

## **Newsletter # 4**

A Publication of

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

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**I believe the church's place and prominence in our society has not disappeared. But we do need to refocus ourselves. The ultimate objective for any rural congregation is not to grow in numbers. It is to help people understand how their spiritual lives relate directly to their everyday lives and to the spiritual well-being of the whole community.** Joyce Sasse

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### **An Alternative Model for Rural Ministry**

*The church is a living entity where death gives rise to new life...*

New windows of insight often invite us to address old issues in new ways. This is what is happening in the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan (U.S.A.) where small congregations got caught in the survival mentality.

With the help of resource people from the Diocese, these congregations developed Ministry Support Teams. After some discussion, key team members invited others to actively participate in ministry, each according to their own gifts. Instead of “purchasing” ministry from the professional provider, the congregations were invited to become “ministering communities”. Their slogan: “Stop Attending Church, Start Being the Church”!

When a congregation agreed to try the model, a consultant was selected by the bishop (from among seminary professors and other resource people) who would have an on-going relationship with the congregation and help them move through the process.

Members participated in orientation sessions where they discerned their gifts and became equipped to fulfill their various functions (see [www.upepiscopal.org](http://www.upepiscopal.org)).

**NOTE:** In CRCN Newsletter #3 David Webber (Caribou-Chilcotin Region, B.C.) made reference to the fact that “many small communities will not have an ordained minister leading them”. The change in organizational structure such as that noted above by the Episcopalians seems to fit in with what David (Presbyterian) refers to when he writes about having trained overseers (episcopes) who will help equip the laos to be preachers and teachers.

## **RURAL LIFE ISSUES**

### **Epidemic of Farmer Suicides (India)**

*The drive toward corporate culture in India is resulting in a crisis in the countryside...*

The largest sustained wave of suicidal deaths in the recorded history of India is currently being recorded, according to P. Sainath, Rural Affairs Editor of *The Hindu*.

While portions of India have unprecedented levels of growth and development, India's rural farmers are sinking deeper and deeper in debt. Many were cash crop farmers who grew cotton, coffee, sugar cane, ground nuts, pepper and vanilla. But the corporate mantra pushed them in the direction of growing food for export (rice, maize, wheat, pulses). State support was promised. But the giant seed companies displaced the cheap hybrids and traditional varieties of seeds, and grasp these peasant farmers by the throat.

Meanwhile, the country's health costs increased, children had to drop out of school to work for their parents, and all were hungry. They couldn't produce even enough food to feed the family.

Credit also dried up because money is being drawn from rural credit institutions to fuel the life-styles of aspiring elites of the city.

No wonder despair abounds. "India's agrarian crisis can be summed up in 5 words, *'the drive toward corporate culture'*, resulting in the biggest displacement in (India's) history".

*(Written February 2, 2009 by P. Sainath, The Hindu)*

## DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

### Worship and Music Resources

In this newsletter a little while ago, I raised the possibility of a small collection of CDs to accompany the hymn book *Voices United* for when a musician was not available. Your response played a major role in shaping this resource. The first 9 CDS are now out and the remaining 3 will follow as soon as copyright has been cleared. We sold out the first 2 volumes and had to make a whole new batch. The remaining volumes average sales of nearly 300 copies each. So, thank you! Clearly you know what is needed for good worship in your congregations.

Summer days may seem far away for us now, yet soon worship leaders will be deciding their vacation plans and worship committees will be thinking of pulpit supply. Does it feel like a burden, the annual challenge of finding someone? Or, perhaps it feels like a welcome change? Maybe, you close your church for the summer since fewer worshippers attend and leaders are hard to find.

Would it make a difference if you could offer a nearly complete worship service for a volunteer to build upon – easily?

**Gathering** is a subscription of worship resources written by United Church worship leaders – ordered and lay - across our land. It provides prayers, sermon helps, hymn suggestions etc., and it comes out three times a year, according to the church year. There is a volunteer national team responsible for its oversight. At their January meeting, the idea of a special issue was born offering 5 to 8 complete worship services especially for the summer months. For the first two years (2011 and 2012), the issue would be sold separately and at minimal cost.

Would such a resource be of interest to you? Would it make a difference when you ponder summer worship?

We would like to hear from you! You can email me directly at [blschwab@united-church.ca](mailto:blschwab@united-church.ca). Let's talk again! *Betty Lynn Schwab*

## **The Philosopher Remembers**

*From Kahlil Gibran's book "Jesus The Son of Man" ...*

"When He was with us He gazed at us and at our world with eyes of wonder, for his eyes were not veiled with the veil of years, and all that He saw was clear in the light of His youth ...

"In truth we gaze but do not see, and hearken but do not hear; we eat and drink but do not taste. And there lies the difference between Jesus of Nazareth and ourselves.

"His senses were all continually made new, and the world to Him was always a new world.

"To Him the lisping of a babe was not less than the cry of all mankind, while to us it is only lisping.

"To Him the root of a buttercup was a longing towards God, while to us it is naught but a root."

## **Our Insecurities**

*Thoughts about the meaning of Lent ...*

Old insecurities come to the forefront when we least expect them, and they threaten our sense of well-being.

As we move through the "Season of Lent", we are invited to acknowledge the darker side of our existence, and leave those difficult things along the wayside. It will help us find more peace and joy in our lives.

"I used to lie awake worrying about what I'd done." James Taylor wrote as he paraphrased Psalm 32 in his book "*Everyday Psalms*". "My conscience tormented me. I couldn't concentrate. I was terrified of being exposed ..."

Taylor tried to express traditional scripture sentiments in more contemporary ways. "So I went to God and confessed. I made no excuses to myself; I didn't hide anything, and God forgave me ..."

The writer stopped thinking of life as a burden and opened himself to the newly discovered freedom of God's blessing.

"God's grace renews my strength; it gives me a second chance. God says (to us) 'I will teach you to take charge of your behaviour ... you have a mind; you can think; you can anticipate consequences before you act ... (so) let God coach you through life.'"

In other words, from the beginning God's Original Blessing is made available to all that has been created. But when we find ourselves caught under the heavy clouds of doubt and despair we become convinced that life is a burden.

Lent gives opportunity to re-examine the negatives that cloud our judgments and our lives.

Be re-assured, beyond the storm clouds lie the rainbows of hope, and the promise that God created us for finer things. We can celebrate life when we know we've inherited the promise of a gracious Creator.

"Start today by smiling at the mirror. See how it smiles back."

*(Written by Joyce Sasse, February 2010)*

## **Helping Them Cry**

### ***When children face tragedy ...***

"Clancy! How could you do such a thing!" the children screamed. They had just arrived at their Grandparent's ranch when the beloved old ranch dog grabbed a kitten and mangled it to death.

Hysteria reigned supreme, and Grandma did her best to comfort them. Who would have thought that Clancy would do this?

She let the kids talk through their terror and guided them toward thinking about what needed to be done now. They decided to put the remains in a shoebox and bury it in the trees.

But first, for these youngsters who had never been to a funeral, everyone had to get suitably attired: fresh outfits, hat and "gloves", and a great deal of solemnity.

Regardless where they got the idea how a funeral should be conducted, their focus on "a proper funeral" brought some healing, though their conversation would often return to Clancy's dastardly act.

None of us can escape the reality of death. But, for children having pets that don't live forever, a wise adult can help them work through these early experiences with tragedy.

I've been asking how children are reacting to what is happening to the children in Haiti. It seems these happenings are as remote as are most extreme happenings that occur on TV. But for those who have Social Justice groups in their schools, teachers are wisely encouraging their students to put their feelings into action through such endeavours as fund-raising.

I appreciated, too, the story told to me of the little girl who was late getting home from school. She explained to her dad that her best friend's doll got smashed in an accident. "Oh", he said, "so you helped her try to put the pieces together."

"No," She replied. "I sat with her and helped her cry."

*(Written by Joyce Sasse, February 2010)*

## **RURAL MINISTRY STORIES**

### **Small Rural Church Thrives During Vacancy**

*When you don't have a resident clergy ...*

Trinity Lutheran Church is located in Pincher Creek (pop. 3500) in Southwestern Alberta. We celebrated our 100th anniversary in 2005. Originally the church was located 6 miles south of town. Although the church membership is much higher, our weekly Sunday services have about 30 people.

Our last pastor moved to another parish in September of 2008. We tried to get a retired pastor to serve us full time, however the best we could do is to get a pastor about once a month – more often in the summer and less often in the winter.

We decided to have reading services - for a minimum. If the family volunteering to do the service could do better than a reading service, great.

Families have volunteered. Small groups have also come forward to do a service. Once or twice a musical group passing through have also done a service.

The results have been much better than we expected. Some of the sermons are prepared and given by individuals comfortable in doing that. Other sermons are obtained on the internet, especially The Lutheran Hour. The order of service is quite varied – formal to very informal. The majority of the congregation seems pleased and appreciative to have it this way.

We have sent four calls. They have all been returned.

The church members have continued to carry on community responsibilities. We take our turn at services at a seniors' lodge. We also have a Good Samaritan assisted living facility in town. In addition to having a monthly memorial service, we have weekly devotions for staff and residents. Visiting the sick and shut-ins at home and in hospital or care facility continues with everyone taking part. We also have a mid week bible study in progress.

We continue to hope for a pastor. In the meantime God is blessing us.

*(written by Cliff Elle, January 2010)*

## **Lenten Luncheons**

*Lenten Luncheons, sponsored by the local Ministerial Association ...*

On Wednesday afternoons during Lent, sixty to ninety people gather in our downtown church for thirty minutes of worship followed by a soup-and-sandwich lunch.

The luncheons, sponsored by congregations from the local ministerial, draw people together from across denominational lines. Each week a different church is in charge of the gathering, or maybe two of the smaller congregations work together.

The mandate is to insure that the worship times doesn't exceed thirty minutes so people on their lunch-hour can participate. Five dollars is the suggested payment for lunch. That covers a bit of advertising and the cost of the food.

We are going into our eighth year. Neighbours from different denominations look forward to worshipping together – and learning from each other.

While a broad spectrum of theological approaches is represented, members of the ministerial have learned how to listen for those understandings we hold in common, and respect the differences. Through the years I've noticed the growing sincerity with which prayers for the life and work of each faith community is offered to the Almighty.

*(written by Joyce Sasse, February 2010)*

## **FAITH-BUILDING PIONEERS**

### **Danish Folk School Movement**

Nicolaj Frederik Grundtvig (1783-1872) was a Danish clergyman who had some original ideas about Church, community and education. Note some of the following:

#### **Church**

At the time, the Christian Church was shaken by controversy over the source of its truth: was revelation to be found primarily in the Bible, in reason, in personal experience, or in tradition? Grundtvig's answer was uniquely, but solidly grounded in his reading of the fathers of the early church. Christian faith, he said, is not grounded in "dead books", rules, or habits; nor in the vagaries of individual emotion or thought. Rather, the basis of Christian faith is to be found constantly renewed in the "living word" of song, speech and prayer, every time the Christian community gathers, and especially at baptism and communion. Christianity must be brought to life in the gathering of its people.

#### **Community**

Grundtvig stressed the importance of community in secular life. He was deeply involved in the rural co-operative movement, and urged the Danish people to search for and build their character on a shared sense of their history. But he was no narrow nationalist: he

argues that people with a sure sense of their shared past could more effectively build community among themselves and with the rest of the world.

### **Learning For Life**

Grundtvig is known as the father of the Folk School Movement: his leadership was born out of a deep conviction that education should be “for life”, not against it; should be a living process, not dry academics or dull recitation; and should involve the whole person. In the schools he envisioned students and teachers would live together for periods of time, exploring together issues and ideas that mattered to their lives. In these schools, singing and celebration and the arts would have a central place. More technical or academic subjects would be approached in the spirit of life, instead of reducing life to technical formulae and qualifications.

Here are some pointers for rural community revitalization today that stem directly from Grundtvig’s vision:

- ◆ It is easy to become discouraged about the lack of control that rural communities have over the forces that shape and sometimes dismember them. Grundtvig would encourage us to focus on the signs of life in a community, wherever they may be found, and always to foster that life.
- ◆ The best way to foster community life is to bring people together in ways that lend themselves to what might be called the “living word” – the voices of people speaking their life experience.
- ◆ Community life is fostered by regular occasions for celebration in which all members have a place, a role and a voice.
- ◆ We should focus more on sources of vitality in community organizing and less on identifying sources of authority. The cult of expertise needs to be replaced by an encouragement of and love for practical learning.
- ◆ Practical learning needs to be seen as learning which enables us, at any moment, to live a “plain and active, joyful life on earth” ... not as learning which merely equips us to compete against and put others down.

What we need above all is to re-learn ways of finding and communicating our deepest concerns, our relations to others, and the history of their development. Community is not so much formed by organizational charts as something told-into-being through our stories. For Grundtvig, and also for us, life and voice must go together.

*(Notes from Dr. William Ramp, Rural Sociologist, University of Lethbridge)*

## **CiRCLe-M ---- WHAT HAVE WE BEEN UP TO?**

CiRCLe M’s first year of operation has been busy! Prayerfully, we thank the Lord for his guidance and input into all that is happening. And we extend a heartfelt appreciation for the many volunteers and supporters who helped facilitate this year’s energetic and satisfying start.

Rural Alberta's Development Fund awarded us a major grant in June 2009. With resources in hand we began collecting library materials for a new on-line Resource Centre. We also launched a website, developed brochures and a newsletter, planned and hosted our first rural ministry conference, co-hosted two training courses in rural ministry and community development, and began the huge and vital task of networking with rural churches, students, denominational structures, and others.

In January 2010, Executive Director, Cam Harder, travelled to central Alberta to meet with leaders from a mix of denominations including Anglican, Lutheran, Mennonite, Pentecostal, United, Roman Catholic and Salvation Army. Cam went with several objectives in mind:

- Find out what is happening in Alberta's rural ministries.
- Challenge denominational head offices to be more attentive to the needs of rural ministries.
- Identify and celebrate the good things that are happening in rural areas.
- Tell others about the support that CiRCLe M has to offer rural clergy and lay leaders.

Everywhere he went, Cam heard about ongoing struggles to support and resource rural congregations. The people he met with recognize that regional church structures are not set up to effectively service rural communities. Instead, the structures cater more to large and urban churches – this, in spite of the fact that small and rural churches make up the majority within each denomination. He learned that church leaders are discussing this problem with a desire to bring change.

Cam also heard about many good things that are happening in rural areas. For example, Mennonites are developing small, strong, missional programs in both rural and urban settings. The United Church has a staff position that takes on rural ministry issues, and the Anglicans are advertising to have the same. The Pentecostals have had some success with "re-starts," closing a small congregation and re-opening it as a mission. He also heard that the Presbyterian church in central British Columbia has had a great experience with house churches in their rural areas (we'll give you a fuller report on that later).

Our next steps will be a mix of following up on contacts, finding and collecting materials for our library, holding training courses for rural clergy, and gathering rural ministry stories about people helping people.

An important part of CiRCLe M's mandate is to collect and share stories of how their churches are engaging rural communities so that others can benefit from their experiences. As we make connections and find inspiring stories we will be sharing them in upcoming newsletters. We invite our readers to contact us and share their own experiences and outcomes.

Several training opportunities are coming in 2010. Their dates will be finalized soon:

- ◆ **Summer 2010** – *Mentoring Teams Training Program* - for clergy new to their rural setting.
- ◆ **May/June 2010** – Course: *Rites in Crisis* – A look at how community rites can be constructed to help communities in times of crisis (celebration and difficulty). With Jan Boyd.

- ◆ **May/June 2010** – Course: *Land, Community and Agrarian Issues from Moses to Now* – A look at rural-urban, land transfer, slave labour and other issues related to rural life in the Bible from OT through NT and church history. With David Jobling and Sandra Beardsall.

*(Notes by Colleen Rickard, Circle-M)*

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

### **The R. Alex Sim Rural Ministry Symposium 2010**

#### ***Therefore Choose Life***

October 25 to 27, 2010,

Crieff Hills Community, Puslinch, Ontario (near Kitchener)

For more details go to: [www.ruralsymposium.ca](http://www.ruralsymposium.ca)

#### **Background**

The R. Alex Sim Rural Ministry Symposium is held biennially, under the auspices of Queen's Theological College, Kingston, to nurture and empower rural churches. It is coordinated by an ecumenical Planning Committee, which includes members from Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Salvation Army and United Churches. The symposium being held October 25 to 27, 2010, at Crieff Hills Community, Puslinch Ontario, will be the eighth such event.

The four primary goals of the symposium are to:

- 1) Assist clergy and lay leaders of rural churches in broadening their understanding of rural communities and churches so that they might be better equipped to lead rural congregations during these times of change.
- 2) Raise awareness and understanding among theological students and faculty about the changing nature of rural communities and churches and of the issues that they face.
- 3) Foster mutual understanding among rural clergy, rural lay people, theological students and faculty by providing them the opportunity to interact in an ecumenical forum.
- 4) Affirm the gifts, strengths and joys of the rural church and rural people.

#### **Program Description**

The 2010 Symposium is entitled “**Therefore Chose Life**” and will focus on issues related to the sustainability of rural communities and the role that rural churches can play in strengthening and/or preserving their communities through fostering various aspects of community health such as economic, services (public, social, medical) environmental, and families.

The symposium will include a variety of experiences including theme presentations,

small group discussions, plenary forums, workshops, worship, entertainment, and free time for one-on-one exchanges. In a book display, current resource material related to rural issues and rural ministries will be available for browsing and purchase.

Two theme presenters will be featured:

Dr. Gil Waldkoenig, Director, Town and Country Church Institute, Gettysburg P.A., will examine how the local church's witness in environmental concerns can be an important resource for community building, sustainable living, and proclamation of the Gospel in fresh and clear tones.

Dr. Rene Van Acker, Associate Dean External Relations, Ontario Agricultural College, University of Guelph, will examine the effects of agricultural production systems on rural communities and how churches can help create/sustain healthy communities.

Those in attendance will be able to develop these themes further through sharing of observations, experiences and expertise, in the small group discussions and plenary forums.

An extensive selection of workshops is being offered on a wide range of topics related to rural life and rural ministry. Leadership of these workshops will be provided by clergy, lay people and faculty with particular expertise in the selected topics.

## **Alberta Rural Development Network Conference**

### ***Creating Rural Connections***

May 11-13, 2010

University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta

For more information: go to [www.ardn.ca](http://www.ardn.ca), call toll-free 1-877-987-1006 or email [exec.assist@ardn.ca](mailto:exec.assist@ardn.ca).

Albertans involved in rural development as researchers or in the community will want to attend the *Creating Rural Connections* conference organized by the Alberta Rural Development Network (ARDN).

The conference features a combination of keynote and concurrent presentations as well as interactive discussion groups, poster sessions and networking opportunities.

Keynote Speakers Include:

Mark Anielski, author of *The Economics of Happiness*; Roger Gibbins, president and CEO of Canada West Foundation, speaking on *The Rural West in an Urban World*; and

Doug Griffiths, MLA Battle River-Wainwright, whose topic is *13 Ways to Kill a Community*.

Concurrent sessions will focus on the themes of natural resource management/sustainability and leadership/community capacity building.

The ARDN conference is expected to attract leaders in research and post-secondary education, and community leaders and program developers from municipal and provincial governments, business and industry, and non-profit organizations.

“This conference emphasizes the link between research, education and community success, and provides extensive opportunities for networking, exchange and collaboration,” said Dee Ann Benard, ARDN’s executive director. “We hope it will lead to the development of new collaborative relationships between rural communities and post-secondary institutions that will help move rural communities in the direction they would like to go.”

*The ARDN has representation from all 21 publicly-funded, publicly-governed post-secondary institutions in Alberta. It was formed in 2006 and became fully active in 2009 when it received a three year grant from Rural Alberta’s Development Fund. The conference is the first of many activities, events and research projects being planned.*

## **ENQUIRIES**

### **Request for “Celebration of Life” Congregational Closure Service**

*When at a crossroad in a congregation’s ministry ...*

Wondering if anyone has prepared or experienced a "Celebration of Life" Closure Service for churches (I am looking for particularly rural, but will be interested in any), that you are willing to share.

I am looking for services that celebrate the many years of God's ministry in this place and how God's ministry will continue to work in a new way.

I would like to make this information available on the CRCN website as I believe churches all across Canada and Presbyteries, Synod's etc. are not sure what to do and so ... many of us do nothing.

(from Eric Skillings)

## **LINKS**

An extensive listing of links to rural community and rural ministry sites can be found at [www.circle-m.ca](http://www.circle-m.ca) .