

the synod bishop for that matter. They don't always see the need for churchwide social statements and rarely read them. They read the Bible and that feels like enough. As a bonus, they may read *Living Lutheran* or *Gather* magazines.

Fourth, people in rural areas usually know their neighbors—sometimes too well. Evangelism programs that are designed to get to know your neighbors are useless in small towns because the neighbor is already known. Most people can tell you not only what church their neighbor goes to, but who built the church, how well it was built, who has been married in that church, who the best pastor in memory is, and what is keeping that neighbor from going to your church.

Fifth, when a new pastor comes to their church, most people in rural areas want that person to know one thing: Please love them. That is enough. Jesus will change them—that's not the pastor's job. Jesus will change them with or without the pastor leading the change. While it could sometimes feel like nothing is changing, God is at work. People in rural areas already know this because they see it all the time. They see God's work in the new shoots springing from the earth every spring. They see God's work in the harvest every fall. They see God's work in the summer rain and thunderstorms

(that's why "How Great Thou Art" is a favorite hymn in rural areas). They see God at work when babies are baptized and in the funeral dinners parishioners prepare. They see God at work in calving season, lambing season and even when it's time to take their animals to market. People in rural areas are strongly connected to the land and see God's work as an integral part of that connection.

Sixth, and finally, to the pastors in rural areas, know that what you do matters. You are the spiritual expert in town. You are God's spokesperson. You are the one who knows the Bible best and you are the one who people count on for spiritual direction. People are counting on you—you are needed at every baptism, every wedding, every funeral, every worship service, every potluck and every other social function because your presence is a constant reminder that God is love and God loves them. They know God loves them because they can tell that you love them. When you let them love you back, it forms a beautiful circle of love that makes rural ministry an important part of the life of the Christian church on earth. **L**

Donald Short is pastor of Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Othello, Wash.

From the bishop *continued from page C*

The Rev. Mark Nelson soon followed, taking the position as Region 1 coordinator and leaving his position as assistant to the bishop. But we didn't have the money to replace him.

My third term, which began in 2011, has been marked by yearly goals and concrete strategies ("The Way Forward") to address the new funding realities and move confidently into the future, either under our own steam or in deeper partnership with neighboring synods. This was the beginning of our experiment with the "net-workers," part-time synod staff posted in our regions to serve congregational mission. In addition, most of these years I have led the work for the call process, the most important partnership with congregations, and it has been deeply satisfying.

From the fears associated with the clock-turn into the year 2000 to the challenging changes of the last presidential election, it has been a complicated 18 years! I'm deeply grateful for having had the opportunity to serve, even in turbulent times. Thank you.

I leave you with more of Romero's words: *We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that affects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. ... We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future that is not our own.*

God's future is still ahead of us!

God's richest blessings,
Bishop Martin Wells



Reflections on rural ministry

By the Rev. Donald Short

I remember my first day of orientation at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. All of us who were new to campus were invited to chapel for some introductory remarks. I believe it was Alvin Luedke, professor of rural ministry, who addressed all of us by saying, “Stand up, look to your left, look to your right, and realize that two of the three of you will be called to rural ministry.”

We have a tendency in pastoral ministry to believe that rural ministry is for beginners, and that people with more experience should serve larger churches in urban areas. Some incorrectly assume that longtime pastors who are still serving in rural areas must not be very good or they would have gotten a call to a larger church by now. Some also mistakenly believe that rural pastors don't work as hard as their urban counterparts because we are willing to be satisfied with smaller congregations in smaller towns.

Many people in my seminary class weren't willing to accept a call to a rural area. Some classmates believed their gifts were in urban ministry and they would be underutilized if they served in an agricultural context. One classmate was initially called to a rural context. But when he toured the two-point parish, he was aghast that he was expected to travel on dirt roads to get to one of the churches! Those of us who have been in rural ministry for a while don't even think twice about taking dirt roads.

I've been in rural ministry for most of my pastoral career. Along the way I've made a few observations. I'll devote the balance of this article to stating those observations with as little commentary as I am able to manage.

First, rural parishioners are some of the kindest people on the planet. They are generous with what they have. I served my internship in a rural parish and was treated to homegrown chicken, beef and some of the best garden-fresh produce imaginable.

Photo: Kristi Spohr



The Rev. Donald Short speaks to Lynette Caruthers at a reception after a “Celebration of the Arts” worship service in Othello, Wash., on Feb. 12 at Pilgrim Lutheran Church. Caruthers is the chair of the Othello Beautification Committee, which was the recipient of the \$300 offering from that service.

People in rural areas are quick to welcome you into their homes and share their best recipes. And they delight when you take the time to hear their stories.

Second, and don't take it personally, but rural people aren't going to do everything the pastor wants them to do. They have seen you before; they know the drill. The new pastor comes charging out of seminary ready to turn the world upside down with bold ideas and fresh insights. People in rural areas are happy to “set the pastor straight” on how the “real world” works. They know they were here before the new pastor arrived and will likely still be here long after the pastor has moved on to another call. They don't feel the need to try every new thing that comes fresh out of a seminary.

Third, people in rural areas are mission-minded. They take pride in making quilts for Lutheran World Relief and are generous with donations to ELCA World Hunger. They are more than happy to support the youth as they prepare to go to the next Youth Gathering, but they won't always welcome the new constitution that is supplied by the churchwide office. They don't always appreciate the political views of the churchwide bishop, or even

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Ag show helps rural ministry resource discover community needs

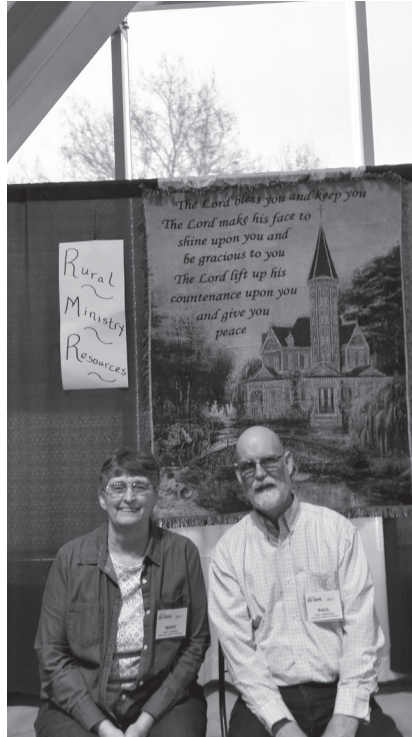
By the Revs. Paul Anderson and Mary Daniels

Where is a good place to make contact with all the rural people in Eastern Washington and Idaho? The Rural Ministry Resource (RMR) Board found the answer at the three-day agricultural show held in February at the Spokane (Wash.) Convention Center.

The RMR made contact with adults and youth alike, with many comments and connections made. The youth especially expressed great interest in the booth and the activities that happen in rural communities.

Two posters on the ecumenical RMR table invited people to leave comments for us to consider in preparing the board's focus for the future. On one poster we asked people to: "Share something about your community." Some of the comments were:

- Very small.
- Awesome.
- Great—some ag and lots of hobby farms.
- We value our rural qualities.
- You know everyone.
- Helps everyone in trouble!
- Everyone helps one another.
- We're a big family.
- Very great community support.
- We have to stick together and hope for the best.
- It's small and quiet.
- Great church family.
- Leading Native American colleges with Salish Kootenai College.
- Lack of teen activities.



Mary Daniels and Paul Anderson make connections, answer questions and take comments to help prepare the future focus for the Rural Ministry Resource Board.

The second poster asked: "What change would you like to see in your community?" There were many great responses in what people would like to see changed, including:

- Drug consumption.
- Back off the developers.
- Transportation more accessible.
- Alcohol abuse.
- More community interaction with each other.
- Positive attitude toward each other.
- Lower teen pregnancy.
- Negative words.
- Less racial discrimination.
- More education about different communities and cultures.

We were thankful for all the responses and input. We took all of the comments and challenges to the ecumenical RMR Board meeting in May, where we discussed how we can respond to the many blessings and challenges of living in a rural setting.

The ecumenical RMR Board has been active in the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod for about 30 years in an effort to support our rural churches and communities. ✚

Paul Anderson is the RMR president and an ELCA pastor serving two rural churches, a joined Presbyterian and Lutheran congregation in Fairfield, Wash.

Mary Daniels is the RMR secretary and a retired ELCA pastor who previously served two rural Lutheran congregations in Eastern Washington.

From the bishop:

Reflecting on 18 years as bishop

"It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts: it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is the Lord's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us."

I've always loved this quotation from Roman Catholic Archbishop Oscar Romero. The words are so generous in spirit, generous and true, that I want to claim it as my own as I reflect on 18 years as your bishop of the Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod. Some might see his words as depressing since they hint at incompleteness, but I see them as promise—the promise of God that is always before us, calling us into the future. And his words give me the courage to look back. In looking back, I understand my time among you as divided into three six-year terms.

It has always been clear to me that the first six years, beginning in 1999, were a calling to steadiness and self-differentiation amid tension and deep disagreement. We were a synod in conflict when I was elected.

The primary struggle was over whether it was faithful that we declare full communion with the Episcopal Church. In particular, we disagreed over the idea that we could subscribe to the "historic episcopate," the notion that through bishops an unbroken line of fidelity stretched back to the first apostles. I understood this struggle to be about notions of power and abuse of power that some in our church feared, and so leadership in the yearly synod assembly became the crucial focus. If we could disagree in a forum marked by fairness and respect, I believed we would find our way.

Having achieved a measure of respect among us, it was time for us to move more intentionally into the mission given by Jesus to "make disciples," and this became the focus of my second term, beginning in 2005. Reading *Reclaiming the Great Commission* by Episcopal Bishop Claude Payne

was a wonderfully unifying process, and he offered deep encouragement when he spoke to our assembly in 2007. We decided to grab this energy with a "super-assembly" in 2008 when we met in Spokane, Wash., with the Rev. Martin Marty as speaker and preacher.

Mark Sedio led us as organist for a fantastic hymning and concert at St. John Cathedral, Lost and Found led a 400-student youth assembly, and voting members and guests attended more than 30 workshops and teaching sessions on various aspects of congregational ministry. Following the example of the Synod Council, many congregations set "guiding principles" for their ministry, using them to drive yearly goals.

During these years, the synod pushed hard for new ministry. Our goal was a new congregation that would serve Boise and the Treasure Valley in Idaho, especially the Kuna area. And we would be working off of a unique partnership recently begun in Sandpoint, Idaho, imagining a senior-housing project that could shelter a new congregation too. My deepest surprise in the 18 years of this work was the opposition that developed to this project, either because it was in territory claimed by another congregation or the new argument: "The synod doesn't have its own projects. Only congregations start new congregations." The project went down with the economic implosion of 2008 when bond-financing became impossible. But this had been an ambitious and creative goal!

The 2009 Churchwide Assembly changed the church dramatically, with a new social statement on human sexuality and a decision that our gay and lesbian pastors could marry where legal. All of the Pacific Northwest synods, in combination with the economic freefall, lost an average of 25 percent of their budgets over these decisions. That meant when Laurel Eschenbacher retired as synod administrative assistant, we couldn't replace her.



Bishop Martin Wells

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