

RURAL MINISTRY NEWSLETTER

Lessons from Rural Ministry

Smaller, But Not Less

By Pastor Helga Jansons, Director for Evangelical Ministry

Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod , ELCA

My appreciation for rural ministries and the pastors of small town congregations continues to grow. When going “walkabout” in the community with a pastor it is a delight to discover how central a pastor can be to the whole community. The church’s presence in the community is emotionally important even to people who do not attend. Rural congregations may think they are too small to make a difference, yet the impact they make on their community is large.

I think that rural and small town ministries may be “ahead of the curve” in some ways. Growing churches in cities function in ways that small churches have always functioned. Even faith based community organizing principles have much in common with the way ministry works in small towns.

Relationships are everything. Well-planned hospitality is important. In small towns you cannot just “be nice”, you need to be authentic, especially long term. Caring must be genuine. “People are not looking for a friendly church. They are looking for friends” (*Discovering Hope, L. Shannon Jung*)

Building the faith community to function as the body of Christ is what enables the church to make an impact in the community. It seems that the church is less central to the community if it functions as a collection of individuals who do not work together as a team. Also having fun is fundamental.

Shared leadership works: where the pastor is not dominant, and even the pillar families of the church cannot be the ones “driving the tractor”. Pastors lead best in non-coercive and gift affirming ways.

A church is likely to be a central meeting place and any event that brings people together is valued. A clear identity, a purpose, and a signature ministry are essential. Community involvement is evangelism.

The church building can mean more to rural parishioners than their own home. A home can be replaced. The building is a symbol of continuity, especially with those who have died.

A little goes a long way. A church known as the place for a blood drive or to receive flu shots, or even a small after school program is noticed. Everything counts. Everyone counts. Every word counts also. On the other hand if there is a rumor it spreads quickly, or if someone speaks ill of the pastor it can be congregational suicide. A church in a small town is a public church; there is no hiding in a small town.

A church in a small town will respond better to practices than programs. Blessings, rituals, celebrations, prayer circles and bible studies are trusted more than a program. The wisdom of the people is valued more than an outside expert. New ways of doing things have to be introduced carefully and patiently.

Rural ministries are an inspiration in perseverance and resilience. I have never served a rural congregation as a pastor. I am not sure I could; I am not that patient. They have my respect and admiration. I am proud to be in a synod with many rural ministries!

Rural Ministry Resources by Pastor Kathy Lee Kramer

Rural Ministry Resources, Inc. (RMR) evolved in the early 1970's when many concerned rural church clergy and laity realized and expressed support for the idea of the rural and small town church as a viable and essential part of the religious fabric of the Pacific Northwest region.

One of our greatest joys are the retreats that we facilitate once or twice a year, gathering us together in a variety of places such as Sunnyside, and Spokane, where we worship, fellowship, rest, study, and exchange ideas, joys, and concerns. We also celebrate and stand in support of our larger urban congregants and welcome them to participate in our retreats.

As example, this past October 10 & 11, 2016, twenty-three of us gathered at Immaculate Heart Retreat Center in Spokane, Washington to study with Dr. L. Shannon Jung (author of *Discovering Hope: Building Vitality in Rural Congregations*) who led us in discussion, deliberation, and worship centered on the theme, "Who Am I Called To Be In Christ?". True to our ecumenical calling, we came together in one accord representing our Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and United Methodist denominations.

Dr. Jung encouraged a "thought experiment" for rural congregations: what if your church disappeared? He has discovered that the church is a reminder of God even for those who don't go to church who still count on "it" happening; that hope, salvation and confession is possible. They may not pray but they count on God to be there. If the church were (is no longer) not there, rural communities say they would (do) experience less trust, confidentiality, no place for confession is available, no sharing of truth (it is bottled up inside), less hope for the future, relationships are not as deep, more depressed, accountability is lessened in the community and they feel less grounded. The church leads communities with scarce resources to be counter-cultural. These are just some of the thing we learned from Dr Jung.

We are planning our next retreat and/or one day event and are open to suggestions for ideas that would be beneficial to your ministry or congregation. Please contact Kathy Lee Kramer (509) 284 – 6107. Grace, Joy, Peace to you all.

Rural Ministry at the Agricultural Show, Spokane WA

By Rural Ministry Resource Board: Pr. Paul Anderson, President and Pr. Mary Daniels, Secretary

Where is a good place to make contact with all the rural people in Eastern Washington and Idaho? The three day Ag Show held the first week of February at the Spokane Convention Center of course! We made contact with adults and youth alike, with many comments and connections made with both. The youth especially expressed great interest in our booth and activities in our rural communities.

Two posters were placed on the ecumenical Rural Ministry Resource table inviting people to leave comments for us to consider in preparing the focus of the RMR board for the future. On one poster we asked the question: "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 Kootinai College (SLC) and lack of teen activities.

The second poster asked the question: “What change would you like to see in your community” There were many great responses in what people would like to see changed in their communities including: Drug consumption; back off the developers; transportation more accessible; Alcohol abuse, More community interaction with each other; positive attitude towards each other; lower teen pregnancy; negative words; less racial discrimination and more education about different communities and cultures and many others.

We were thankful for all the responses and input as we will take all of the comments and challenges to our ecumenical Rural Ministry Resource Board meeting being held in May to see 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 thirty years in an effort to support our rural churches and communities.



Pastor Paul Anderson is an ELCA Lutheran pastor serving two rural churches, a joined Presbyterian and Lutheran congregation in Fairfield, WA and has been their pastor for 12 years.

Pastor Mary Daniels is a retired ELCA Lutheran pastor who served 15 years serving two rural Lutheran congregations in Eastern Washington.

Five Practices for Healthy Rural Ministry

by Rev. Laura Terasaki, Wilbur Community Church, WA

As a pastor, my role as the congregational leader is to make new disciples and to “equip the saints for ministry”. The healthier a congregation is, the easier it is to accomplish this goal. Until the congregational system is in a healthy place, it is almost impossible to do ministry that builds the church into mature disciples of Jesus Christ. In a rural context, here are a few key practices that can help keep your church in a healthy place, instead of falling prey to toxic people or power groups that disrupt the mission and ministry of your church in their community and beyond.

1) Rotate your leaders and observe term limits

When your congregation uses the same 20% of lay leaders to do 80% of the work, you are guaranteed to stagnate and burn out your best people. When I first came to my congregation, my Council members were technically following term limits but they would rotate a year off and then come back on again for a full term. Many of them had been on Council totaling 10, 15, or even 20 years over the course of their life. If you are struggling to get new leaders, you must ask “Why?”. Is it because we are bad at training and discipling younger leaders? Do we have a tendency towards leaders clinging to power and control? Is our council too large for the size congregation we have? When you struggle to find new leaders, this is often the first red flag that you are failing to reach and raise up the next generation in your church.

2) Model confidentiality

Confidential pastoral care is very hard to do in rural settings. In a town where “everybody knows everything about everybody”, it can be very hard to create a culture of trust. I recently had to put some guidelines around our email prayer chain because it was clearly becoming a gossip chain and not a fruitful tool for prayer. If your congregation does not feel like the church can be a safe space where they can share the truth of their lives, you will rarely have the opportunity to minister to people in their deepest need. If you model confidentiality, your people will follow.

3) Focus on quality over quantity

When I first came to my congregation as a Solo Pastor, they had as many events and programs on the calendar that churches with multiple full-time staffs have. Many congregations try and do too much in part because they are in denial about their decline over time. They don't want to admit that the programs of the past are not working. In fact, they are likely to judge younger members for not stepping in to keep these programs going. It is better to have a few well-attended, fruitful events a year, than dozens of programs done with poor quality and limited investment. It is important to help rural churches understand that the culture has changed, that younger generations have different interests and needs, and that it is better to let some programs die so that space can be made for the Holy Spirit to lead the church into new opportunities. In addition, each event or program should be evaluated with the end in mind. Does this program reach new believers? Is this event just social or are there opportunities to grow in faith? Busyness is not next to godliness.

4) Avoid Conflicts of Interest

I find conflicts of interest a huge problem in rural churches. For example, married or related lay leaders should not serve on Council at the same time, and hiring congregants to do large projects such as new construction or to provide all the landscape services can backfire. While it might be cheaper and there is an existing relationship—it is much harder to hold them accountable when things go south, and, when they do (which they will), everyone will know about it and trust me, you do not want to deal with the fall out of broken relationships publicly in a small town.

5) Celebrate “risk”

Lastly, encourage your lay leaders and congregants to discern how the Holy Spirit is moving in your community. Take risks and celebrate regardless of whether or not they were successful attempts at innovative ministry. Praise your leaders for stepping out in faith and build their self-esteem. A church that never takes risks will stagnate and decline. Always be looking for fresh movements of the Spirit. This can be as simple as a lay leader sitting in a different pew or as big as a church deciding to meet the needs of their neighborhood by opening a daycare.

I wish you luck as you build healthy churches. Do not be afraid of conflict. Be brave and enforce healthy boundaries so that your mission and ministry have a strong foundation to survive and thrive.

Rev. Laura Terasaki is the Solo Pastor at Wilbur Community Church which are two congregations in the process of merging together as one (Wilbur Lutheran Church and Community Presbyterian Church of Wilbur). Laura was raised in the ELCA and is an ordained PCUSA Teaching Elder. For more information check out wilbur-uniting.org or email Laura at pastorlaura@wilbur-uniting.org.