

## Brad Roth – Rural Church

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Leaf through the November issue of the national magazine *Christianity Today* and you will find an excerpt of a new book. The book focuses on the dynamics of the rural church in America today and was written by a young pastor in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Brad Roth is the pastor of West Zion Mennonite Church in Moundridge, Kansas, where he lives with his wife Lici and their two children. Brad grew up on a farm in Illinois, went to Augustana College and then to Harvard Divinity School.

When asked by a fellow Ivy League student where he came from, Brad replied, "Illinois." His classmate responded that this was "flyover country." "Where are you from?" Brad asked. "New York City," said the classmate. Brad responded, "Don't you know where your food comes from?" It was a classic example of rural meets urban.

After Harvard, Brad graduated from Anabaptist Mennonite Theological Seminary. He and Lici married and moved west, accepting a pastorate in eastern Washington State. After several years they were called to mission work in Peru, teaching and helping with pastoral development.

Then they felt called to work directly in a church. That path led them to rural Kansas. West Zion Mennonite Church in Moundridge was looking for a pastor, and Brad took the job in January 2013. Moundridge is a rural community of 1,737 people. Now, that's rural.

From his studies, Brad recognized that not a lot had been written about the rural church. Literature tended to focus on suburban and even megachurch growth. "Some have written about rural churches as failures and others idealize them as a place with earthy values," he said. "It's more complex than that. We need to look at the rural context with clear eyes."

Brad learned from people such as writer Wendell Berry and K-State sociologist Laszlo Kulscar. He also interviewed two dozen pastors and leaders in rural churches across the nation, particularly in the Great Plains. The result was a book published in September 2017 entitled *God's Country – Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church*.

"I wanted to capture best practices for living and ministering in rural areas," Brad said. The book draws on his own experiences and those of the pastors he interviewed. "I reflected on all the times I messed up, so I have lots of material," Brad said with a smile.

His well-written, thoughtful book provides an authentic look at rural life and rural churches. Here is an excerpt from his chapter Praise in Place: "God delights in and is present in rural places...All places can give praise to God." The chapter titles describe his best practices for rural ministry, using words such as Abide, Watch, Pray, Grow, Work the Edges, Learn to Die, Befriend, and Dream.

The book is sprinkled with compelling, true examples of the points he wishes to make. For example, a rural town in Canada had only one dining place. "In the morning it was the coffee shop, at noon it was the café, and at night it was a bar," Brad said. The woman owner wanted to close it because the roof was leaking. "Some might say, 'Oh, it would be good to get rid of that seedy bar,' but the congregation saw that it served as a

place for people to gather earlier in the day,” Brad said. The congregation got together and fixed the roof for the good of the community.

Brad told of another example where a Kansas community lost its movie theatre but it was kept open by a community non-profit group, including the local pastor. The pastor helped by putting up posters and serving popcorn. “We have to meet people where they are,” Brad said. “Reaching out and connecting with people is a key part of growing the kingdom.”

He described his keys for faithful service in the rural church. “You have to love rural communities and rural people,” Brad said.

The book is available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

*Christianity Today* has featured this book by a young pastor in rural Kansas. We commend Brad Roth for making a difference with his writing and with his service.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.