



FACE . . .

Ministry in the Rural Context: More than Just Keeping the Doors Open

RAY BRANSTITER

As a rural pastor serving ten congregations in the Eastern North Dakota Synod, ELCA, the term “maintenance ministry” has always struck a raw nerve with me. More often than not, I have heard the term used by a “city pastor” whose yardstick for effective ministry seems to be the number of new members they have received into their congregation during the past year. I hear them saying, “You are simply allowing a congregation to keep its doors open; you aren’t really doing ministry.”

Recently my intern and I attended a cluster meeting where another phrase struck a nerve like a dentist’s drill. As the meeting began we went around the room discussing the context of each of our congregations. One of the supervisors told of the rapidly expanding ministry that she was leading, the current building project, and the number of new members brought in each year. Understandably, she was very excited about her church growth. When it was my turn, I gave a brief overview of the congregations that I serve. Just as I completed my review, she referred to my ministry as a “hospice ministry.” My response, in the local vernacular, was simply, “Uff da!”

Tri-County Ministry is made up of ten cooperating congregations, nine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and one of the Presbyterian Church (USA). On average, one hundred and eighty-five people attend Sunday worship at the largest of them; at the smallest, about twenty-five. Tri-County Ministry was formed when all eight of the original congregations were without a pastor. Despite the normal intercommunity rivalries, they felt called by the Holy Spirit to try this new idea of cooperative ministry. Over the years, Tri-County Ministry has become a model for ministry in rural America.

As I reflect on those who so freely use the phrase “maintenance ministry,” I am reminded of a rural ministry conference at which the late Senator Paul Simon of Illinois was the keynote speaker. He opened by admitting his limited knowledge of rural ministry. He thought, however, that the inner-city churches with which he was familiar and rural congregations experienced some of the same difficult issues: elderly congregations, out-migration of the ethnic base, and aging facilities. Then Senator Simon said something that has stuck with me over the years: “If the mis-

(continued on page 320)

TO FACE

Ministry in the Rural Context: “Maintenance Ministry” or Maintaining the Mission?

RANDALL SCHLECHT

“A pastoral call is God’s activity in which congregations, pastors, and synod bishop/staff are privileged to participate. The Holy Spirit guides the call process through congregations, committees, and pastors as well as through the bishop/staff of the synod.”

Those words are the first paragraph of the working assumptions that inform the call process of the Eastern North Dakota Synod, ELCA; they inform my own ministry as well. When I visit with members of a call committee I remind them (and me) that the Holy Spirit guides this process, this congregation, and this synod staff pastor. None of us in the room is in charge of the process; it is not up to us alone to accomplish the task before us. We are to use all the gifts at our disposal to assist one another in the process. Believing this to be God’s activity, we can anticipate some wonderful surprises along the way.

I have also been privileged to be a participant in a number of meetings where leaders of congregations gather together to pray, wonder, and dream about possibilities of shared, cooperative ministry. At some point, I always ask, “Why do you want to do this?” and, “Is your purpose to proclaim the gospel and minister to God’s people?” If it is merely to keep the doors open, I tell them, they should not do it! My questions are meant to remind them that this process is God’s activity. We generally do not have a clear vision of where this might lead at that first meeting—or even at later meetings—but we can look forward to what God has in mind.

Rather than asking whether “maintenance ministry” is viable in the rural context, I would rather ask “Does maintenance ministry (with purpose, focus, a vital sense of mission, and openness to God’s activity) have a place in the rural context?” To that question, I would answer yes. For me, even in those congregations that have been defined by someone as being mere “maintenance ministries,” I find wonderful, surprising evidence of God at work. I’ve discovered that when they believe that their ministry is God’s activity guided by the Holy Spirit, then we will see it demonstrated. When maintenance ministry is thought of as less than viable, not desirable, and having no percentage of growth, then, I suppose, nothing good will come out of this place, and believing that, we will see it to be true.

(continued on page 321)

sion of a congregation is to keep its doors open, it will fail. If the mission of the congregation is to do mission, then it will succeed.”

Notice that Simon did not single out small congregations in his statement. For the senator the yardstick for ministry was not the number of warm bodies in the pew on any given Sunday morning but the mission at the heart of a congregation.

Mission is at the heart of each of the congregations at Tri-County Ministry. It would be very easy for our largest congregation, Trinity Lutheran of Cooperstown, to break away from Tri-County. In all reality, it would save them money. However, the members of Trinity see their involvement in Tri-County Ministry as a form of local mission that is more important than having “their own pastor.” Since the beginning of Tri-County Ministry the congregations have seen their mission to the church grow. For example, they took over the administration of Red Willow Bible Camp for a time, when the camp was struggling with weak leadership and a declining financial situation. In November 2005, they increased the size of Tri-County by adding McVile Lutheran Church and Our Savior Lutheran Church in Kloten. Over the years, Tri-County Ministry has been an internship site, an important part of its mission to the wider church. Each January, Tri-County Ministry joins with Luther Seminary to host “Seminary on the Prairie,” an annual educational event that brings seminarians together with clergy and lay leaders for a seminary class. All of this would not be possible without a strong sense of mission and the conviction of these congregations to come together to do God’s work in rural North Dakota.

When we try to label other congregations, we should hear the words that Jesus spoke in Matt 18:20, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God is present as well, and viable ministry is taking place. As long as they see their ministry as missional, they are not a maintenance ministry at all, but a worshiping body of Christ.

You cannot see the mission of a congregation by looking at its average weekly attendance, the newness of its church building, the grandeur of its sign, or the size of its parking lot. The best way to see the mission of a congregation is to worship with them, pray with them, listen to their pains and sorrows, and if possible spend a few hours with them in their tractor or combine. Yes, I will admit that there are a few congregations simply holding on for dear life because they do not want to be the generation that closes the church that “my grandfather built.” However, I suspect that there are a few congregations with five hundred in attendance on a Sunday that have less sense of mission than others with only twenty-five. ⊕

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As a side note, “maintenance” need not be thought of as only something negative. My marriage needs daily maintenance. My emotional, spiritual, and physical health need daily maintenance. The daily ritual of nurturing and watering is valuable maintenance. Focusing on “maintaining the mission” will be more helpful than talking about “maintenance ministry.” The positive question will be: “What is the purpose for the existence of this ministry, and in what ways will we maintain that purpose and mission?”

We must ask “why” and “what” before we ask “how.” Why are we here as a congregation? Why has God called us to this place? What is God up to in our congregation and in our lives? Being clear about these things will help us to think about the questions of “how.” How then will we maintain the mission that God has created us for? How will our community and area be better because our church is here?

In both call committee meetings and area strategy conversations, I find congregations seeking pastors who will lead them in maintaining the mission for which they were created. I remind the members of small, rural congregations that pastors will come to serve congregations that are focused on God’s activity, open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and have a clear purpose for their existence and ministry. If the congregation has lost its focus on maintaining the mission for which it was created, then it will be difficult for them to find a pastor.

In the Winter 2005–2006 edition of the Newsletter *Mission Partners Focus*, David Daubert, executive for renewal of congregations in the Evangelical Outreach and Congregational Mission unit of the ELCA, writes of fast-growing congregations and what those congregations share in common:

- 1) they have a sense of God’s purpose for their ministry,
- 2) they constantly adjust and change as their context changes,
- 3) their leadership empowers people to live out their ministry and callings,
- 4) they emphasize ministering to those outside their walls with intentionality and ministering to those inside their walls with a focus on equipping and discipleship.*

No matter what the context, congregations like this will maintain their mission. As Daubert concluded, “If we learn from these simple (but not easy) basics, the ELCA may have more fast-growing congregations in the years ahead.”

Perhaps then, when the question is asked, “Can anything good come out of maintenance ministry in a rural context?” the answer will always be, “Come and see.” ⊕

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*Online at <http://www.elca.org/outreach/missionpartners/pdf/MissionFocus05.pdf> (accessed 24 May 2006).