



MINNESOTA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Ecumenical Rural Concerns
Listening Sessions
October 2006 – January 2007

Summary and Conclusions

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INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, Minnesota's rural economy has been essential to the wellbeing of the whole state. Senator Norm Coleman recently wrote in the forward to the Rural Minnesota Journal (Jan. 2006) that, "While Minneapolis and St. Paul are often thought of as the center of Minnesota's economy, the reality is that our expansive rural industries are truly a major driving force behind our state's financial strength." And financial stability is only the beginning of the treasures which find their home in rural Minnesota. Here also, we find pristine lakes and rivers, thick beautiful forests, places of great recreation and towns which hold generations of history not only for the state but for most people who now find themselves in the Greater Twin Cities Area. Most of us have a particular town where we, our parents, or our grandparents grew up. The rural is indeed intimately tied to the urban in Minnesota.

In a demographic study of rural Minnesota, Thomas Gillaspay makes note of the incredible changes that have taken place in the past century in shifting the population density from a broad distribution across rural land to now densely populated urban spaces:

In 1900, nearly two-thirds of Minnesota's population lived in rural areas (66%) and three-fourths of the rural population lived on a farm (74%). By 2000, after rapid growth in urban areas and little growth in rural areas, only 29 percent of the state population lived in rural Minnesota and only 10 percent of the rural population lives on a farm. The farm population has declined from 49 percent of the state population in 1900 to 3 percent in 2000. Rural Minnesota has changed.¹

While rural Minnesota continues to make its mark on both the global and local economy, there are growing challenges which add increasing strain to rural communities at every level. In reviewing several of the recent analyses of the significant strains facing rural Minnesota, there emerge three key issues: (1) a decreasing as well as changing population of people who live in rural Minnesota, (2) rural poverty, and (3) an ever declining infrastructure (roads, schools, technology, hospitals, public services).

When we speak of the first of these issues, "a decreasing as well as changing population of people who live in rural Minnesota," we are referring to the in-and-out migration for rural Minnesota. While Minnesota continues to increase in population, 80% of the state's population growth has been focused in the Twin Cities.² State demographers note that each year we see up to five times as many new college graduates move to the Twin Cities region from elsewhere in Minnesota as move in the opposite direction.³ At the same time, we have seen an increasing population of retirees moving to rural Minnesota (and particularly the Central Lakes area). While only 30% of the state's population lives in rural Minnesota, 41% of the state's elderly reside there.⁴ One other group of people who are migrating to rural Minnesota are recent immigrants. After an initial move to the Twin

¹ R. Thomas Gillaspay, "The Demographics of Ruralplexes," *Rural Minnesota Journal* (January 2006), 33.

² Tim Penny, "Reinventing Rural Minnesota," *Rural Minnesota Journal* (January 2006, Volume 1), 2.

³ "Implications of rural Minnesota's changing demographics," *Minnesota Planning Critical Issues* (July 2000), 1 at http://www.mnplan.state.mn.us/pdf/2000/rural_01.pdf.

⁴ *ibid.*

Cities, many new immigrants choose to make a second move to rural places in order to take work in meat and other food packing plants.⁵

In discussing rural poverty, we must consider the above mentioned factors of immigration as well as farmers who continue to make up a significant group in rural Minnesota. In the face of declining net farm income, Tim Penny wrote this in *Rural Minnesota Journal*, “It was assumed that subsidies would translate into profitable farms and by extension vibrant rural communities. The evidence demonstrates, however, that federal farm policy has not made rural Minnesota more prosperous.”⁶ We continue to see a consistently higher rate of poverty in rural counties than those of our most urban areas. And a steady decline in the number of family farms with fewer than 200 acres continues to erode the very fabric of “Main Street Minnesota.” Yet, Minnesota is host to one of the largest number of small farms in the country, particularly organic producers; that is, are ready for consumption and which go directly to market as raw produce, or with limited value added (e.g., tomatoes and peppers make salsa).

The third issue of declining infrastructure is in many ways a result of the previous two. With declining financial support in a community, the basic structures are bound to breakdown. We hear ongoing complaints from rural dwellers of roads in disrepair, consolidated school districts and the increasing distance between hospitals. We know that these are community supports which are essential to sustaining and drawing population as well as sustaining health in a community.

But like any group of people, or place on the map, there is always a lot to say about what needs to be improved. But what’s often not communicated in such studies are the strengths of those people, and their communities. People living in rural Minnesota often choose to live there for a reason: the quality of life; the slower pace; the more intimate sense of community; stronger ties to family; closer link to the land, and the food that it produces; just to name a few such reasons. Worthington, for instance, is the bio-technology capital, and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities are a dynamic presence in rural communities.

And so it is out of this basic context for rural Minnesota that we put our ear to the ground and listen to the people of the church; both about the church life itself, and how the church is engaged in the communities they seek to serve. Seeing the rural church, and the rural communities as separate entities provides clarity. But the two entities are intricately bound together, and have much to say to, and about one another. For instance, as rural communities decline in numbers, so too will the number of people participating in the life of the church. How are the realities of the broader communities interacting with the life of the church? How can we as the Minnesota Council of Churches support the rural church in ways which are meaningful and productive in this particular season?

⁵ In their article entitled, “How the Food Processing Industry is Diversifying Rural Minnesota,” Katherine Fennelly and Helga Leitner demonstrates that “there is a strong correlation between the location of food processing plants and increases in minority and non-English speaking residents in rural Minnesota. Julian Samora Research Institute Publications, Working Paper No. 59, (December 2002).

⁶ Tim Penny, “Reinventing Rural Minnesota,” *Rural Minnesota Journal*, 3.

**SUMMARY OF PROCESS AND COLLECTED RESPONSES
BY REGION**

The Minnesota Council of Churches hosted ten listening sessions throughout rural Minnesota. There were two listening sessions in the Northwestern, Northeastern, Southwestern, and Southeastern regions of rural Minnesota as well as one session in the South Central (Northfield) and Central (Foley) regions.

In most every case, there was a local minister who served as the host and facilitator and a member of the program commission from the Minnesota Council of Churches who served as the recorder. The agenda for each listening session was pre-prescribed by the Council’s Program Commission, including the wording and the order of the questions to be asked. All responses to questions were recorded.

The first chart below describes the logistics of each listening session, grouped by regions. The charts that follow summarize the ideas which were collected from these sessions. The question which was posed will be identified, and then a summary of the answers which were offered will be provided, grouped by region.

Chart 1: Listening Session Demographics

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|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Northwestern</u></p> <p>Fertile – Host: Concordia Lutheran Church Facilitator: Rev. Carl Hansen Recorder: Rev. Jill Steichen. Attendance: 14</p> <p>Staples – This listening session was held at the end of the “Ministry on the Fringes.” Host: Faith Lutheran Church. Facilitator: Pr. Del Moen Recorder: Elizabeth Swee. Attendance: 24</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Northeastern</u></p> <p>Kerrick – Host: Oak Lake Lutheran Church. Facilitator: Nate Anderson Recorder: Rev. Tim Johnson. Attendance: 10</p> <p>Grand Rapids – Host: United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids Facilitator: Marva Jean Hutchens Recorder: Rev. Scott Jacob. Attendance: 8</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Southwestern</u></p> <p>Heron Lake – Host: Heron Lake ELCA. Facilitator: Rev. Joyce Piper Recorder: Rev. Joyce Piper. Attendance: 1</p> <p>Maynard – Host: Maynard ELCA. Facilitator: Pastor Mary Hovland Recorder: Rev. Chris Morton. Attendance: 14</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Southeastern</u></p> <p>Lake City – Host: Lake City UMC. Facilitator: Rev. Nelda Rhodes Clarke Recorder: Pastor Dave Neil. Attendance: 10</p> <p>Stewartville – Host: Stewartville UMC. Facilitator: Rev. Jeff Olson Recorder: Ms. Becci Dawson Cox. Attendance: 3 (all from churches >500 in Stewartville)</p> |

Central & South Central

Foley – Host: Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church.

Facilitator: Pastor Tim Wittmer

Recorder: Jerad Morey

Attendance: 6

Northfield – Host: St. Olaf College.

Facilitator: Rev. Joseph Crippen

Recorder: Linda Kvanbeck (St. Olaf Church Relations).

Attendance: 7

Austin – This listening session was cancelled because we were unable to find a recorder. However, the man who had agreed to facilitate the session, Rev. Jim Peck (First Cong. UCC) submitted some very helpful observations about the Austin community which have been included in the Central and South Central Section.

**1. WHAT IS THE MOST PRESSING CONCERN FACING YOUR CHURCH TODAY?
(ANSWERS DIVIDED IN TWO GROUPS: CHURCHES WITH FEWER THAN 125
PEOPLE AND CHURCHES WITH GREATER THAN 125 PEOPLE).**

Churches with fewer than 125 (if responses were not grouped by recorder into >> 125, then they will all be recorded in the <125 section)

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| <p align="center">Northwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Declining attendance & financial stability -Aging cong./pop. & lack of young people (young people leave post-college--no jobs) -Lack of volunteers/leadership from cong. -Diff. finding pastors for multi-cong. -Loss of sense of mission -poor economies in rural areas | <p align="center">Northeastern (GR)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -aging congregation -young families no time to be very involved in church life -financial struggle to pay a pastor -doing outreach w/hungry & homeless in the face of community's "not in my backyard" attitude -Iron Range immigrants uninterested in church |
| <p align="center">Southwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Declining church attendance -Aging members, aging community -Drug abuse in community -lack of youth & youth groups -Resistance to change and apathy -Mission of church reduced to survival -Fewer men in worship (seasonal activities) | <p align="center">Southeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -low attendance with elderly members -Our image as church -Big buildings to keep up -lacking critical mass of people |

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| Central & South Central |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Members have a low level of commitment to the church – decrease in lay leadership -Faith not reflected in people’s lives, living in “post-Christian” world -Mobile people = transient congregations and less commitment -Aging membership, missing boomer generation (50-60) -Finding a priest who is willing to work part-time -sustaining church with small membership; moving beyond survival -Immigration/changing rural-ethnic make-up: building compassion between the established rural community/church and new immigrants/refugees -Consolidation of churches |

Churches with greater than 125

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| Northwestern | Northeastern (Kerrick) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -clergy shortage -absence of youth/young adults/families -meeting needs of aging congregations -mission/connecting with community -declining attendance -church staff overwhelmed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -In Kerrick, those churches closer to the freeway noted difficulty finding ways to involve young people who had moved into the community -Those farther out expressed aging congregation and loss of young people |
| Southwestern | Southeastern |
| <i>Data not divided for this region</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -health care/many uninsured (small farms, small business owners, single moms) -dichotomy between wealthy and poor -fear of split of UMC & ELCA |

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| Central & South Central |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Retention of young people -Growth in relation to diversity -Shrinking population, shrinking youth, shrinking finances |

2. WHAT ARE THE THREE MOST SIGNIFICANT CONCERNS FACING YOUR TOWN/COUNTY TODAY?

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|---|---|
| Northwestern | Northeastern |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Drug/Alcohol Abuse -Aging/Changing Community -No funding - schools, community services -Poverty/Economic Hardship for families/lack of good-paying jobs -Lack of Healthcare -Lack of community leadership -Greed -Russian Orthodox pop. – cultural tensions and perceived welfare drain -latchkey children/child abuse -crime | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Isolated seniors with inadequate support -Healthcare – too expensive for small business or self-employed -Lack of positive activities for teens -Economic strain – price of land high, farmers are taking second jobs to make it, dairy and beef cattle farming severe decline -School populations declining |

| | |
|---|---|
| -effects of the Iraq war on families | |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Southwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Racial tensions as community diversifies -Jobs – low paying and lack of jobs -Farmers in increasing debt, needing to farm 2-3 times more land in last 30yrs. -Lifestyle -Drug Abuse (meth and ice) -Lack of affordable, decent housing -Economic decline/less local ownership - Population size same, but % Anglo lower and churches now smaller -Rural communities established based upon how far family could travel in one day, but now we're so mobile there's no sense of community identity -Farm bankruptcies, with land skyrocketing from \$1,000/acre to \$3-4,000/acre | <p style="text-align: center;">Southeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -concern about leadership-who will lead? -lack of unity/shared vision -Main streets disappearing/shops closing -No place for kids to be -Loss of community connectedness-rather have your neighbor's land than neighbor -Loss of family farm and family units |
| <p>Central & South Central</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Loss of community/knowning one another -Drug Abuse -Transportation for poor and elderly to food shelf/access to services -Young adults are in debt/lots of financial ignorance -communication breakdowns -Recent school closings, downtown decaying, nothing for kids to do -Farming and environmental concerns -Language (Spanish/Somali) and Cultural diversity diff. esp. for elderly -Pastoral care complex -Ethanol and business growth - decrease in \$ available in county coffers/taxes for capital improvements hard on farmers -Ethnic tensions between established population and new immigrants/refugees -Care for growing elderly population -Consolidation of Schools -Transportation – Rural roads in decline | |

3. WHAT IS THE CHURCH DOING ABOUT THE ISSUES FACING YOUR COUNTY?

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| <p style="text-align: center;">Northwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Senior nutrition -Naming reality of drugs, alcohol, suicide/hosting Narcotics Anonymous -Youth retreats on meth -Parish Nurses -Food shelf/school supplies for kids -Spiritual uplift – offering hope -Networking rural churches thru Lily grant | <p style="text-align: center;">Northeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Parish nurses -Projects to help seniors -food shelves/thrift stores |
|--|---|

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Church day care/after school program -HS Youth Group -MCC, JRLC, LCPPM, LSS -Donations to charities – social ministry | |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Southwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Participating in multi-cultural day -Prompting new thinking with area cluster parish: Prairie Star Ministries -Shifting to more mission, less focus on immediate survival -Response to local tragedy (insufficient insurance) -Free meals and bingo for seniors -Sunday school, youth events, deliver food to families in need, mission trips -EAM – Entrepreneurs group working to start new businesses | <p style="text-align: center;">Southeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Disciples in action – need expressed – group responds -ACT – addressing needs of teens -Exotic Dancer “club” petitioned -Teaching/mentoring -Encouraging congregation to be involved in advocacy and mission -Widen understanding of mission -Language Changing – asking—“How is your faith being lived out?”; “Are you engaged in a personal mission?” -Hard to measure engagement with non-churched; think about process-don’t focus on results |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Central & South Central</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Trying to make people feel welcome -Intergenerational socializing/mentoring programs through confirmation -Hosting Narcotics Anonymous, 4H, Care Groups, and other community events -very ecumenical when & is low, learn from one another and become more effective -agreement can be difficult even between yoked congregations -repeatedly identify the issues but don’t act -give money in diocese to end world poverty (even small churches) | |

4. WHERE DO YOU ALREADY SEE CONGREGATIONS WORKING TOGETHER TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY CONCERNS?

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|---|--|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Northwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Parish partnerships/Work w/judicatories -Food shelves -Ecum. worship w/offerings to food shelf -Housing own confirmation ministry -Ecumenical youth events/missions -Support Care&Share, Northlands mission -Shoe drive for Iraq; children ministering to returning soldiers -Political action -Habitat for Humanity -Personal finance program | <p style="text-align: center;">Northeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Meeting together to discuss the issues -ecumenical services -special offerings for local service programs -willingness to support each other’s ministries --hope to do more to work together |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Southwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Food shelf -Food boxes at Christmas, making quilts, mitten trees | <p style="text-align: center;">Southeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Work independently -Some joint worship/Ecumenical services -Long for more joint work on issues, need |

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|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Some churches in are talking about working together (Watson/Montevideo) -Raymond Parade -Multiple community services also noted, not tied to the church | <p>stronger relationships between clergy, trust, intimacy</p> |
| <p>Central & South Central</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Co-hosting food shelf, clothing closet, “junk” giveaway, household furnishings for poor -Organization “CARE” – helps to keep elderly in their homes longer, volunteers help -Participated in National Day of Prayer -Ecumenical Easter Cantata & Good Friday service -Co-sponsored “See You at the Pole” -treat a symptom but not the cause – Sat. dinners for 12 years -recently program working with people from prison -Rice Co. – Habitat for Humanity – sweat equity by recipients, churches. Helps with lack of affordable housing -bird flu action plan in Cannon Valley area. Designated block person → community building | |

5. WHAT STRENGTHS AND RESOURCES FROM THE CONGREGATIONS AND/OR COMMUNITY CAN WE IDENTIFY?

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| <p>Northwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Supporting hometown business, churches -Strong lay leadership/ldrshp in cong. -Clergy resources for crisis in school, town -Food shelves -Rural outreach/Mission support -Tradition gives order, loyalty, dedication -Christian faith, prayer, hope, witness -Educators -Buildings as asset -Monetary support to community/outreach -We are church people 7 days/week -Lakes-tourist industry -Clean water | <p>Northeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Make do with what you have attitude -Equipment and know how for fixing and making things -Volunteers do a lot -people pull together to do things -Recent urban immigrants to the country have expectations for higher levels of service that sometimes causes tension. |
| <p>Southwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -People in rural comm. can do a lot, but it often doesn’t get channeled into commercial venture -Care Centers, EMT, Hospice, Helicopter -More and better housing for seniors -Middle generation with energy, sense of tradition, and means (a tri-generation church) | <p>Southeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -An abundance of talent/information -People in town who know about management and organizational structure “How to get us somewhere” doesn’t transfer to congregation or community life -Can use nurses/etc. for resources on how to affect healthcare -Abundant wealth -Vigorous retirees (60 & younger) -Lots of 30-40 yr. olds |

Central & South Central

- Varied talents – music, leadership, organizing, friendliness
- “CROSS” and “CARE” – for homeless and elderly support
- Movie Theater has become a community building/gathering place
- Fieldhouse exercise center
- started the community action center as a collaborative of churches in the 60’s
- After school program parenting, teaching skills, ECFE, project kids
- ESL
- congregation filled with people who want to help build a better world.
- Care & Share – help needy people raising \$32K
- Faith & Action – elderly person needs a ramp at house
- People are lonely and want to be asked to be involved in congregation
- Immigration – see not as a problem, but untapped group of people who have the same heritage and can relate to that
- a lot of talent and skills in congregation to be tapped to help immigrants.
- A seasonal ministry in Montgomery Seneca plant, that is their parish.

6. HOW MIGHT CHURCHES WORK TOGETHER TO ADDRESS OTHER COMMUNITY ISSUES?

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|---|---|
| <p align="center">Northwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Don’t emphasize differences in denominations -Ecumenical confirmation event -Work together on family crises/social action -Love your neighbor/genuine concern -Church housing community concern events- church as safe haven | <p align="center">Northeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Support small business -Look for ways to collaborate as with Farmer’s Market -Look for ways to share in programming -“How do we raise a unique Christian voice in community of many voices? And a variety of Christian voices.” -Perhaps we can share Pastoral Leadership -Fostering a “pastoral presence” in small rural communities |
| <p align="center">Southwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Not directly addressed | <p align="center">Southeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Health care – ecumenically promote good health - i.e.; everyone comes to worship in work out/hiking clothes (in multiple churches) and “walk the trail” together after worship &/or only fresh fruit after worship during fellowship -Project Neighbor –One time financial aid -free soup supper 1 night/month -Kids activities to attract others -allow your building to be used for whatever |
| <p align="center">Central & South Central</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Organize movie nights -Host ecumenical youth group New Year’s Eve event -Catholics & Protestants should work to understand each other and even worship together | |

- Transportation for the elderly – organize rides to church
- Spanish immersion for example – see what other congregations are doing and how we start it.
- SE Synod doing some migrant ministry in Austin on Albert Lea
- If one group is doing something well, other congregations can pitch in as in the mission field, working together
- Worshiping together, build on full communion agreements between church bodies. Do it your way in your place. Witness a different tradition.
- Sharing of pastors for small congregations. Not hang on to denominational ties. If you let loose earlier to stay alive and healthy. A county-wide parish with congregation of diff. denom. Keep names of churches/
- Congos come together with music and theater for services, cantatas, special events

7. WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM THE MINNESOTA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES? HOW CAN THEY HELP?

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| <p style="text-align: center;">Northwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Money put into Rural Life Outreach -Legislative stances that improve quality of life in rural MN – augment JRLC -Keep up foodshare -JRLC important (Day on the Hill) -Help build partnerships w/people of other faiths -Children exist in rural community and are at risk too | <p style="text-align: center;">Northeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Advocate for Health Insurance -Advocate for Small Businesses -Rural/Urban exchanges that help people especially youth get to know one another -Perhaps MCC can help to broker the sharing of pastoral leadership |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Southwestern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Help churches work across denominational lines – unity -Connect us with global concerns -Develop the talents of people -Help inventory the talents in our communities – network our resources -Help small churches learn how to help each other – share resources -Picture documentary of rural churches -Large churches partner with small churches, with MCC as conduit -MCC choose an issue, and help churches to develop ministries around that issue -MCC help churches to work with middle-generation -MCC develop a listserv for churches by topic: ministers, stewardship, global concerns, education, immigration -ELCA now sharing Communion with PC(USA), RCA, and UMC ---build stronger sense of unity | <p style="text-align: center;">Southeastern</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Return of “blue” laws – Sunday and Wednesday -Foster opp. for churches to get together -“key 73” – Ecumenical Bible Studies/ Discipleship – Find ways for groups to come together -Sharing – explanation of faith -See what we have in common – help community start -We really don’t know how the MCC can help us -anti-bias/anti-racism MCARI, open forum on programs, information from MCC directly, could take these questions to ministerial assoc. -follow-up visit from MCC representative |

Central & South Central

- Make these reports available—what are other communities thinking?
- Preserve Wednesday nights as church night
- Recommend plans or events
- Support those who speak up as Christians
- Hold to the Gospel in the midst of ecumenism
- program on racism and making better use of that in our congregations, synods, etc.
- Congregations concerned about children
- What will you do with our thoughts and where do you go from here? Can you be a connecting point for denominations and congregations?
- Sharing clergy: how to. Training model of how to work with another congregation/denomination without losing our identity.
- When will they get back to us and how?
- Maybe the MCC can create a model agreement for cross-denominational sharing of clergy at the congregational level.

SUMMATION OF RESPONSES STATEWIDE

1. What is the most pressing concern facing your church today? (answers divided in two groups: churches with fewer than 125 people and churches with greater than 125 people).

The concerns which are held in common among most regions in churches with fewer than 125 people are a decline in church attendance, a decline in involvement of young people, financial difficulties, loss of sense of mission (mission reduced to survival), and a low level of commitment from congregants in terms of lay leadership and volunteerism. Participants in the NW and Central/S. Central regions note difficulty in finding pastors who are willing to take on either multi-congregations or part-time positions. The Central/S. Central and NE regions note difficulties which arise out of the changing rural-ethnic make-up. They note difficulty in connecting with refugees/immigrants and tensions which have arisen between the established rural community and these new members of the community. Pastor Jim Peck from Austin, MN (home of Hormel Foods) notes that his pastoral concern is building compassion between these two groups.

Among churches greater than 125, the most consistent concern was the absence of youth, young adults, and young families. Other concerns mirrored those of the less than 125 groups, but had less in common with one another (see chart above, question 1).

2. What are the three most significant concerns facing your town/County today?

Among the concerns mentioned which face rural towns/counties, those which stand out as being held in common are: drug/alcohol abuse, economic hardship/poverty (for families, farmers, lack of high paying jobs, town struggling to keep afloat), lack of healthcare, inadequate support for increasing elderly population, closing schools/community services/downtown shops, lack of positive activities/place to be for kids/teens, ethnic tensions, lack of community leadership and connection to one another. The SW region also noted a lack of affordable housing. The Central and S. Central region noted transportation difficulties (deteriorating roads, transport for poor/elderly).

3. What is the Church doing about the issues facing your county?

The actions which participants noted in response to the issues facing their counties varied widely. Many of the activities involved meeting a tangible need such as co-hosting a food shelf, delivering food or supplies to families in need, hosting support groups to address addiction, providing activities for youth, and providing parish nurses. Other activities focused more on cultivating a vision for mission within congregations and cooperating with other churches and socially concerned organizations to provide services to the community.

4. Where do you already see congregations working together to address community concerns?

Several participants noted that congregations cooperate in order to maintain food shelves and other community support programs. Ecumenical worship services, youth events, and special offerings were also noted as something which congregations frequently work together on. Several regions expressed a longing for this kind of joint work to grow.

5. What strengths and resources from the congregations and/or community can we identify?

The strengths and resources which were noted in response to this question varied widely from region to region. Many community service programs and the knowledge and skills of community members were noted. Interestingly, in the Southeastern region, many young families (this response came from Stewartville) were noted as a resource. This is a demographic that has been noted as lacking in most other rural regions.

6. How might churches work together to address other community issues?

Participants offered a variety of very specific examples of ways that churches might work together in order to address community issues. Some of these include, working together on confirmation events, finding ways to share church programs and to join efforts on social issues, hosting ecumenical social events (such as a hike, movie night, or a meal), organizing rides to church for the elderly, and sharing of pastoral staff.

7. What do you need from the Minnesota Council of Churches? How can they help?

The most pointed and widely held request of the Minnesota Council of Churches is that somehow the Council might help these small rural churches in developing a model and brokering the sharing of clergy (and other resources) between churches. Many participants noted that there is a need for church members to learn how to share and how to overcome the tensions and challenges that arise in sharing clergy. Aside from this request, the suggestions vary widely. Please see charted data for other suggestions.

EMERGING THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are themes that emerge from the ten listening sessions hosted between October 2006 and January 2007 in Minnesota. Churches in rural communities are increasingly feeling strained, and even low on energy as the sense of “scarcity” overcomes a strength of abundance and strength. People in the church continue to offer their gifts and talents in ways that make the most sense to them, but their families are changing, the communities where they live are changing, and the issues they’re facing are changing. The will of the people in the church, and the church itself, continues to be strong, but fatigue has set in as the capacity seems to have been overcome by the changes. For instance, financial stresses, aging populations, and declining attendance are felt deeply by local rural churches. It becomes difficult to envision mission beyond basic survival when these are the issues which they face.

The broader community in which these churches reside is also facing its fair share of changes. The economy is shifting significantly, from an agricultural base with a vibrant “Main Street,” to a decaying downtown, pockets of large industrial employers, fewer but larger farms, and a growing rural poverty, all of which will profoundly affect any organization which draws its resources from the community.

The question that emerges for the Minnesota Council of Churches is how can we support rural congregations in a time of struggle? More particularly, it seems that we are being asked if there might be a way for the Council to come alongside rural churches in learning to share resources and particularly clergy. How can we help to build common ground for the common good in Rural Minnesota? This may entail basic bridge building between congregations and denominations, it may include education which might demystify the gamut of denominations or establishing contexts within which congregations can come together in order to address such community issues as care for the elderly. One pastor has even suggested that perhaps the Minnesota Council of Churches can help to establish a provisional agreement which enables clergy to serve in two congregations of two different denominations. But, as one participant remarked, if rural churches are going to survive, they are going to have to learn to cooperate and this cannot happen without some help.

Immigration has impacted congregations and communities in some regions of Minnesota. There is a combination of migrant farm workers remaining in communities and secondary migration of new immigrants and refugees moving from the Twin Cities to rural areas, where there is work available in meat packing plants and other farm and factory-type settings. In the face of this changing demographic, the challenge is for the rural church to understand their calling as those who welcome the alien and stranger. This however is a huge task as many are making the transition from being an almost entirely white community to embracing cultural diversity. For many in rural communities, the loss of their family, friends, colleagues, and fellow citizens escalates the fear levels felt about people of the other ethnicities and religions “moving into my town.” Perhaps there is some role in this for the Minnesota Council of Churches. We stand in the unique place of being deeply involved with resettling refugee and providing an array of immigration

services, while also being deeply involved with rural churches. It seems that this is a rare position for any organization to hold.

And so, we consider all of these things: the struggles and strengths of the rural church, the situation of rural Minnesota and our capacities as an organization. We are left with the question of how we can best come alongside the rural church in this season. Where do our gifts and unique interests as an ecumenical organization, an organization deeply concerned for the poor and for new refugees and immigrants meet the urgent needs of the rural church?

SOME IDEAS AND CONCEPTS FOR THE PROGRAM COMMISSION

Churches

- ✓ Identify existing resources on how churches can cooperate
 - ◇ Within denominations
 - ◇ Across denominational lines
 - ◇ Community-wide ministries and/or services
 - ◇ Beyond the local community
- ✓ Host conferences and workshops on cooperating ministries
- ✓ Explore alternative use of church property
- ✓ Sharing best practices in various ministries – stewardship, education, mission, worship
- ✓ Tell the story of churches in rural communities that are thriving
- ✓ Stewardship: when expenses exceed income, how do you give out of your abundance?

Community

- ✓ Define the religious community's role in addressing drug and alcohol concerns
- ✓ Identify replicable ways that churches are already providing support to teens in rural communities
- ✓ Participate in existing, and/or help to design sustainable, economic alternatives for rural communities, and the role(s) that the church can play
- ✓ Convene and facilitate community-wide conversations on “Welcoming the Stranger” and the impact of Minnesota's newest immigrants
- ✓ Strengthen the existing, and help to develop new ministries for Seniors (e.g., parish nurses)
- ✓ Continue to feed those who are hungry, but how support local food shelves



APPENDIX A

Ecumenical Rural Concerns Listening Session Agenda

(90-120 minutes)

Open (5-10 min.)

Either the recorder or facilitator can provide an opening prayer.

Recorder brings MCC program handouts, a description of the Ecumenical Rural Concerns program, and explains what MCC is about and hoping to achieve. They then provide Post-Its to attendees as facilitator asks the following two questions:

Questions (80-110 min.)

1. What is the most pressing concern facing your church today?

Recorder: please mark two columns. Our vision for this question is that people from different-sized churches will have two ways to answer. Folks who attend a church of fewer than 125 people may fill out post-its and answer under one column, churches of more than 125 under another.

2. What are the three most significant concerns facing your town/County today?

This will be another post-it project as people generate their concerns. Facilitator: encourage participants to spend time near the board, grouping similar concerns together and discussing with each other which concerns are related in their groups.

Facilitator: As people finish with the concerns list, have them sit down and then discuss as a whole group which concerns are the top three.

Recorder: Using a marker, record the following responses on big paper for all to see.

3. What is the Church doing about the issues facing your county?
4. Where do you already see congregations working together to address community concerns?
5. What strengths and resources from the congregations and/or community can we identify?
6. How might churches work together to address other community issues?
7. What do you need from the Minnesota Council of Churches? How can they help?

Conclusion (5-10 min.)

Recorder collects evaluation forms and sign-up sheets, tells folks what will be done with the information collected, and requests that they bring extra program flyers home to their congregations.

Either the recorder or facilitator may close in prayer.

APPENDIX B : Session Summaries (Verbatim Notes)

Saturday, October 14, 2006

Staples, MN (NORTHWESTERN)

At end of “Ministry on the Fringes” conference

Facilitator: Pr. Del Moen

Recorder: Elizabeth Swee

24 in attendance

- I. Most pressing concern facing church
 - a. Under 125
 - i. Declining church membership and declining financial support
 - ii. Outreach to the unchurched
 - iii. How does a small country congregation continue to be a viable entity in a changing world?
 - iv. Youth attending church
 - b. Over 125
 - i. Keeping in touch with, and reaching out to, the social needs of the community
 - ii. Expanding or developing 3rd age ministry in churches
 - iii. Are we comfortable enough with our calling as Christians to answer the great commission in the midst of smaller differences?
 - iv. How to mobilize and support laity in ministry/mission
 - v. Lack of commitment to regular church attendance
 - vi. Too much to do and not enough time to do it (meeting needs of everyone)
 - vii. Churches helping with community food drives
- II. Significant concern facing your town/county
 - a. Group A
 - i. Youth programming/addressing drug problems
 - ii. Promoting healthy families
 - iii. Stimulating in healthy ways the young people of our town
 - iv. Keeping the mature members of our community engaged and active
 - v. Alcohol and drug abuse
 - vi. Family structure
 - b. Group B
 - i. Changing community
 - ii. Less income to provide ever increasingly needed services
 - iii. Leadership development (current leaders aging w/o new leaders being trained)
 - c. Group C
 - i. Political movement to “cut taxes” at expense of public good
 - ii. “me-first” values of materialistic culture (“GREED”)
 - iii. Integrating marginalized people (including the poor)

- iv. Townships planning for increased population and water and septic systems on sandy soils. Comprehensive Planning.
 - d. Group D
 - i. Economy / Good jobs for people
 - ii. Funding for schools
 - iii. Funding for city and townships
 - iv. Wages are too low for many families
 - v. School funding (opportunity)
 - vi. Health care
 - vii. Employment opportunities
 - viii. School funding
 - ix. Taxes
 - x. Drugs and alcohol
 - xi. Income
 - xii. Property taxes
 - xiii. Health care
 - xiv. Public education programs
- III. What is the church doing?
 - a. LSS is active
 - b. Senior nutrition
 - c. Naming the reality of drugs, alcohol, suicide
 - d. Having space for narcotics anonymous
 - e. Youth retreats on meth
 - f. School supplies for children
 - g. Parish nurses
 - h. Food shelf volunteers
- IV. Where are congregations working together?
 - a. Food shelves
 - b. Ecumenical youth events
 - c. Political action
 - d. Habitat for Humanity
 - e. Coordinate efforts to avoid duplication
 - f. Personal finance program
- V. What are the community's/church's strengths and resources?
 - a. Mission support
 - b. Educators
 - c. Leadership in congregations
 - d. Buildings as asset
 - e. Monetary support to community
 - f. We are church people 7 days/week
 - g. Lakes-tourist industry
 - h. Clean water
- VI. How might churches work together to address other community issues?
 - a. Don't emphasize differences in denominations
 - b. Ecumenical confirmation event
- VII. How could MCC help?

- a. Keep up foodshare
- b. JRLC important (Day on the Hill)
- c. Children exist in rural community and are at risk, too.
- d. Create stronger partnerships with people of other faiths
- e. Polarized: need to be reconciled

Tuesday, November 14

Fertile, MN (NORTHWESTERN)

Facilitator: Rev. Carl Hansen

Recorder: Rev. Jill Steichen

14 in attendance

- I. Pressing Concern facing church
 - a. Under 125
 - i. Attendance
 - ii. Making sure we can make the budget
 - iii. How to get other members to take part in activities
 - iv. Attendance
 - v. Inactive members
 - vi. Aging congregations
 - vii. Economic/demographic (the young leave for an education and don't come back because there are no jobs)
 - viii. Loss of young people
 - ix. Apathy/Priority setting
 - x. Declining population
 - xi. Aging population (→ young people leaving)
 - xii. Poor economies in rural areas
 - xiii. Number of divorces
 - xiv. Most of your budget comes from people > 70 years of age
 - xv. Lack of volunteers for Sunday school and release time
 - xvi. Lack of willingness to participate
 - 1. council
 - 2. programs, etc
 - xvii. Population aging—not able to help because of transportation or mobility
 - xviii. The youth (few as they are) are too programmed in athletics—and parents also
 - xix. TV consumes people—breaks community associations as they used to be
 - xx. Declining membership
 - xxi. Declining finances
 - xxii. Few members willing to accept leadership
 - xxiii. Few pastors willing to serve small and multi-congregational parishes
 - xxiv. Aging members
 - xxv. Lack of concern for mission and church at large

- xxvi. How to keep young people active after they graduate
- b. Over 125
 - i. Priest shortage
 - ii. More youth involvement
 - iii. Intergenerational commitment (perhaps more a cultural concern)
 - iv. Involvement of young families
 - v. Overloaded agendas for children, youth and families
- c. Additional notes on conversation:
 - i. Demographics: predictions not good. Population grows up here, gets education, doesn't come back; no jobs.
 - ii. Apathy
 - iii. Economic
 - iv. Lack of [volunteering?]
 - v. Decreasing population
 - vi. Larger farms
 - vii. Larger machinery
 - viii. Aging population
 - ix. Stress on families
 - 1. can't afford to farm or take over family farm
 - x. population
 - xi. those who are active in church are same ones active all the time
 - xii. old congregation
 - xiii. getting non-church going to participate
 - xiv. how to keep us here
 - xv. decreasing membership leads to decreasing finances
 - xvi. people don't want to accept leadership roles
 - xvii. smaller churches—less pastors willing to serve
 - xviii. “keep congregation going” at all costs
 - 1. Lack concern for mission or outreach
 - xix. Lender recommended not to put money back on farm
 - xx. # of divorces has hurt the kids
- II. Concerns facing town/county
 - a. Change in agri-governmental direction
 - b. Cheap food
 - c. WAR and young people and families
 - d. Latchkey children
 - e. Race/class/culture tensions
 - f. Drugs/alcohol
 - g. Good parenting
 - h. Crime
 - i. Jobs (good paying)
 - j. Poverty
 - k. Child abuse
 - l. Russian Orthodox people dividing area—consuming welfare \$
 - m. Nation* not at war—effects families only
 - n. Economic

- o. ADDITIONAL NOTES
 - i. Small economies are based on agriculture in some way or another—it's the backbone
 - ii. Has been farm crisis since '80s
 - iii. Increase in [harvest press?]
 - iv. Increase in income taxes
 - v. Government direction is towards cheap food; not concerned with the producer
 - vi. Nation is at war
 - 1. foreclosures on people just coming back from Iraq
 - 2. dairy farmer
 - 3. policy not thinking about being at war and young farmers
 - 4. families with young people in Iraq
 - 5. government needed change
 - 6. people are dissatisfied
 - vii. Drugs and alcohol
 - viii. Lack of good parenting
 - ix. [Mahnomen?] SS. Board:
 - 1. neglect
 - 2. abuse
 - 3. cure
 - x. poverty: lack of good paying jobs
 - xi. Waubon:
 - 1. latchkey children
 - 2. what do kids do
 - 3. hot to meet need
 - xii. tensions
 - 1. race
 - 2. class
 - 3. culture
 - xiii. influx of Russians from West not paying taxes
 - 1. divisive—causing hatred
 - 2. Oregon Russian Orthodox
 - 3. 125 students WiniMAC demand Russian language
 - 4. using welfare system
 - 5. don't want to speak English
 - 6. don't want to talk about it aloud
 - xiv. WW2 all contributed during war—all helped
 - 1. Now: only those involved are at war
 - 2. For the nation it's business as usual
 - 3. Nation is not at war
 - a. Not all serving country
 - b. No sacrifice; no draft
 - xv. Depression/farm families
 - 1. Don't know where to turn
 - 2. Prices same as 23 years ago

3. Going into another 1980s farm crisis
 4. Rural life outreach desperately needed
 5. 2 farm-related suicides this fall
 6. Back into 1980s mediation notices because of being foreclosed on
 7. still recovering from the flood—some never recover
 8. petroleum based: cash flows really hurt
 9. prices same as 30 years ago
 10. care about consumer, not producer
 11. small towns losing all their industry, stores, etc.
 12. kids planned on farming, but now it's not worth it
 13. A lot of 60-70 yr old farmers can't retire because they can't pay taxes
 14. economy is hard
 - xvi. large churches
 1. can pay bills
 2. don't [want?] [to] give disaster but ½ acres yield 2 bushels
 3. Meetings like this should happen in many places all over [world?]
 4. Corporate America: greed; why should this be good model?
 - xvii. Consumptionism economy
 1. Everyone has cable, cell, computer
 2. People don't know how to handle money
 3. Basic level of expectations is much higher than it used to be
 4. Credit cards
 5. materialism
- III. What is the church doing?
- a. Spiritual uplift—hope
 - b. Pastor a miracle—partnership
 - c. Networking of rural church through Lily Foundation grant
 - d. Donations to charities—social ministry, Bible camps
 - e. Church operated day care
 - f. After school program
 - g. HS Youth—building resource for community
 - h. MN Council of Churches—JRLC, LCPPM
 - i. Supportive Ecumenical Relationships
 - j. Day on the Hill—JRLC
- IV. Congregations already together
- a. Parish partnerships
 - b. Work with judicatory bodies
 - c. Ecumenical worship with offerings to foodshelf, etc.
 - d. Housing own confirmation ministry
 - e. Helping youth experience mission with others—more service orientation
 - f. Support of Care&Share, Northlands mission
 - g. Shoe drive for Iraq; children ministering to returning soldiers
- V. Strengths/resources

- a. Supporting hometown businesses, churches
 - b. Strong lay leadership
 - c. Clergy resources for crisis in school, town
 - d. Foodshelves
 - e. Rural outreach
 - f. Outreach funds from congregations
 - g. Tradition gives order, loyalty, dedication
 - h. Christian faith, prayer, hope, witness
- VI. How might churches work together?
- a. Work on family crises—drugs, abuse, divorce
 - b. Social action—command, not option
 - c. Love your neighbor
 - d. Genuine concern vs. gossip
 - e. Church housing community concern events—church as safe haven
- VII. How might MCC help?
- a. Money put into Rural life Outreach
 - b. Legislative stances that improve quality of life in rural MN—augment JRLC

Jan. 30, 2007

Grand Rapids United Methodist Church (NORTHEASTERN)

Facilitator: Rev. Marva Jean Hutchens

Recorder: Rev. Scott Jacob

This Listening Session was informal and so did not follow the agenda that was provided. Eight people attended including the facilitator and recorder. Those in attendance represented four congregations in Grand Rapids and three in neighboring small towns. The denominational backgrounds were 4 Lutherans, 1 Methodist, 1 Presbyterian, and 1 Christian Alliance. We discussed as a group, the split was even in terms of congregations over/under 125 members. Two of the participants needed to leave after one hour due to prior commitments.

Most significant concerns facing the church were:

- The issues of aging congregational members
- Young families are not connected to congregations – they have less interest, less time, and the church is not the center of their community – it is 1 of several centers
- Small congregations struggle with affording adequate pastoral leadership.
- How do we do outreach to the Homeless and Hungry? 2 big issues – First is how do we do it well? And second, how do we deal with the communities “Not in my backyard” attitude?
- In what ways can and do congregations share in programming?
- How do we raise a unique Christian voice in community of many voices? And where there is a variety of “Christian” voices?
- Unique to this area, we experience Iron Range immigrants who tell of not being interested in being connected to a church.

- Pastoral Leadership – where can we share and how would we do that? Can MCC “broker” some of that?
- How do we create or foster “Pastoral Presence” in small rural communities?

There was much discussion concerning local issues facing the ministerium. There was some division described between mainline clergy and the more theologically fundamentalist clergy. (The discussion was primarily after a couple of the pastors had left, the pastor of the Christian Alliance congregation was one of them so this conversation was held by the mainline denominational pastors.) There is an upcoming event being planned by the theologically fundamentalist congregations and they are seeking community wide support with all of the congregations participating. There are many issues that need to be resolved and much of the discussion was concerning ways to resolve them.

There was some conversation at the beginning about MCC’s work and programs. There seemed to be recognition of and appreciation for much of that work.

Tuesday, January 16, 2007

Kerrick, Minnesota (NORTHEASTERN)

Oak Lake Lutheran Church

Host Pastor: Nate Anderson

MN Council Rep: Tim Johnson (UCC)

Notes – Prepared by Tim Johnson

Ten people were present, representing five communities of faith, including the Catholic Community on the Fondulac Indian Reservation. It was a mix of male and female representatives, clergy and laity. All of the churches present were between 150 – 300 in membership.

We began with a meal and prayer. Because of the size, the conversation remained informal around tables with my taking notes as people spoke.

Most Pressing Concerns Facing the Churches

There was some discrepancy between churches near the freeway and those further out in the country. Those closer to the freeway were experiencing something of a population increase, reflected in increased membership and a younger population base. They were concerned about ways to involve young people in the church. Those out a little further experienced an aging population, with young people leaving and the consequent impact on the local churches. In general people were positive about their congregations and not expressing a lot of unhappiness or concerns.

Concerns Facing the County or Town

Again there was some discrepancy between close to freeway churches and those further out. Those further out were particularly concerned about isolated seniors and feeling that they were not getting the services and support they need to stay in their homes. Saw them falling through the cracks.

All of them expressed the number one concern as health care. Too many people did not have it. Small business found it too expensive to provide. There are self-employed families without coverage. Health care came up several times as a major issue.

Activities for teens, especially those without good supervision or positive engagement was also a shared concern.

There was significant discussion about the changes taking place in the rural economy. People spoke about it like forces that were beyond their control. Land is being bought up by weekenders, causing inflation in real-estate property values. The price of land is sky high. The local industry is changing. Dairy no longer exists, beef cattle farming is in severe decline. Those who do farm, need a second job. For some schools the populations are declining causing problems, while other schools near freeway are doing fine.

What Churches are doing?

A number of churches have some ministries addressing these needs. Oak Lake has three parish nurses. Some do organize work projects to help seniors. They participate in food shelves and thrift stores.

What they are doing together?

They have shared ecumenical services, special offerings for local service programs, a willingness to support each other's ministries. There was expressed a feeling they could do more together.

Strengths and Resources

There is a make do attitude with what you have. People tend to have equipment for fixing and making things. A lot gets done with volunteers. People still have spirit of pulling together. Though the changing culture reflects some loss of that. Some recent urban immigrants to the country, have expectations for higher levels of service that sometimes causes conflict or tension.

How Might Churches Work Together

Some expressed the need to support small business over against the growing presence of big box stores. Look for more ways to collaborate like with "Farmer's market's"

How Might The MN Council Be Supportive

1. Advocate for Health Insurance.
2. Advocate for Small Businesses
3. Rural/Urban exchanges that help people, especially youth get to know one another

*The member of the Fondulac Reservation came in just as the meeting ended. She spoke positively about the impact the reservation was having, calling it the biggest employer in Carlton County and speaking with pride about the Community college, clinic and other institutions run by the Reservation. She was well received by others, but nothing had been said about the reservation up until that point.

Evaluation

No formal evaluation was done. But, the spirit was positive. Everyone participated and seemed genuinely appreciative that this effort had been made.

Thursday, Nov. 16

Maynard, MN (SOUTHWESTERN)

Facilitator: Pr. Mary Hovland

Recorder: Rev. Chris Morton

14 in attendance

I. Pressing Concern of Your Church

- a. Church Attendance – younger families aren't coming, or only come for Sunday School and leave before worship
- b. Age of church members is older
- c. Declining membership leading to church(es) closing
- d. Lacking youth ministries --- no youth groups --- need youth centers ---- yet youth are crying for attention and something to do ---
 - i. Partner with others? Like police and state troopers?
- e. Older members aren't wanting much change --- and youth bring energy (uncontrollable?)
- f. Churches can pull together to do something for youth ---- joint programming? Like MACCRAY School District
- g. Drugs are showing up in our communities --- youth
- h. Demographics of rural communities in Southwestern MN --- aging very rapidly
 - i. What does this say about ministry? Health care, immobility, transportation
 - ii. Youth are leaving the rural communities --- what can keep them here?
 1. Money and jobs are elsewhere, but what about lifestyle?
 - iii. If go to school elsewhere, what is there to bring them back?
 1. Willmar is no better on jobs than Maynard --- good paying jobs with benefits are hard to find --- cashiering at grocery stores is not enough
- i. Listening to children/youth and accept their gifts and dreams
 - i. Example: 16 year old girl who wanted to build an arena, but parents said no, so she moved and now at 18 has an arena with 40 employees working with children with disabilities

II. Challenges Facing Your Communities/Counties

- a. Racism – not accepting people who are different, but there are a more diverse group of people living in our communities
 - i. Education to help address the ignorance
 - b. Jobs – it’s what keeps people in the community
 - i. This is a farming area, but they are not employing people
 - ii. There aren’t any jobs that pay very well
 - c. Farming – number of acres has doubled or tripled in the last 30 years
 - i. New County Road but only four families live on that road for one mile
 - ii. Empty farm homes
 - iii. Expanding only leads to more debt, until family farm goes broke
 - iv. Combine sold for \$5,000 but now it’s \$250,000, but the price of grain has remained the same
 - v. Farmers are having to chase their neighbors off their farms so that they can farm more land to actually make money
 - 1. One farmer is now farming the equivalent of 17 farms where families used to live
 - d. Lifestyle – psychologists are so slotted into activities that they are now being labeled as living under stress...that they need more “free time” but that’s what life used to be like
 - i. Sports activities have become so intense, and less fun
 - ii. Competition – to get ahead, have to win....beginning at a very young age
 - iii. How we value life, and people
 - iv. Enjoyment and relaxing is not as important
 - v. Less activities that are simply fun, like Sadie Hawkins dances
 - vi. MACCRAY didn’t have a homecoming dance because the kids didn’t/wouldn’t come --- because the kids have other things to do, like work on the farm, or work at a job...
 - e. Drugs – meth and ice – Sherriffs having to monitor and patrol, prisons, etc...
 - i. Prisoners of Hope – big change in prison population, with most of the people being under age of 20, and one of the major reasons for them being in prison was meth
 - f. Housing – lack of affordable, decent housing
 - i. Carpeting is 20+ years old
 - ii. Furnishings are old, or poorly cared for
- III. **What is the Church Doing to Face These Challenges**
- a. Christian Reform Church in Raymond is providing free meal for Seniors, or Bingo or some form of entertainment
 - i. Only a few of the Seniors who know each other already come
 - b. Raymond UMC has a Sunday School, but attendance is very small
 - i. 1 person in 27 stopped to offer help of “drunk woman” out front of church
 - c. Emmanuel ELCA – Pr Bob takes youth out kayaking, horse back riding, take youth and adults to Gophers Football

- d. Maynard ELCA – Bible School, delivering food baskets, Pr Mary has taken kids to WY, annual youth gatherings, etc ---- but the kids don't seem to want to attend, even when it's free
 - i. Fewer youth so kids not wanting to go
 - ii. Went to Twins game in Summer, opened up to Luther League
 - iii. Servant trip to visit Global Health Ministries, UoM Campus Ministries, Caring and Sharing Hands
 - 1. Youth from Granite Falls ran away to Twin Cities and was killed, and people in Maynard remember
 - iv. One Accord – youth singing group from variety of churches...about 70-some kids from MACCRAY and surrounding towns, from 7-10 churches...but not doing that anymore since one young woman stopped after 11 years
- e. Pastor's Meeting Today – Yellow Medicine has had three youth deaths lately...amazed at the care that the youth are providing one another...kids in waiting room sleeping on floors in hospital in Sioux Falls....
 - i. Amazing ministry that the kids are willing to do, even the kinds of things that adults are afraid of
- f. Entrepreneurs (EAM) – goal is to start a new business every year
 - i. Amish store in Maynard is one such example
 - ii. Pr Larry Olson is active with this group
 - iii. It's a group from the secular community, but religious folks involved
- g. Core Competence in rural communities – people in rural communities can do a lot of amazing things, but it doesn't always get channeled into a commercial venture...people give of themselves here, whereas in urban settings gifts are only offered in exchange for cash/pay
 - i. Commercial Richness vs Community Richness – people willing to give more of themselves in rural communities
- h. EMT – what a blessing for health concerns for Seniors and everyone
 - i. They know everyone
 - ii. But it makes it even more difficult because they know each other...the experience is personal, which is a mixed blessing...
- i. Care Centers – wonderful Centers for the Seniors who are in need
 - i. While they are getting such bad names all over, but the one in Clara City is so wonderful
 - ii. Environment is welcoming, both in terms of care and quality of building/upkeep
 - iii. Connecting with Assisted Living – multiple-levels of care in one setting
 - iv. More elderly leads to more opportunity
- j. Hospice – wonderful care for people, very personal
- k. Technology helping with the distance
- l. Helicopter provides more immediate care
- m. Housing – more and better housing for Seniors, instead of “slum” landlords – own a lot of houses, but don't keep them up
 - i. Afraid to say anything

1. What Can the Church or Community Do About These Concerns

- Housing – Speak up, but need more people to do so

2. How Can Churches, or People in Community Work Together

- Health Benefits – Lions Club has provided some care
- Nursing Homes – provide opportunities for older people to work with the younger people – provides attention to/for the older people, while providing training to younger people training for CNA's/PCA's
- Transportation – Prairie 5 Rides – Family Service have people who need transportation to clinics/doctors, so they call for volunteers to take people places...volunteer your vehicle and time, and get paid mileage
 - 5 Counties covered
 - Take them to Twin Cities, Willmar, Sioux Falls
 - Project Turn About is a rehabilitation center for alcoholism, drug addiction, gambling in Granite Falls
 - Outreach places in Marshall -- late afternoon and evening programs
- Machinery Museums – community activities like thrashing bees, classic tractors...enthusiasm and pride in classic machinery....great for retirees and opportunity for young people to learn, and tourism opportunities....a place for people to care for one another....reaching people where something is important to them, like machinery
- Restoration --- school house, barns, etc....learn about the culture....
- Heritage Hills/Pioneer Show (3rd week in April and 3rd week in August) – appreciation of the community's culture, take pride in their past, and teach the next generation
 - Community pride that crossed lines beyond the church
- Raymond Parade – everyone works together....and it's rather large...breakfast, lunch, dinner...activities....kids' parade....
- Maynard's 4th of July festival
- New Parishes – Healing Water in the area, some groups of churches are talking about how to work together
 - Watson/Montevideo area held conversations
- Food Shelf – various churches involved, plus all of the churches donate...Maynard ELCA supports the food shelf in Montevideo
- Men's Fellowship Groups have been replaced by civic organizations, like Lions....but it's the Fellowship Groups that help to make the church
- Food Boxes at Christmas, plus Women's Fellowship are making quilts....all go to those in need....Mitten Trees provided more to go into food boxes....grant provided by Thrivent
 - Raymond doesn't have something like this, but there are low-income families who are in need
 - Wish the church(es) would be more giving

- The number of baskets seems to be increasing each year

3. How Can the Minnesota Council of Churches Be Of Help?

- Help churches work across denominational lines...move beyond doctrinal commitments...look beyond the divisions, and find the commonalities - Unity
- Connect with global concerns – humanity’s connection to one another – not “them/us” but us
 - Begin with each one of us
- Develop the talents of people, rather than some other things that church leaders are spending their time on....listen, and learn what their talents are and help find ways to express them
- Help inventory the talents in our communities
 - Pieces are here, but we need to find ways to gather them in
 - Find out what the youth want...then work with them
 - Find out what the older generations are doing and interested in...link them, mentoring
 - Confirmation classes as places to get to know one another across generations (even grandchildren getting to know grandparents as mentors)
 - Tractors, equipment, machinery
 - Craftsmanship in such areas as wood working
 - Farming to gardening....canning...feeding families, and the hungry
- How can churches help each other within the community, particularly those that are so low in numbers
 - Share the same church building
- Picture documentary of rural churches --- picture with a short story, maybe in partnership with the Minnesota Historical Society

December 7, 2006

Heron Lake, MN (SOUTHWESTERN)

Rev. Joyce Piper

(This thing was a bust. Rev. Joyce Piper valiantly recorded the words of the one attendee)

1. Most pressing concern facing your church today:
 - a. Apathy
 - b. Lack of engagement in church; over-scheduled families
 - c. Fewer families with children
 - d. Scattered commitments
 - e. Learning how to do same with less
 - f. Survival as “mission” not compelling or life-giving to the congregation
2. Three community concerns:
 - a. Main street empty - economic decline

- b. Hispanic population being ignored
- c. Less local ownership
- 3. What is the church doing:
 - a. Participating in multi-cultural day
 - b. Prompting new thinking with area cluster parish: Prairie Star Ministries
 - c. Shifting to more mission, less focus on immediate survival
 - d. Response to local tragedy (insufficient insurance)
- 4. Congregations working together?

Jan. 11, 2007

Stewartville United Methodist Church (SOUTHEASTERN)

Facilitator Rev. Jeff Olson

Recorder Ms. Becci Dawson Cox

3 in attendance (Becci, Jeff, and one other person from Stewartville (Ron Allen). Both Jeff and Ron were from churches in Stewartville with congregations greater than 500.)

-Becci noted that their orientation might be more suburban rather than rural because of their location and church size.

1. Most pressing concern facing your church today

Health Care – uninsured growing

- dichotomy between those who have/have not even in well-to-do areas
- losing benefits and not having
 - smaller farms and small business owners, single moms

Fear of Split of UMC & ELCA over issues of inclusiveness (elephant in the sanctuary)

2. Three community concerns

Stewartville

- lack of unity/shared vision
- concern about leadership – who will lead?
 - no choice/no slate
 - partnership/servanthood needed
 - **-burn-out of leaders – city culture in congregations
- inferiority complex “we aren’t good enough to have...”
- We as the presence of Christ in Stewartville haven’t found a way to address this—so many unchurched 45-70%

3. What is the church doing:

Teaching/mentoring

Encouraging congregation to be involved in advocacy (JR/LC/Bread for the World/ Heifer International –moving them into the world – serving others/not ourselves

Widen understanding of mission

Adept at check writing – moving towards hands-on mission work

Language Changing – “sense of calling”

More God-talk by pastor frees people to do so—“How is your faith being lived out?”; “Are you engaged in a personal mission?”

Hard to measure engagement with non-churched; think about process-don’t focus on results

Changing people from the inside changes response

4. Where do you already see congregations working together to address community concerns?

Work independently

Some joint worship

Long for more joint work on issues, need stronger relationships between clergy, trust, intimacy

5. What strengths and resources from the congregations and/or community can we identify?

An abundance of talent/information

People in town who know about management and organizational structure

“How to get us somewhere” doesn’t transfer to congregation or community life

Can use nurses/etc. for resources on how to affect healthcare

Abundant wealth

Vigorous retirees (60 & younger)

Lots of 30-40 yr. olds, lots of young people

6. How might churches work together to address other community issues?

Apathy, indifference

Pray – for a “depression”

Health care – ecumenical promote good health

-i.e.; everyone comes to worship in work out/hiking clothes (in multiple churches) and “walk the trail” together after worship &/or only fresh fruit after worship during fellowship

7. What do you need from the MCC? How can they help?

tough question, don’t know, anti-bias/anti-racism MCARI, open forum on programs, information from MCC directly, could take these questions to ministerial assoc. – follow-up visit from MCC representative

-We really don’t know how the MCC can help us

January 18, 2007

Lake City (SOUTHEASTERN)

Facilitator: Dave Neil

Recorder: Nelda Rhodes Clarke

10 in attendance

1. Most pressing concern facing your church today

- low attendance with and elderly members
- Our image as church
- Critical mass of people
- Big buildings to keep up/ “Family of God”

2. Three community concerns

- Business closing – to drive larger communities/business
- Main streets disappearing – stores are “tourist”
- Internet
- No loyalty – young families “church shop” - both parents working, distracted by sports, etc.
- No place for kids to be
- Money is here in Lake City (doing well) – equipment does what 30 people did – equipment lasts a long time, now farmer farms 1000+ acres
- Rather have your neighbor’s land than your neighbor – no longer helping each other – not the community connectedness
- loss of family farm, loss of family units (from evaluations)

3. What is the church doing:

- Disciples in action – need expressed – group responds
- ACT – addressing needs of teens
- Exotic Dancer “club” petitioned

4. Where do you already see congregations working together to address community concerns?

- Ecumenical services – small supportive

5. What strengths and resources from the congregations and/or community can we identify?

6. How might churches work together to address other community issues?

- Project Neighbor –One time financial aid
- free soup supper 1 night/month
- Kids activities to attract others
- allow your building to be used for whatever

7. What do you need from the MCC? How can they help?

- Return of “blue” laws – Sunday and Wednesday
- Foster opportunities for churches to get together
- key 73 – Ecumenical Bible Studies/ Discipleship – Find ways for groups to come together
- Sharing – explanation of faith
- See what we have in common – help community start

Thursday, November 16

Foley, MN (CENTRAL)

Facilitator: Pr. Tim Wittwer

Recorder: Jerad Morey

6 in attendance

- I. Concerns of the churches
 - a. Competition with public events (school sports, other public organizations)
 - b. Personal discipline of membership—duties taken too lightly
 - i. Folks have a light commitment to church
 - c. Degrees of faith—be active beyond Sunday morning
 - d. If folks saw Christ as real in their lives, would they act differently on a Friday?
 - e. Tough to integrate faith with life in “post-Christian” world
 - f. Mobile people = transient congregations – less commitment
 - g. Theology important to commitment
- II. Issues facing town/county
 - a. Absence of community in towns/less “rooted” areas (like on the block—landed folks may know who’s on the next 40 other but rarely do next door neighbors)
 - b. Drugs
 - c. Transportation for poor and elderly to the foodshelf
 - i. Access to services in general
 - d. Young adult debt—people are “licked before they start”
 - i. It’s too easy to get in debt
 - ii. There is a lot of financial ignorance (how to use the gifts of God)
 - e. Communication breakdowns
- III. What is the church doing?
 - a. Boosting attendance
 - i. Making people feel welcome
 - b. Commitment cards help people feel invested
 - c. Intergenerational socializing
 - d. Hosting Narcotics Anonymous
 - i. And hosting 4H, Care groups, Women of Today, and other events as a form of outreach
 - e. Engaging in a confirmation guides/mentors program to enable intergenerational relationships
- IV. What are congregations doing together?
 - a. CROSS center—foodshelf, clothes closet, “junk” giveaway, household furnishings for the poor
 - b. CARE—keeps the elderly in their homes longer, offers home visits, volunteers do housework
 - c. The did organize to preserve Wednesday night from non-church events in the past
 - d. Engaged in a local national Day of Prayer
 - e. Share an ecumenical Easter Cantata

- i. And an ecumenical Good Friday service
 - f. Sponsored See You at the Pole
- V. Strengths of community
 - a. Varied talents: music, leadership, organizing, friendliness
 - b. CROSS and CARE
 - c. Movie theater is a community building
 - i. A local business is willing to risk profit to invest in the community
 - d. There is a fieldhouse exercise center
- VI. How might churches work together?
 - a. Organize movie nights
 - b. Host an ecumenical youth group New Year's event
 - c. Protestant and Catholic relationships—they can work to understand each other better and even WORSHIP together
 - i. A Lutheran church in St. Cloud invites Catholics to its Reformation Sunday services!
 - d. Transportation for the elderly—organize rides to church
- VII. How could the MCC help?
 - a. Make summary of these reports available—what are other communities thinking?
 - b. Preserve Wednesday nights as church night
 - c. Recommend plans or events—share best practices
 - d. Challenge church/state separation attitude
 - e. Preserve separation of church and state
 - f. Support those who speak up as Christians
 - g. Hold to the Gospel in midst of ecumenism

January 25th

Northfield – St. Olaf College (SOUTH CENTRAL)

Facilitator: Joseph Crippen

Host/Recorder: Linda Kvanbeck

1. Most pressing concern facing your church today

More than 125:

- Retention of young people
- Growth in relation to diversity
- shrinking population, shrinking youth, shrinking \$

Less than 125:

- Aging membership
- The missing boomer generation 50-60
- Finding a priest who is willing to work part-time
- walking with people
- accepting the challenge

- focus beyond survival
- healthy family orientation
- ability to sustain the church with a small membership

2. Three community concerns

- Taxes for capital improvements are unduly hard for farmers
- Recent school closings
- Ethanol and other business growth
- fixation on corn and soybeans and the money input for pesticide and fertilizer
- environmental concerns of crops
- downtown decaying. Nothing for kids to do
- instead of more kids, more teachers
- Ogrowth identity of people – major shift as new people come in
- \$ available in county coffers
- Language diversity Spanish and Somali—Worthington very diverse
- Culture/customs difficult for older members to accept and live with
- Years ago people went with their ethnicity –now mixing into congregations
- pastoral care complex

3. What is the church doing:

- very ecumenical when money is low, learn from one another and become more effective
- agreement can be difficult even between yoked congregations
- repeatedly identify the issues but don't act
- give money in diocese to end world poverty (every congregation .07)
- Many small churches with the least to give, give the most
- Canadian churches can only retain 24% of income

4. Where do you already see congregations working together to address community concerns?

- difference between social action and social change
- treat a symptom but not the cause – Sat. dinners for 12 years
- recently program of people from prison
- Rice Co. – Habitat for Humanity – sweat equity by recipients, churches. Helps with lack of affordable housing
- bird flu action plan in Cannon Valley area. Designated block person → community building

5. What strengths and resources from the congregations and/or community can we identify?

- started the community action center as a collaborative of churches in the 60's
- After school program parenting, teaching skills, ECFE, project kids
- ESL
- congregation filled with people who want to help build a better world.
- Care & Share – help needy people raising \$32K
- Faith & Action – elderly person needs a ramp at house

- People are lonely and want to be asked to be involved in congregation
- Immigration – see not as a problem, but untapped group of people who have the same heritage and can relate to that
- border issues of immigration and legal make the people reticent to mingle in congregation
- a lot of talent and skills in congregation to be tapped to help immigrants. We underutilize these talents. Find a way to organize and act.
- seasonal ministry in Montgomery Seneca plant that is their parish. Reg. 5 – Baptism, marriage, mass and meal. Need to deliver message in Spanish.

6. How might churches work together to address other community issues?

- Spanish immersion for example – see what other congregations are doing and how we start it.
- SE Synod doing some migrant ministry in Austin on Albert Lea
- If one group is doing something well, other congregations can pitch in as in the mission field, working together
- Worshiping together, build on full communion agreements between church bodies. Do it your way in your place. Witness a different tradition.
- Sharing of pastors for small congregations. Not hang on to denominational ties. If you let loose earlier to stay alive and healthy. A county-wide parish with congregation of diff. denom. Keep names of churches/
- Congs come together with music and theater for services, cantatas, special events

7. What do you need from the MCC? How can they help?

- program on racism and making better use of that in our congregations, synods, etc.
- Congregations concerned about children
- what will you do with our thoughts and where do you go from here? Can you be a connecting point for denominations and congregations?
- Sharing clergy: how to. Training model of how to work with another congregation/denomination without losing our identity.
- When will they get back to us and how?

Austin (SOUTH CENTRAL)

Thought from Pastor Jim Peck – First Congregational UCC

This listening session was cancelled, but he still offered his thoughts.

Here are the key concerns I have for rural Minnesota:

1. Immigration / changing racial-ethnic make-up. This issue is very real in smaller cities in the rural part of the state, particularly any community that has a food processing plant. Most Minnesotans are taking these changes in stride, but there is a very vocal contingent that is making sure things stay tense. We need help in interpreting these changes effectively to the long-time residents. We need help in understanding immigration law

and policy. We need help communicating that these changes are part of global economic changes. This issue is very real in Austin. Since 1990, the percentage of persons of Hispanic descent has gone from less than 1% to over 10% today. That is a huge change in a very short time. Maybe we should be advocating to Congress or the state legislature for immigration impact assistance funds. We should certainly be advocating for a major overhaul of our immigration laws and policy. There is a more just solution than either what we have now or the close the borders / open the borders polarity. From the standpoint of full disclosure, I am chair of the board of a nonprofit here that works with the immigrant community. I see this tension first-hand and know this issue quite well.

2. Elder care. The proportion of elderly (over 65 yes, but also over 80) in rural Minnesota counties is higher than it is in the state as a whole. Our county has the highest percentage of people over 65 of any in the state -- 22% -- and I'd estimate half of those are over 80. Caring for the elders is a genuine challenge for our congregations, especially when so many of our mainline congregations are themselves skewed to an older demographic. Our elders want to stay in their homes as long as possible, and want to stay in the area even when they move to a new living arrangement.

3. Consolidation of institutions -- Schools. There are only two remaining community institutions left in rural Minnesota now that the local store, local creamery, local farm implement dealer has moved on to the nearest larger town. Those two institutions are the local schools and the local churches. I anticipate there will be increased pressure to consolidate local rural school districts over the next decade, largely on cost-savings, improved resources grounds. Those grounds are justified -- Mower County children are served by nine school districts, some with fewer than 500 total students K - 12. That makes no economic or educational sense to me. I know the sentiment favoring this school arrangement will be difficult to overcome. But I expect this movement will develop.

4. Consolidation of institutions -- Churches. While some may be skeptical, I believe our most rural churches have more of a chance of surviving than some of our town churches, simply because the members of the rural churches will work harder to keep them open. State and regional judicatories may have to develop some shared ministry agreements across denominational lines to allow these congregations to be served by clergy, agreements that don't require a ten year national approval process. Some of these churches do not have ten years to wait for all the wrangling to be over. Maybe the Minnesota Council of Churches can create a model agreement for cross-denominational sharing of clergy at the congregational level. Polity should not trump serving people.

5. Transportation. Rural roads are being shortchanged by the State Department of Transportation. I, too, drive in the Twin Cities and Rochester and know there are serious transportation challenges there. However, in rural Minnesota, good roads are the only viable option. Yes, in a city like Austin (23,000), a limited service bus system is possible, if subsidized. But population densities are such that good roads essential -- that was true in horse and buggy days, too. This is not because of the automobile, but because of development patterns and densities. I certainly know from experience that many rural

roads in southern Minnesota are deteriorating, too narrow, lack shoulders, and need improvements for both safety and traffic volume reasons.