

**CANADIAN RURAL CHURCH NETWORK
and
CENTRE FOR RURAL COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP & MINISTRY**

November 2009

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The *Centre for Rural Community Leadership and Ministry (CiRCLe-M)* strives in a variety of ways to equip rural people and churches to help build healthy communities. The *Canadian Rural Church Network (CRCN)* is proud to share in this ministry through our outreach efforts.

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FAITH MATTERS

Resilience Keeps Us Going

We are held captive by the consumer culture ...

What's next? These continue to be unsettling times in rural communities. We are put upon by strong forces that mask the qualities that would otherwise give our lives vitality and purpose.

At a recent conference on rural communities and the church, Dittmar Muendel compared our situation with that of the people of Israel who were taken into captivity in Babylon (587-539 B.C.E.) and were held there for 50 years.

Removed from the land and culture they knew, they became disoriented and depressed.

Rural folks suffer a similar fate. Industrialization and the consumer culture have imprisoned our psyche and disconnected us from the land. Technological instruments dictate how we should farm. Food and services are transported from long distances into our communities by corporations. Our work is measured in terms of "efficiencies". We are held captive by the consumer culture. We fear that endless demands like a cancer, will devour us.

While both we and the land feel our strength being drained, it is amazing how resilient we can be. When the Israelite captives were released to return to their homeland, they encouraged each other to rebuild their land and communities and their spirits were restored.

If we can once again feel the restorative powers of nature and creation, we will reconnect with our deeper potential. To live with our hands in the soil, to give attention to the songs of the Creator, to re-build our relationships with the land and with our neighbours, is to re-discover our God-given restorative and re-creative powers.

The local church (members and clergy) can help community members keep focused on what is life-giving, re-discover glimmers of hope, and work together for the good of all.

Significant questions that need to be addressed include: How do we strengthen local economic roots? What are the ecological impacts that threaten us? Who has a voice, and who can give a voice to the voiceless?

Our God-given resilience keeps us going!

*NOTE: The Circle-M Conference on *Equipping Rural Churches to Build Healthy Communities* was well attended by more than 50 registered delegates and a number of support persons from Lutheran, Mennonite, Pentecostal, Salvation Army, Anglican, United and other churches. People came from Ontario to B.C. to hear stimulating presentations and thought-provoking workshops. The participants were a rich resource for each other.*

Further reports, including Brother Andrew's report on *Rural Church Decline, Resilience and Sustainability*, will be included in our next Newsletter. **Written contributions from other delegates would be appreciated.**

Small is the New Big

The significant message for churches is *smaller is better...*

If you've visited an electronics store in the past few years, you'll know that in the world of electronics, smaller is better. Unlike the electronic industry, North American automobile manufacturers didn't pay attention to the *smaller is better* movement and that inattentiveness brought them to their knees. Guess what – the new message to churches is also, 'smaller is better'! The mega-churches of the previous century have learned that small groups are crucial to their survival, and many of the 'emerging' churches of the past few years are being designed to stay small. The largest percentage of churches in Canada has less than 50 people in regular attendance. Smaller churches can feed the need for close-knit, authentic relationships and that is something many people are looking for today. So, it's okay to be small in number, however, churches are called to **not** be small in faith.

As well as being big in faith, churches also need to think big when it comes to ministry with children. If there are no children crossing the threshold of your church building on a Sunday morning, it can be easy to say, "There's just no point in even thinking about ministry with children." If that's the case at your church, I challenge you to think big and act in faith. Here are some ideas:

- Look to the broader community and consider the needs of the children in your community. Has the music or art program been cut from the school budget? Are there people in your church who could offer music lessons, choir, or art classes? Is there a library in your community that offers a children's story hour for which your church could provide readers or helping hands? If there isn't a library, could your members provide books and a weekly 'Grandparents Read' session?
- Offer 'Spiritual Grandparenting' groups. Many grandparents long to offer faith formation and spiritual grounding to their grandchildren whether near or far away. Consider forming small groups at which grandparents can share joys and concerns and pray for their grandchildren. Discuss ways to share one's own faith and nurture the spirituality of grandchildren.
- Provide faith formation when grandchildren are visiting. If there are often children present at Christmas, during school breaks, or summer holidays, offer well-staffed and well-resourced opportunities to share the love of God during those special times.

If there are few children in your community and attendance is sporadic, it may be frustrating and costly to purchase curriculum for a whole year when weeks may go by with no participants. That doesn't mean, however, that it's okay to give up on the children in your midst. Here are some ideas:

- Develop a rotating calendar of leaders who are ready to work with the children on their scheduled weeks. Keep on hand a kit of good quality craft materials (no dead felt markers!) and a copy of Ralph Milton's Lectionary Story Bible for Year A, B, and C. Develop a small-group format based on the Godly Play® model:
 - Gather and check-in (you may want to sing and take an offering as well as finding out how the week has been for each child);
 - Hear the appropriate story from the Lectionary Story Bible;
 - Respond to the story with some wondering questions: I wonder what part you liked best? I wonder what part was most important? I wonder if we could leave out any part of the story and still have everything we need? I wonder where you are in the story, or which part is about you?
 - Allow free individual response using the materials in the craft kit;
 - Gather back as a group for prayers and snack;
 - Blessing and dismissal.
- Invite leaders to name their favourite Bible stories and work with the minister to develop a story box or bag and a plan to engage the children with that story. The story box should include materials to help tell the story and activity resources. Look in your cupboards and you may find a felt story board and figures, story leaflets from previous curricula, art posters, song books, etc. to develop the story boxes. The Armored Penguin website, <http://www.armoredpenguin.com/>, can help you create word searches, crossword puzzles, and other activities for your chosen story. Again, a rotating calendar of leaders can be developed so that someone is always ready with their story box.

Remember too that small faith communities are often better at developing children and youth leaders because there is greater opportunity for children to be active leaders. Giving children significant roles in the congregation is easier because they are more visible in the smaller church. A small congregation offers more opportunity to be flexible and spontaneous. You can include children in greeting and handing out leaflets, collecting and counting the offering, reading Scripture, playing a musical instrument during the offertory, taking attendance, sharing stories of church camp, or leading a children's time.

Remember, small is good when faith is big!

(written by Amy Crawford, Program Minister for Children, Young Teens, and Youth, United Church)

RURAL LIFE ISSUES

What is Rural?

“When we still lived on the farm ...”

“When we still lived on the farm ...” a friend replied as I started to talk about our Rural Church Network. The obvious implication was that they no longer considered themselves “rural” after they retired to town.

Anything that isn’t “urban” falls under the rural community and rural church heading. People from villages, towns, farms, tourist regions, northern communities, and maritime communities all fall under the same heading so far as the Canadian Rural Church Network is concerned.

Furthermore, this is not just about people in agriculture. The townsfolk are vital members in helping keep our small communities and small churches functioning.

In these communities we tend to be more inclusive of each other across denominational lines. Churches are a vital part of the community, and vice versa. The landscape is an important contributor to our spiritual well-being. And rural folks readily seem willing to volunteer themselves for a needy cause.

Building relationships with each other, with the Creator and with the Creation are basic values rural residents care about.

Urban interests often tend to look on rural resources as being disposable. One astute observed noted: “We are used like canaries in the coal mine!”

Thank goodness we are strongly resilient and unbelievable stubborn. What an asset that our rural pride is so pervasive. We are survivors!

(notes by Joyce Sasse, October 2009)

The CRCN’s Mission and Visioning Statement

Believing that feelings of isolation and despair can be overcome when people of the land gather to share stories about positive possibilities, the CRCN is an organization of persons (lay and clergy) who have a passion for enhancing the quality of life in rural communities.

The vision is to be a supporting network for rural church and rural community development in Canada. Through the Internet and modern communications, ecumenical partners are able to:

- Support each other
- Help articulate the rural story and spiritual values
- Affirm the Church’s role at the heart of small communities

- Exchange information and resources across Canada and around the world
- Reflect the importance of community values in a global society

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

Prayer for Quietness

In the midst of the clatter of life, we need quietness...

In the midst of all the demands of our week,
may we sit quiet for these few moments
and let our Spirits catch up with us.

So many voices tell us the things we
should do, must do, ought to do ...
So many sources seek to advise us,
direct us, influence us ...

Gentle us, Lord.
Give us these few moments to listen
to the rhythms of our own life-blood ...
and to hear the music of your voice.

In this sacred time lift our burdens.
Refresh us. Renew our spirits.
Re-create in us the memory of whose we are ...
and who we are meant to be...
... until our cup runneth over. Amen

STORIES (Best Practises)

Validation Of Calling By Faith Community

Minister not able to perform duties due to cancer, but ...

I heard that a colleague in rural ministry had to leave his remote pastoral charge because of a recurring bout of cancer. Then I found his name on a church bulletin board on the edge of the city.

The church secretary told me he was now their minister and would be taking part in a covenanting service the end of the month. Indeed, she said there were major concerns for his health and she directed me to the web-site his support team had set up which allowed family, friends and congregants to read his blog-journal and stay in touch.

While the journey through endless weeks of further chemo and tests will not be easy, it is wonderful to see the way people are validating his calling, and he and they are able to offer each other mutual support.

Arrangements are being made for provisional replacement, but it is evident my friend will not be left alone to face what lies ahead. His ministry, and that of his congregation, continues.

(notes by Joyce Sasse, October 2009)

HISTORICAL NOTES

Before Agriculture

Archaeologists discover ancient storage bins ...

Although people may not have been farming 11,000 years ago, they knew about the importance of good grain storage.

The recent discovery of small grain storage bins built by Neolithic people, have been found in Jordan, near the Dead Sea.

These hunting and gathering people built granaries for safe year-round storage of wild barley harvested from the Jordan Valley.

It is speculated that this laid the ground-work for sowing seeds on suitable bits of land, as the earliest stage for agriculture.

(written by Joyce Sasse, August 2009)

INTERNATIONAL

Use What You Have!

Perhaps if I was bigger ...

Scripture is filled with stories of how, with God's help, "the few, the small and the not-enough" are victorious against the odds. A tongue-tied Moses looked at the odds and said "Since I do not speak well, perhaps if I had a new sound system or the capacity for multi-media presentations, I could do it." But God said "Use what you have" – so Moses picked up his stick and freed God's people from slavery.

A small David looked at the odds and thought “Perhaps if I were bigger or maybe had enough money to buy a bazooka, I could do it.” But God said, “Use what you have” – David picked up a stone and won the day against Goliath.

A frightened Twelve hid behind locked doors and mused “If we only had the right leader or a better facility to operate from, we could make disciples of all nations.” But God said “Use what you have” – so the Twelve left their hiding place, and with nothing but words, began making disciples.

A rural congregation looks at the odds and says “We really want to be a healthy church and perform our mission, but we are too few, we are too small, and there is never enough.” But God says “Use what you have” – so the rural congregation, trusting God, moves forward ...

(from the United Methodist Rural Fellowship Bulletin, USA Winter 2008/09)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

IRCA (International Rural Church Association) International Conference

***Canada is looking for delegates to attend the
IRCA International Conference, September 20 – 27, 2010 in Germany.***

Theme: “Hunger – the Global Challenge”

Keynote speakers each day will cover the global challenge of hunger, migration and hope for the countryside – the churches’ response. A report from the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, agreed to at an Intergovernmental Plenary Session in Johannesburg, South Africa in April 2008, will be a focus for some of the discussion.

Bible Studies, with presenters from different regions of the world, a field trip, and reports from regions will be featured along with opportunities to converse with others at the conference. For details, see www.irca.net.nz .