

Small-Town America, by Robert Wuthnow

reviewed by [Elizabeth Dilley](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Small-Town America

By Robert Wuthnow

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The popular imagination, influenced by a relentless bread-and-circus news media and entertainment culture, has a way of creating stereotypical “truths” that are more fiction than fact, limiting if not entirely erasing the histories and stories of

entire peoples. Over and over this happens: to Native Americans, to most other racial and ethnic minorities, to women, to sexual minorities. As stereotypes take root in our collective mind and memory, it becomes very difficult to hear the depth and variety of people's lived experiences, to see in others the same complexity we value in our own selves and our own histories.

Residents of small towns are one stereotyped group: they are caricatured as poor, uneducated rednecks who see no need to go past the county line, or as romantic back-to-the-landers who nobly forgo the many pleasures of cosmopolitan living in favor of the simpler, more honest existence of putting their hands in rich soil. And then there's the trope of the local kid returning home after personal tragedy—the tale of redemption set amid red barns and cornfields. Whether we see denizens of small-town America as simpletons or preservers of a simpler way, we seldom explore the complex truth of their lives.

Having fled a small West Coast town for the glamour of New York City at the age of 18, and then having returned to small-town life for my pastoral first call in the Midwest nine years later, I've lived many of the complexities of small-town and rural American life. I therefore read Robert Wuthnow's *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* with great appreciation.

A careful and meticulous researcher, Wuthnow artfully weaves large-scale government data with stories that emerged from deep qualitative interviews he and his team led with hundreds of residents of small towns throughout the United States. At nearly every turn, I was convinced that he had spent a couple of years among the good people of Red Oak, Iowa, where I served for nearly a decade: the stories I read in these pages are in many ways their stories, with their troubles and their joys.

Paradoxically, the community and individual stories Wuthnow presents challenge and occasionally confound as well as confirm his data, but he is perfectly content to let the contradictions sit without explaining away either the data or the stories. What emerges is a rich tapestry depicting the pleasures and difficulties of life in small-town America, the histories and the promises of these places, and the hopes and fears of the people who choose to live there. Wuthnow allows the stories to tell themselves and the data to speak for itself until a rich picture emerges from their interplay.

For example, we see that amenity scores often rank small towns very poorly, leading to a conclusion that their “lack of cultural activities is a drawback,” albeit one that “many townspeople manage to overcome.” But we also learn that people in more rural settings have far greater trust in their neighbors and shop clerks than do people living in more densely populated areas. Though it is obviously a gross oversimplification to compare natural amenities to trustworthy neighbors, these are some of the trade-offs that people make when they decide to live in one place rather than another.

People who live or work in small towns will see familiar faces and landscapes throughout this book and will emerge with a deeper framework for understanding their communities. Of most interest for ministers may be the chapters on habits of faith and the brokenness of Washington. I found the one on leadership to be a helpful treatment of the ways in which formal and informal community leaders are raised, nurtured and occasionally cut down.

As Wuthnow digs and pokes, drawing on both the data and input from participants in his research, he challenges platitudes and easy assumptions. He treats his subjects as agents of their own lives rather than as passive objects to whom life happens—or worse yet, as fools who don’t know anything better than their existence far from the wonders of the big city. What a joy it is to perceive in these pages a profound respect for the people who were interviewed.

Yet these are not simply stories about individuals. They are also about complex communities, about ways of life ordered by relationships with others and with the earth. Between natural disasters, poor weather and the effects of climate change, such a way of life is seldom easy, but for those who choose a rural existence, it is worth the struggles and the sorrows. Though it can be difficult to live in the shadow of a parent or grandparent’s reputation, many of those who choose to remain where their ancestors live have sound and principled reasons for doing so. Mindful that they may miss out on certain opportunities, they also give thanks for the unique opportunities available to them in rural communities.

The lives of rural Americans are every bit as rich and complex as the lives of their metropolitan sisters and brothers. Because there are more churches per capita in less populated than in more populated places, many ministers will serve in a rural or small-town context at some point in their ministry. The church needs high-quality resources for rural pastoral leaders that are based on the truth of people’s lives and

experiences, not on media misrepresentations about who lives in small-town America or on our own hopes or dreams for what those communities should be.