

CRCN – CiRCLe M NEWSLETTER

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

Letter #7 - September 2010

Editor: Joyce Sasse

A small community allows one to be relevant because one does not feel along.
There is a saying in Lesotho in South Africa: "A person is a person only amongst people."

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FAITH MATTERS

Prayer Involves Sharing With Others

Rethinking our expectations regarding prayer ...

Too often we are asked to pray for particular individuals because of some crisis. There's a death, or cancer, or a family whose life has been turned up-side-down.

What is the expectation? Some think prayer is about winning God over and willing our expectations for a favourable outcome.

If that's the common understanding, maybe we need to change our awareness of what it means to pray, or what it means for prayers to be answered.

When I'm asked for such prayers, I'm honoured that someone in pain is sharing what is a very difficult time. I'm able to assure them they don't have to face this crisis alone.

Shared prayer is also a reminder to all of us that God is present and offers us courage, hope and strength when we feel drained. Remember the "Footsteps in the Sand"? When we see only one set of tracks, that's "when He carried us through".

Many don't give much thought to what faith is about until they are confronted by the extremes of life. Then, whether it be the extreme of pain or of joy, we may begin to contemplate the possibility that there is something bigger than us, beyond us but always available to us, that is like a promise to us. With our questions, our doubts, our expressions of anger or joy, and our sense of mystery, our sense of faith is slowly nurtured.

The wisdom shared by our elders, the insights gained through the stories of Scripture, the truths learned as we move through the world of nature, give us glimpses into the broader context in which we find ourselves.

Prayer is about inviting others to share our story. It is about sensing some awareness of a Greater Power. It is about the mystery of experiencing reserves of courage and strength when we would otherwise feel depleted.

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

Listen Willingly

Rachel Carson's book helped foster the environmental movement...

My fellow seminarians wrote a skit in which I was to sit in a rocking chair and knit. It was during the time when atomic bombs were being tested. Rumour had it that a fine dirt called

Strontium 90 fell on our pastureland. “To protect our children” I was knitting “anti-radioactive udder covers for Canadian cows”. With humour we did our bit in trying to save the Universe.

Last night I listened to an actress, in monologue, tell about the struggles Rachel Carson faced (about the same time as our skit) to alert people to how dangerous it was to use poisonous chemicals, especially DDT. For years she was vilified in a campaign led by the chemical companies.

But her books and magazine articles were read by the public and her scientific astuteness and clarity of thought made sense. While some labeled her a “Joe McCarthy”, her public demanded banning-action be taken by the lawmakers. The environment and the lives of our children were in jeopardy. Her work inspired the environmental movement.

To this day “Silent Spring” can still be found in book stores and on private library shelves.

We are encouraged to be on the alert for ways the corporate community can disrupt life on our planet in their pursuit after economic gain.

Made in God’s image, we are given the responsibility of caring for our World and all that is in it.

Theologian Thomas Berry writes, “Physical degradation of the natural world is also the degradation of the interior world of the human.”

Isaiah said “If you listen willingly, the good of the land you shall eat.”

The earth forms not only the raw material of human kind, according to Celtic Saint Hildegard, “but also the substance of the incarnation of God’s Son.” Treat it with respect.

“I am pessimistic about the human race because it is too ingenious for its own good. Our approach to nature is to beat it to submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively instead of skeptically and dictatorially.” E.B. White

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

Instructions from the Ancients

When fertile land was considered to be the property and responsibility of the community....

In our world of “big” how can there be any place for “small”?

Look at the size of new homes and the way small companies long to expand. For many there is no such thing as enough.

But the Old Testament Wisdom Writers advise otherwise. Thousands of years ago this Middle Eastern area was the cradle from which our cereals and legumes originated. They realized fertile

soil could not be handled as private property – it was to be handed from one generation to another.

Modern day essayist Wendell Barry tells us the claims upon us of family, community, land and human decency must be treated as ordinary and essential manifestations of God's claim on human life.

The command to “have dominion” over the earth didn't mean to conquer it. This was told to those who understood they were “created in God's image”. They had an intimate affinity with the Creator. “The fear (respect) of Yahweh is the beginning of wisdom. It is not our prerogative to think we can bend nature around our demands so we can run the world.”

When fleeing through the Sinai Desert, the people were given food – but were instructed to collect only as much of the manna as they could use in a day. Have faith. God would also relieve their hunger on the morrow.

As they entered the land reputed to be “flowing with milk and honey”, the ancients cautioned that this land was fragile and precious. There was no margin for negligence.

How does today's visionary, who believes in modesty and sustainability, survive in our world of big? Organic farmers are partnering with city clients. Farm families are focusing on intensity. Urban gardens have become vogue.

Small is not just a fantasy. It has its unique way of gaining attention. You'll know that if you've ever found yourself in bed with a mosquito!

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

RURAL LIFE ISSUES

Prison Farms Terminated

Government spurns teaching agricultural skills ...

It's bad enough to make a country preacher swear! The Canadian Government has clearly shown its hand with regard to their attitude to the agricultural sector by closing the country's prison farms.

In 2009 there were six prison farms – in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and New Brunswick. Three hundred inmates worked there.

They produced food-stuffs that supplemented prison kitchen budgets. Also, there was a training and rehabilitative program built in for each participant.

Today, when pet therapy is such an integral part of so many institutional programs, and a broad variety of therapists encourage people to work in local gardens for their sense for well-being and to support the community, the government's measure for success seems to be based solely on how many dollars are realized.

There is no measure for the mechanical skills that were learned, nor the way participants had to help plan and work together. There is certainly no appreciation for how a way-of-life could be shared, nor for the spin-offs from this way-of-life.

All this portrays the pitiful point of view politicians have for the rural culture and rural ways of doing things. As one TV pundit puts it, the bottom line seems to be "Money! Money! Money!"

Maybe the other farms ran at some loss, looking strictly from a cost-profit point of view. But the Kingston penitentiary farm more than paid its way, yet it seems to be among the earliest closed.

What happens when they have to write purchasing contracts for the likes of milk? And have to set their inmates up in new training and rehabilitation programs?

I shake my head when I look at the crass and inadequate measure this Federal Government uses to justify the unjustifiable.

I'm certain God watches over our country-side and its people even if the Feds don't!

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

Antagonists or Partners

Rural and urban people are dependent on each other in a healthy society ...

Frequently "rural" and "urban" are seen to be at odds with each other. Rural folks often feel decisions about our social, economic and political systems are made by urbanites who don't understand who we are.

Ellen Davis, in her book about the central place of agriculture in the Old Testament, suggests the two societies don't have to be antagonistic.

Ideally, a city should provide for all within its walls and the region around it. Here rural people find a market for their produce, protection from invaders, access to work and a "social location for the landless". Furthermore, the city's health depends directly on the health of its hinterland. In chapter 1, Isaiah refers to Zion as "a faithful city, filled with justice. Righteousness would lodge in her." This is intended to reflect a "holy, healing image".

But cities that are controlled by political or religious authorities and used for their own ends are parasites to the rural area around them. They are forced to pay high taxes, provide supplies

for the government stores and for trade, and give cheap labour. Amos, Hosea and Micah all railed against cities that functioned in this way.

We see the same extremes today. Davis reminds us the key factor is food supply. In healthy situations the hinterland supplies food at reasonable cost, while administration, education, development of the arts, etc emerges from the centre.

Cheap transportation takes away from the city's dependency on the hinterland. Furthermore, in this industrial age, hinterland becomes the dumping grounds for toxic waste. The viability of the countryside is degraded.

However, there are ways we can look positively at the relationships between rural and urban, as can be seen in many heavily populated areas. For example, they have found agricultural ways to break down the toxins in city waste.

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

For the People of B.C.

Much of British Columbia face an incredible summer of drought and fire ...

Merciful God, hear our prayers.

We remember the people from the interior of British Columbia, where drought, fire and smoke have threatened their lives and livelihood.

- The smoke was so heavy that hospital surgeries and procedures were temporarily cancelled.
- Herds of livestock had to be brought in from their forest pastures. Not only have pastures and feed supplies been burned, but so have hundreds of miles of fence lines. The smoke seeped deep into the cattle's lungs. Many of those that survived needed veterinary treatments.
- An evacuee waited in a nearby refuge for news of whether or not her farmstead had burned. She found relief in the fact that the answering machine clicked in each time she phoned home – a sign that she would still have a home when she returned.

Stories of people standing fearful and helpless before the ravages of nature. Still they work together and do what they can to survive.

As these moments pass and life resumes, we pray for courage and strength and hope for the survivors. And we pray that we may stand as a cloud of witness to the realities they have faced. Ever-loving God, hold those in pain close to your bosom. Amen.

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

A Lament for the Countryside

We seem to have been assailed by the erratic ways of nature ...

Rural people feel at one with the land. When it is healthy and productive, they feel contentment. When the land suffers, as the Prairies have this year, that pain touches everyone.

Looking back on the summer that might have been, we remember late snows and excessive rains. Fields, roads and communities were flooded. There was little opportunity to cultivate and seed. Nor was there any heat to warm the land and enable growth. Many crops that survived have been pelted with hail. Now we watch for early frost.

Hay that had to be cut wouldn't cure. Bailing was repeatedly delayed.

What about the harvest, the wet spots, the lack of drying weather, the changes that keep knocking us out of step?

Is this an economic question both for the agricultural producer and those who provide him with services? Of course! Is this a question of survival for those who've already hung in as long as they can? Of course!

Creator God, we turn to you in our times of despair and helplessness. You know our plight even before we dare to give voice to what is in our hearts.

You are witness to our sleepless nights and the rehearsed presentations we plan to give to potential financiers. You witness the ways in which our hopes and dreams turn sour, and grief overtakes us.

The promise is that you will help us to look at life in new ways and find glimmers of hope in the darkest places. But our skepticism overtakes us.

It helps most when we can give voice to our doubts by talking with you, with our families and with our advisors. It is true that each one sees life through a different lens. Together we can more easily hold the vision and look forward to each new day.

May our declaration about "Next Year Country" be a statement of faith, and may we pray for wisdom and courage.

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

A Woman of Note in Proverbs

New Biblical understandings enhance the place of women ...

Maybe we don't get the deeper meaning if we read only one version of the Bible. Not only are these stories translated from original texts, but each person involved with that translation, no matter how scholarly, brings their own interpretation to what they are working on.

Take the final chapter of the Book of Proverbs – which has traditionally been referred to as a poem about “The Capable Wife”. The title, itself, biases our thinking. She is seen primarily in the role of serving her husband. It concludes “Many women are good wives, but you are the best of them all.”

A more contemporary Biblical Scholar, Ellen Davis, in her book “*Scripture, Culture and Agriculture*”, sees more when she interprets this passage which she calls “A Valorous Woman”.

The woman, who happens to also have a husband, is hard-working, God-fearing, and successful in the way she runs the family farm. “It is likely that many or most of the men had to spend months away from the farm” working on imperial projects and even rebuilding Jerusalem. In the face of these demands, the women were called to keep the family farm and economy going.

The poem, Davis concludes, “Honours the industry and accomplishments of this ordinary citizen.” The woman is scrupulous in her care of the land. She opens her mouth in wisdom, and follows the rituals of her faith. This is indeed “an ideal for a whole people living on the edge of subsistence.”

What more can be said? Davis sees “the mother of the family as teacher, sharing fully with her husband in the work of maintaining both the household and the covenantal identity of its members.”

This interpretation of the passage reflects the true culture of Israel at the time as it was shared with the people. Even until today, many farm women we know live this reality daily.

NOTE: *Ellen Davis, using contemporary writers such as Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold as primary sources alongside Old Testament sources, is affirming for many modern day students in the rural-culture movement.*

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

RURAL MINISTRY STORIES

Sugar-Bowl Economies

Where would our small church budgets be without the work of the women?

Years ago many women of the church financed overseas missions and congregational budgets from savings collected in their “sugar bowls”. They sold eggs and butter, they held bazaars and bake sales, and contributed whatever they could. Their efforts kept the local pastor paid, and they gave toward a million dollar budget to support women’s work around the world.

Others gathered their pennies and gave to the Fellowship of the Least Coin. Not only was great work done in this manner, but it was affirming for those contributors whose purses held precious little.

Since that time numerous projects have been undertaken for the ladies to maintain their financial commitments. Family-centred programs have added laughter and entertainment to the process. Thrift shops fostered the theme of re-use long before the Green Movement gained credibility. Sponsoring church suppers and funeral luncheons is made possible because of the volunteer commitment of large numbers of women.

Where would our church budgets be without them?

Several years ago, when I did a couple of speaking tours in Ontario, two new projects caught my attention.

One congregation offered their services by preparing supper-meals for the harvesters. Place your order the day-before and a busy farm family could pick up hot, packaged meals that could be taken directly to the field.

In the Ottawa Valley, the end of October, car loads of men came to their tiny cabins-in-the-woods with their buddies to hunt deer. If anyone offered them a hot meal in the evening they were more than appreciative. So the local women drew up a schedule that stretched out between their tiny communities as to who would serve the meal each night of the week. The men knew which community to visit, and their cash outlay was a major part of each church’s annual budget.

Women give generously through giving their time and talents!

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

CiRCLe M NEWS

Upcoming Rural Ministry Courses:

1. **Healthy Rural Communities**

November 22 to 26, Camrose, Alberta
Rev. Dr. Dittmar Muendel

This course will examine the ecological, economic, political, social, and spiritual health of rural communities in an integrated and experiential way.

To provide an experiential basis, the students in small teams will spend a part of their time preparing to do a rapid diagnostic of nearby rural communities, learning to detect what hinders or promotes the health of the community. Part of our time will be spent in reflecting upon what we have seen and experienced as well as in both sociological and theological analysis. As tools for reflection, students will learn to use a variety of popular education techniques such as photovoice, casual conversations, role play, community mapping, and developing a 'tree of life' of the community. To deepen our reflection we will attempt to bring in a variety of local "experts", from area farmers and business people to university profs in areas such as ecology and politics.

Contact One of the STU Registrars:

College of Emmanuel & St. Chad Registrar: 975-1588; email: colleen.walker@usask.ca, or
Lutheran Theological Seminary Registrar: 966-7856; email: susan.avant@usask.ca

2. **Peer Mentoring for Clergy New to Rural Settings**

Starts Fall 2010

CiRCLe M is offering a *Peer Mentoring* program to help clergy make a gracious and informed entry into their new rural site by connecting them with a local guide to their community's history and cultural dynamics. This two-year program begins in Fall 2010.

Starting ministry in a rural parish can be daunting for someone who has never served a rural parish before. Even those who have previously done so, quickly recognize that rural communities and congregations are highly unique with complex social networks that must be navigated with care. It takes considerable time to know a community and for them to get to know and trust you.

In this program, Clergy will be paired with a local mentor who can help them come to understand the history, key players and important customs of the community. Clergy will be assisted to identify an insightful, long-time member of the community with whom they can form a mentoring team. This person may be a professional—a teacher or doctor, for example—but will not be a

member of the clergyperson's congregation. This allows for some freedom and confidentiality in their conversations.

Once a mentor has been identified, clergy-mentor teams will come together for a two-day training event that will help them get to know each other in a structured way and provide some tools for intentionally exploring the life and culture of their community. It will also help to set expectations for the mentoring relationship. During the two years of the formal mentoring relationship, teams will be brought into contact with each other once a year face-to-face, and at other times by email, conference call, or other means. They will celebrate their rural ministry experiences and share mentoring strategies.

Participants will be responsible for their transportation. Accommodation can be arranged very inexpensively. The training itself will cost each team \$450 per year. In some cases subsidy for training and other costs is available from grants that support this program.

If you are new or about to move to a new ministry, give us a call and we will include you in a group.

Contact Cam Harder, Executive Director of CiRCLe M: 306-966-7867 (Saskatoon); email: crharder@sasktel.net.

3. Foundations of Rural Ministry and Community Development

January 2011

Rev. Dr. Cameron Harder

This graduate course is the first in our STM (Masters in Sacred Theology) in Rural Ministry and Community Development. It introduces students to the cohort model of study, builds relationships and establishes protocols for the overall program. The course examines Canadian rural realities and looks at theological and theoretical models of rural ministry, particularly as it engages the surrounding community. Students will examine some of the challenges and possibilities inherent to interdisciplinary work. They will also engage in a collaborative project in their own context to map its demographic, social, economic and spiritual character. Finally, students will explore possibilities for their own research trajectory in the program. As a result of this course students will be able to:

1. Identify the theological and sociological model(s) for relating rural churches to their communities that are most appropriate for their own context.
2. Map some of the social demographics of their church and communities.
3. Be able to choose appropriate tools for interdisciplinary work and research in their field setting.
4. Identify the core questions from their own context that will guide their study and research.

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Lutheran Theological Seminary Registrar: 966-7856; email: susan.avant@usask.ca

CiRCLe M Resource Centre

Visit our on-line Resource Centre:

It is a place where you can:

- Download materials for rural ministry.
- Borrow books, videos, CD's which will be sent out to you at just the cost of shipping.
- Trade rural ministry resources.
- Sort through tools for reaching out to your community.

Visit: www.circle-m.ca/resource-centre/

Volunteer Opportunities:

We are Looking for Book Reviewers:

We will send out the books at our cost (they need to be returned).

Our aim is to have the reader write a 500 word review of the book so that we can share it in our newsletter.

Please contact us if you are interested at circle.m.ministries@gmail.com or 306-966-7864.

We are Looking for Newspaper Articles:

It would be helpful to have rural people watch and scan for newspaper articles that we may be interested in sharing on our website. Please contact us if you would like to volunteer (circle.m.ministries@gmail.com).

LINKS

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

ANNOUNCEMENTS/UPCOMING EVENTS

Fall 2010 ***Learning Circles.***

Join a Learning Circle with others engaged in Small Church Ministry.

The United Church of Canada is offering Learning Circles by telephone conference call again this Fall, to explore the joys of small church ministry.

Small groups will gather monthly by telephone conference call together with a trained facilitator. We will share stories, explore patterns, attend to the Spirit and be encouraged by a circle of friends who are also serving The Body of Christ in small communities of faith (less than 80 souls on Sundays).

Because of the strong interest in these groups we're offering five different Circles in order to keep the groups a manageable size. This is a chance to connect with colleagues across the country, and reflect on what makes our small church ministry special, unique, frustrating, and fulfilling!

To learn more about this new kind of continuing education opportunity, and to register, please click the following link:
<http://www.united-in-learning.com/Fall2010>.

September ***Hunger, the Global Challenge.***

2010 *IRCA International Conference.* Germany. September 2010.
<http://www.irca.net.nz/events.htm>.

October ***Therefore, Choose Life! Nurturing Rural Congregations and*** ***Communities.***

R. Alex Sim Rural Symposium. Ontario. October 2010.
<http://www.ruralsymposium.ca>. See notice on next page for conference details.

Taking the Next Steps: Sustainability Planning, Policy and ***Participation for Rural Canadian Communities.***

University of Alberta Augustana Campus. Camrose, Alberta. October 2010.
<http://www.augustana.ualberta.ca/centres/acsrc/TakingtheNextSteps/>

Therefore Choose Life!

Nurturing Rural Congregations and Communities

The Eighth R. Alex Sim Rural Ministry Symposium

October 25 to 27, 2010,
Creeff Hills Community, Puslinch, Ontario

"Therefore Choose Life" is for anyone with an interest in sustaining and renewing rural and small churches or rural communities: clergy or lay; leader or member; student or educator. Participants will examine how we have come to be where we are and explore options for re-invigorating rural and small churches.

Theme 1: The church's witness in environmental concerns as an important resource for community building, sustainable living, and proclamation of the Gospel in fresh and clear tones.

Theme 2: The important role of the community in supporting farmers in their move toward sustainability and the fundamental role in sustainable farming for institutions that help to build community, including churches.

Bursary: In an attempt to help offset travel costs, the Rural Symposium is offering Western Canada registrants, two bursaries (free registrations). Please contact Annette Skillings (Registrar) at info@ruralsymposium.ca for information.

The R. Alex Sim Rural Ministry Symposium is held biennially, under the auspices of Queen's School of Religion, Kingston, to nurture and empower rural churches.

<http://www.ruralsymposium.ca>