both in planning and execution of the programs - helps him to develop this sense of belonging and of importance. But at the same time, such activities help him



to see the worth of the other fellow and to learn the value of co-operation.

He needs as broad an educational program as any other youth - music, art, literature, science, mechanics. If he is to choose a vocation in which he will do well and be happy, he must know something about many vocations. He must be trained in government, for though he lives in a rural area, he is part of the government.

Another of the great needs of rural youth is understanding parents, with a genuine interest in youth's problems. Youth need parents' co-operation.

This need has been expressed to our staff members by the youngsters at State, County and local 4-H meetings. It is youth's perennial plea that "Our parents don't understand. I can't talk to mine because they just get mad."

Grace Sloane Overton, national authority on family relationships, counselled with 5,000 youths at a state 4-H meeting. She won them completely. Our women's editor overheard one boy express his sentiment in the remark, "Boy, that old gal's all right. She's on our side."

He had confidence in her and appreciated her understanding of his problems. Those youngsters clamored to pour out to her their pent-up questions which may have seemed trivial and inconsequential and silly to parents, but to one with understanding they were worth consideration.

Needs of rural youth for companionship of their parents, in addition to working hours, have been brought to light through our Rural Neighborhood contest. In progressive neighborhoods where farm families are working and playing together, we hear both adults and youth radiantly express their

we see greatest progress. I know of many rural communities where the pastor or pastors have used the group's enthusiasm to mold a new spiritual life for the entire neighborhood.

But I also know of communities where the people have almost run over their ministers in building their community to meet changing needs. Three years ago a certain community had one church in it, and everybody joined forces to help the Baptist pastor build a fine rock building to serve the community. He took part in all community meetings, and had an opportunity to influence every family. He died and another pastor came in, bringing prejudices that shut him out of community affairs. That year, 1949, this community life suffered a severe setback, and the program that had drawn the young people together now was breaking them apart. But the people persisted, and during the past year they built a new wing on the church for their young people and their activities. The same pastor is still serving the community and he is learning the hard way that he can best lead the people spiritually if he shares with them their other problems and joins in their community activities.

Just as what the family does as a group establishes the quality of living in the home, so it appears to be true that what the people in a community do sets the pattern of spiritual, moral and living standards for the majority of those who live there.

Farmers of today use or expect to use highly modernized farming methods and farming equipment. But in some respects, the methods of learning to live have not kept pace. Even where folks are willing to meet

the needs of their young people and are anxious to help them solve the problems that I have described, there are too few people in the community with adequate training or know-how to do the job. They are hungry for somebody to show them the ways and the means. Of course, the county agents and soil conservation people and livestock groups do much to train our young people in how to make a living on the farm. All of us commend and encourage these efforts.

But it is in the field of providing spiritual inspiration, cultural understanding and wholesome recreation that we most often run into major problems. Lacking these things, it is not surprising that so many young people, especially from rural areas, seek their recreation in honky-tonks and other questionable places of amusement. It is not enough to warn them of the dangers of going to such places. We must also provide them with some other place to go; we must also give them something better to do.

Most of the present-day rural pastors were trained in the seminaries to be able to preach and live in cities. Although many thousands of them are doing a fine work in the country, a large percentage of those I talk to have their eyes on a pastorate in a big city. And even though a lot of these young men come from the farms, I find that many of them are so far behind the times in regard to agriculture that they can't even get on speaking terms with their congregations.

These two factors hamper their influence with both the rural youth and the adults. The youth no longer turn to their pastors for guidance. They feel that the pastor is in no position, for example, to give ethical guidance in regard to a particular business practice if he knows nothing about the

business. That may not be true in cities, but it is so in the country, where everybody or nearly everybody in the community is engaged in the same business.

When the young people of rural communities feel that the pastor cannot lead in these things, they often lose interest in the church and its activities. Many remain loyal. Often these are the young people who join 4-H clubs and take leadership in programs growing out of these other activities.

But like the Baptist pastor I told you about, too often preachers look upon these activities as competing with church activities, and if they don't condemn them, they take a chilly attitude. On the other hand, many churches help to sponsor them, seeing to it that all of the activities remain on a high, wholesome plane as the leaders intended that they should be.

One of the great needs of rural young people is an understanding pastor, who can guide them spiritually as they prepare to make a living and a life in today's fast moving, complex world.

This is particularly hard to do when pastors appear at the local community church only two or three times a month, and even then stay *as pastor* for only a few ~~minutes~~ *months*. The pastor never really gets acquainted. Financing seems to be a major problem here and I know that young pastors usually experience severe financial stress before they are called to a church large enough to support them. But a good church with the right kind of leadership can and will support a pastor. And in most cases, it is the first job of the pastor to provide that leadership. He must train himself for it and he must be bold enough to assert his leadership tactfully and forcefully, to succeed.

And I am convinced that in rural areas, these needs of our rural youth and the problems of adults as well are so closely interlocked that they can be met successfully only on a community-wide basis. And this belief is based on observations of how these problems have been solved in scores of rural neighborhoods, like those I have described to you. Where the people are united for common good, they can do anything they set out to do.

Yes, the people are more important than the soil, or anything that grows on the soil, or anything that we can build on the soil. We must have these other things, too but they must come in proper order.

The world today is in trouble because too many nations and too many people have neglected to seek divine guidance in their affairs, and in our affairs. Get more money, build more buildings, buy more land, drill more oil wells, do more business, -----gimme, gimme, gimme - seems to be the world's idea. It is the materialistic approach that marks communism, and if the same idea continues to spread in the United States, we will be no better off. We, too are being overcome by our lack of faith, by our greed for material wealth, with little or no thought for giving.

How many of our national and state officials serve the public primarily in order to draw the salaries and pensions that their jobs provide, and how many of them serve the public primarily to help build a greater, happier Christian nation?

Most of us can do little directly about the godless manner in which our national government operates and the even more atheistic attitude

of United Nations members. But there is something that we can do which will make our own lives and our own communities richer, and eventually it will spread to have its influence on these other affairs.

First - we should seek and find the way of life that God set forth for us, and which is plainly set out in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Once found, we can make it a real part of our daily lives, supporting the church of our choice to help it serve its purpose of uniting in fellowship the believers who are its members.

And we can serve by helping to build a better, more wholesome community in which to live. We can stand for those things we know are right, and stand equally strong against those we know are wrong. Then we will be making a personal contribution to the fight against communism, or materialism, in whatever form it may take.

I conclude by saying that the answer to these big problems of our nation and the little problems of our boys and girls all depend upon our homes and our little communities. And if we want to live in a better neighborhood, we must help build one.