



The Congregation on the Prairie: Ministry During the Challenge to Survive

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SURVIVAL HAS BECOME THE ISSUE FOR RURAL AMERICANS IN TODAY'S WORLD OF computerized farm management and land competitive operating skills. Rural people display remarkable courage in meeting the challenges of population losses, shrinking church memberships, declining enrollment in school districts, and constantly vacillating budgets. Because of these changes, people need to drive ever greater distances to clinics or high-school activities, to run down parts for machinery, and, of course, to church. These people have given me a new perspective on hopefulness. Before I turn our attention to the Tri-County Ministry story, the focus of this paper, I relate a few experiences in agriculture leading up to my exciting return to rural ministry.¹

¹The Tri-County Ministry model is featured in videos available in the resource centers of most synod offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: *Renewed: Reinventing Rural Ministry* and *Renewing Rural Ministry*, a two-part video series produced by the evangelism team of the ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries (Chicago: ELCA, 1993), and *A Plains Pentecost: Pioneering Renewal in Rural Congregations* (MOSAIC video, Spring 1996). See also, Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig and William O. Avery, *Cooperating Congregations: Portraits of Mission Strategy* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 2000), chapter one.

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The Tri-County Ministry in rural North Dakota provides one model for continuing ministry in rural America in a time of often debilitating decline. Through congregational cooperation, the Spirit blows new life into old churches.

I. A TIME OF CHANGE

My adventures in rural ministry began in 1967, when I moved my family from Luther Seminary in St. Paul to the little town of Fessenden, North Dakota. Although my childhood years were spent on a farm in the Red River Valley to the east of this town of 1,000 people, serving as pastor presented an entirely different situation. I was much more attentive to the price of hard spring wheat, sunflowers, beef cattle, and, of course, to the weather. The prices and weather strongly affected the economic life of our congregational members (60% farmers), and this in turn affected the business district. In my growing-up years and the one year that I farmed with my father, farms ran generally 320-960 acres, and most of them had small herds of dairy and beef cattle, some sheep and hogs, many chickens, and even a few turkeys. By 1967, this had changed considerably. The prices for small grains were good, thus the emphasis had shifted to their production. Farm size was up, and many farms had little or no livestock.

During the late '60s and early '70s, there were few farm auction sales. If there were an auction, it usually meant that the farmer was retiring and that no one in the family wished to farm. Most often, at least one of the children would carry on the tradition of the family farm. However, the cost of land and equipment, fuel and fertilizer certainly did prevent some young entrepreneurs from following their dreams. If the initial land and equipment weren't provided through the family, there was little opportunity to start farming. The trend was to fewer and larger farms. It was not uncommon to see farms of 1,280 acres. This naturally caused decreased populations and smaller local congregations. The parsonage at First Lutheran in Fessenden had been built the year before we arrived. A tunnel connected the parsonage with the church, which was approximately 100 feet away. The primary purpose of this tunnel was not to allow the pastor and his family the luxury of navigating the jaunt from parsonage to church protected from inclement weather; rather, the basement of the new parsonage contained six Sunday school rooms with a large assembly area to accommodate for the enrollment. With our departure in 1973, only six years later, just four of these rooms were being occupied, and the assembly area was no longer in use. This reduction in needed Sunday school space was a clear sign of what was happening in rural America: a decrease in the number of farms, a proportionate increase in their size, and shrinking rural congregations.

I gave little thought to what was taking place. I went on to parishes in the cities of Devils Lake and Fargo, ministering now to people whose employment was in professions far removed from spring planting and purchasing crop insurance, people whose livelihood was not so vulnerable to the weather. In the '70s and '80s, Devils Lake had not yet begun to experience the trauma of a flooding lake and the damage to its economy associated with the nightmare of the nineties. This city was close enough to the country to remember that bread, milk, meat, eggs, and cereal weren't produced on the grocery store shelf; but the greatest percentage of parishioners were professional people whose way of life was only indirectly related to the

soil. Unlike many of the vacated, landmark churches dotting the countryside, Our Saviors was only five years old, and constantly growing.

This same trend was magnified at Bethlehem in Fargo, a city with fine medical and educational facilities, professional baseball, basketball, and hockey, and great shopping malls. Fargo is a supply center, where much farm equipment and fertilizer is manufactured and products for the small-town grocery shelf are produced and distributed. Bethlehem had large confirmation classes, many, many baptisms, and unusual numbers of people attending new-member orientation classes (many transplanted from the country). As compared with Devils Lake, Fargo is two or three steps farther removed from the direct association with the land, where the size of farms has now swelled to 2,800-3,500 acres.

II. A LESSON IN LISTENING

My “reality check” of rural ministry began seriously in 1980 when I was named to the Board of the American Lutheran Church’s Division for Life and Mission in the Congregation. One of the portfolios of this board was CORM (Committee on Rural Ministry), to which I was appointed. Our two, sometimes three meetings a year were always located in a rural community, in an open country church, and committee members were housed with a farm family. From the hog country of Iowa, to the vineyards of California, from Texas to Wisconsin, South Dakota to Appalachia, we listened to the people of these communities. They described how the economy had created a system that was causing small farms, many of which had been in the family for generations, to go under. This was the decade of farm foreclosures. People were losing not only their livelihood and proud tradition but also their way of life, their vocation to manage the land, which they knew rightfully belonged to the Creator of all things, and to produce food for people wherever it was needed.

Out of their economic and social dilemma farmers sent us an urgent plea: “Give us more pastors who will come and stand beside us, and stay with us.” We tried to help in two ways. The first goal was to secure a director for CORM who was a person with a sense of the gospel of mercy and justice, and a person who had a first-hand knowledge of farming, preferably a farmer! That candidate turned out to be a man named Chuck Kanten, an active Minnesota farmer, who was in the process of turning over the farm management to a son. Chuck was everything we could have asked the Lord to provide. Our next step was to make contact with several of our seminaries, encouraging them to provide specific courses that would give information to men and women coming to a rural parish. Chuck was a walking agricultural encyclopedia ready to be tapped. His awareness of the urgent need of agriculturally educated pastors made him a valuable curricular resource for several of our seminaries.

During this period it was estimated that 65% of seminary students had their roots in the city, but 75% of all seminarians took their first call to a rural parish.

This mixture could, and still does, create many challenges for these pastors and their congregations. Having served in the country as well as a city, I have experienced a vast difference between rural theology and urban theology, rural stewardship and urban stewardship, rural sociology and urban sociology. Each year a number of seminarians from Luther and Wartburg Seminaries spend several weeks on a farm, living in close association with the whole process of farm life. Occasionally seminary professors also participate. Students and professors who follow this pattern will enhance programs in the classroom and in parishes. The Horizons program provides supplemental financial assistance that enables seminary interns to serve in rural areas otherwise not able to fund internships.

While in the Central African Republic in the spring of 1998, I visited both the seminary and the Bible school in Baboua. Seminary graduates, when ordained, will cover as many as twelve congregations, but because of the vast distances between congregations and inadequate means of transportation their ministry is limited primarily to the celebration of the sacraments, weddings, and administration. The Bible school student, known as a catechist, is trained to teach, preach, and visit and is also provided a small plot of land and given on-the-job training in soil preparation, planting, harvesting, and marketing. As missionary Tom Olson, Agricultural Program Management director, explains it, "There is a marriage of the hoe and the Bible, a marriage of agriculture and theology." This marriage bears fruit in the village to which the catechist is assigned. The C.A.R. and the U.S.A. are truly "worlds apart," but maybe sometime, somewhere, with our extremely technological world of sophisticated learning techniques, an even greater emphasis could be applied to the rural ministry education of seminarians. Many of them will be serving in predominantly rural settings in their early years of ministry—and hopefully for many years to come.

III. PUTTING THE HEART AND THE HEAD IN THE SAME PLACE

In 1992, I was challenged to live what I had been observing throughout the agricultural United States in the eighties. Eight rural congregations, seven ELCA and one Presbyterian, were without pastors and were considering a new model of ministry in an area that covered 40 miles between Cooperstown and Grace City, North Dakota. In January, a consortium of congregations was only a thought. By February, it was an idea. In May, conception took place by means of a unanimous affirmative vote of all congregations. In August, birth was taking place with the arrival of a pastor and the parish coordinator. By September, another full-time pastor, an Associate-in-Ministry (AIM), a half-time pastor, and two part-time secretaries were on the scene. Tri-County Ministry was now a mission. The Spirit of God had given new breath and life to the 1,250 baptized members in the parish of Faith in Hannaford, First Presbyterian in Cooperstown, Glenfield in Glenfield, Grace in Grace City, Mabel in Sutton, Our Saviors in McHenry, Trinity in Binford, and Trinity in Cooperstown. Sitting in a room with 40 call committee members

back in April was not a typical experience for me. For the next seven years, nothing would be customary in my ministry!

1. Structure

It was evident from the beginning that a strong measure of autonomy would be a major ingredient in the mix. Each congregation would retain its Sunday school, council, session, women's group, and budget for benevolence and congregational needs. However, an extraordinary amount of cooperation was required for eight congregations to be together in mission. This would involve the sharing of clergy, confirmation programs, youth programming, parsonages, internship, Befriender and shepherding programs, many fellowship events, and formulating a budget to support these people and programs. A parish council consisting of two representatives from each congregation (large or small had equal voice) met monthly to plan in the area of worship, evangelism, youth, and education. Annually we evaluated staff needs, held retreats, did long-range planning, and established a budget. At the outset, an assessment of \$110.50 per confirmed member was established. With inflation, the establishing of an internship program (1993), and numerous changes in staff structure, the assessment per confirmed member for 1997 and 1998 was \$143.50.

These congregations would no longer have one pastor, they would have several. The four preachers would preach twice each Sunday, two preaching in the "west forty" and two in the "east forty" for a month at a time. The next month the preachers would switch locations. All four clergy persons visited in the four hospitals and as many as six nursing homes that were the primary places of service. It was not unusual to have parishioners in several other hospitals and nursing homes in the area, too. Shut-in and other home visitation was also essential in communities where large numbers of people were 70 years and older. Staff job descriptions, after their preaching and visitation responsibilities, were written accordingly. Duties for the associate pastor included confirmation and youth education (and all that goes with this portfolio—curriculum selection, teacher and mentor training, retreats, trips, and counseling). The half-time pastor was assigned all aspects of visitation. The Associate in Ministry was in charge of organizing small groups, counseling, and Befriender coordination. The coordinator organized preaching schedules, made visitation assignments, planned fellowship trips, and led the shepherding program. The lead pastor worked with church councils, sessions, adult education, staff meeting structure, and served as internship supervisor and GIFTS mentor (the lay ministry program). The retirement of the visitation pastor was the first major change in staff, and more changes followed. These made it apparent that interim positions would be needed periodically. But always there was a way to reconfigure, and never did the parish experience a lack of pastoral presence. The staff met weekly in one of the congregations, for three hours, to pray, give reports, plan, and receive assignments. We shared a meal at the local restaurant, which also opened the door for visiting with parishioners. Restaurants in small towns are a

hub for socializing. Most pastors serving in isolated rural congregations, where neighboring pastors live miles away, did not have the opportunity for camaraderie such as we enjoyed. Unfortunately, loneliness and isolation are often reasons rural pastors give for leaving their parish after two or three years.

When a new pastor enters into the life of a congregation, it requires adjustments for pastor and congregation. Enter four new “theological master minds,” each with their style of doing worship, and adjustments can be major. Multiply the church organists, councils, women’s groups, Sunday school Christmas programs, church suppers, and the Affirmation of Baptism services by eight, and at times it did put a strain on the Scandinavian emotional system to put it together. However, in nearly all points of adjustment, I have never seen better cooperation. One of the questions most frequently asked by congregational representatives inquiring about our model was, “How do eight congregations work together? We have only two, and cooperation is very limited.” Open discussion of issues and a willingness to make sacrifices for the good of the entire body characterized the spirit in Tri-County. When this same attitude in any congregation allows the Spirit of God to work the unexpected will happen! The Presbyterians were most gracious. Not only were the pastors new to them, none of us were Presbyterian (the exception being one Presbyterian interim later in the program). Thank God, there were a few converted Lutherans in the bunch, who understood us, and broke us in. I can remember being tutored by a husband and wife on the way to a Presbytery meeting. They had other places to go after the meeting, so they drove their car and I drove mine. But they took turns riding with me to update me on the structure and “alphabet soup” vocabulary of the Presbyterian brothers and sisters.

2. The GIFTS program

Early in Tri-County Ministry, the need for supply pastors became apparent. The answer was to train and equip people in our parish to do this supply. The obvious program was GIFTS (Growing in Faith to Serve). This program, formerly known as the Deacon program, which originated in the (Lutheran) Western North Dakota Synod, was put into place for the purpose of training lay assistants to the pastor. Training takes place on the congregational level with the local pastor serving as mentor and meeting with the group or individuals for study and on-the-job training. Several workshops are held each year, led by a seminary or college professor or a pastor. Opportunities for study at Luther Seminary are offered each year in the summer and fall. This gives the participants the opportunity to study with seminary professors and experience life on the campus. The GIFTS program requires a total of 100 concentrated hours in designated subjects, ideally over a period of three years. When the course is completed, a service of recognition takes place in the local congregation. However, everyone is encouraged to continue to study, as the need to study never diminishes. The nine GIFTS participants in Tri-County were not all preachers. Each one had individual gifts and offered them as needed in the parish. The GIFTS program is one of the most innovative programs

for the education of lay assistants in the church today. Two GIFTS people from the Eastern North Dakota Synod have gone on into the ordained ministry. Others who show unusual skills have filled in as interim pastors when ordained pastors were not available. Ministry during the challenge to survive can be invigorating. It depends only on the willingness to be led by the Spirit of God. Granted, there are those places on the prairie where the possibility of a resurrection of what existed is gone. But there is always the possibility of a transformation into something new. Sometimes, there is more potential than we dare to admit, but we are afraid to step up and look at a new approach to the dilemma. Leland Kaiser said: "If your line of vision is even with the floor, you can starve to death in a full pantry."² I don't believe this is an exaggeration. When those parishes, remote as they may be, have been purged of the fear of doing ministry a new way, there is great cause for progress and celebration.

3. The foundation

Attending a confirmation service for a relative, a visiting family was impressed with the concept of Tri-County Ministry. The relative had long since left the community and was living in an urban area. She was strongly aware of the struggle of rural congregations to do more than maintenance ministry. She and her husband wanted to see this model of ministry continue in her home church. They decided to send a portion of their monthly pledge to Tri-County. This gift sparked the establishment of a Tri-County Ministry Foundation to benefit the mission of Tri-County now and to continue to sustain its ministry for future generations. Letters to confirmation alumni from all eight congregations who had moved away since their confirmation informing them what was happening in their church generated more gifts. These, along with memorials, transfer of undesignated funds, and the yearly contribution from our city friends who got the snowball rolling produced \$70,000 in five years.

4. The internship program

One of the immediate programs assisted by the foundation was the internship program. One cannot overstate the importance of the education of lay and clergy in rural ministry. Capable, creative people must be equipped to serve. An intern in Tri-County will tell you, "We do it all." They preach three times a month, visit in hospitals and homes, lead adult Bible studies, assist in the confirmation program, carry out their designated ministry plan for the year, attend seminars and council meetings. They drive many, many miles, and consume enormous amounts of coffee, hot dish, and Jell-O! Living in a detached site, they must be self-starters and good managers of time. Attending weekly staff meetings and working with several pastors provides the opportunity to observe a variety of styles of ministry. The man who served as intern in 1998-1999 returned in June 2000 as a regularly called

²Quoted in Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1996) 36.

pastor in Tri-County. Not only that, but he will bring another intern from Gettysburg Seminary with him. We have had the distinct blessing of having interns provided from Southern Seminary, Luther (2), Trinity, and Gettysburg (2). Four of them are already active in rural ministry. The congregations have been enriched by these men and women and have had a hand in helping to shape some excellent pastors.

On a flatbed trailer on a cool Sunday afternoon in September 1992, our first Tri-County Ministry staff was installed into office on the shores of Red Willow Bible Camp. As our bishop laid his hands on us, a burst of wind rushed through the trees, cascading colorful leaves on the lakeside congregation. Call it what you wish, to me the Spirit of God was blowing among us.

Little did I realize the impact of the hand of God on my shoulder when I was tapped into service in the beautiful Sheyenne and James River valleys of North Dakota for my final full-time call in ordained ministry. My pledge was twofold: first to listen, learn, and serve with all I had in me with these great country folks, people who wonder what next year will bring, but always have hope for the future; second, to pass along as much information as possible to anyone who was looking for innovative ways to do ministry in the country. My retirement came in May of 1999, but ministry continues in rural America. ⊕