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Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church*, Herald, Harrisonburg, VA, 2017. 223 pp. \$16.99. ISBN: 9781513801612.

"I love the rural church" (13). Brad Roth's opening line in *God's Country* defines his theological center: love for God and God's church in particular places named as rural. But he doesn't stop there. After describing the pitfalls of idealizing or disparaging rural communities and congregations, he offers a vision.

We need a new approach, one that sees rural communities not as places to pity or lionize but simply as *places*, places open to God's goodness and in need of God's grace. We need a vision for the rural church that discovers its common vocation and destiny alongside the global church. The church is forever calling people to passionate worship of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We're calling everyone to live as disciples of Jesus who challenge structures of sin in our lives, families, and communities. It's a life animated by the Holy Spirit. . . . This is a vision that's bigger than urban or rural. It's a kingdom vision. (17)

We need this kingdom vision—rural, urban, suburban, local, and global. In my context, *God's Country* arrives at a critical time when Mennonite churches in the United States are seeking a faithful way forward amid great loss and change. While acknowledging loss and marginality as rural experiences, Roth calls rural congregations to reclaim God's kingdom vision for the rural church by "learning to praise, abide, watch, pray, grow, work the edges, die, befriend, and dream. Each of these disciplines is rooted in the biblical narrative and Christ's enduring commitment to the rural church" (18).

Readers will bring their own experiences of loss and marginality to these disciplines. I believe you will find your own story and a way forward as Roth skillfully engages each of these disciplines, bringing the biblical story alongside his own stories and those of congregations and people he meets. Through his message of hope to the rural church, Roth provides a kingdom vision for the whole church.

To further his discussion of church and place, Roth expands on ecclesiology, or "how we understand the church," to create a term he calls *ecclesioculture*. "Ecclesiology begins in doctrine and aims to define the church." "Ecclesioculture, on the other hand, begins in love. It aims to love the church as we discover it while still dreaming of where God is leading us. This is our respective ecclesioculture—a vision for cultivating churches of all sorts in communities of all sorts" (18).

My congregational work spans three states. I often visit congregations close in proximity but distant from each other in theology and practice. Each kindly asks about the other. I reply that Mennonite Mission Network is committed to serving congregations “in all their diversity: rural and urban congregations, younger and older populations, long-standing and new immigrant communities, speaking multiple languages, and many varying convictions about how to be God’s faithful people in today’s world.”⁶ These congregations are part of Mennonite Church USA, former members of this body, emerging congregations, and congregations committed to engaging the world with an Anabaptist lens.

As a local and global church, we need Roth’s pastoral voice reminding us that God is already present in the many places and peoples we encounter—praise, abide, watch, pray. Failing to see God’s presence in every place or person is a failure to love. “But seeing God is also an act of will, an intentionality whereby we consent to recognize and rejoice in God. It’s obeying the command to love (John 13:34; I John 4:7–8) by coming to deeply, continually, and faithfully love a place and a people. Joy follows” (51).

We need Roth’s prophetic voice to imagine how God is working within and among new congregational affiliations and structures, immigrant groups, emerging faith communities, and interfaith conversations—grow, work the edges, befriend. We need Roth’s contemplative voice to draw us closer to the God who loved us first, who comes to us in flesh and calls us to be the people of God in all sorts of places and with all sorts of people, dying to self, rising to new life in Christ, and joining God’s dream of “a people gathered together from ‘all tribes and peoples and languages’ (Rev 7:9)—and addresses” (213).

While readers well versed in the Anabaptist tradition will recognize key components of a Jesus-centered, nonviolent, transformational faith lived in community and expressed through discipleship, mission, and service, Roth’s incorporation of contemplative theology may be less familiar. His instinctual application of an Anabaptist, contemplative theology may be overlooked or dismissed. As with Jesus’s lived example, this theology begins and ends in love.

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⁶ James R. Krabill, ed., “Walking Together in Mission: Following God’s Call to Reconciliation” (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2013), 11.