

Letter #8 - November 2010

CRCN – CiRCLe M NEWSLETTER

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both Mary and Elizabeth found enough strength to nurture a new generation.

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FAITH MATTERS

Canadian Named Leader for International Rural Church Association

Past chair of CRCN now chairs IRCA ...

Rev. Catherine Christie, who has served pastoral charges in Southern Alberta and Southern Saskatchewan, has been named the chair person of the *International Rural Church Association*.

The work of the IRCA, which meets every four years, encourages its members around the world to share stories of the joys and struggles of rural people, examine these struggles in the light of the Christian Gospel, and to be a support network to each other between conferences.

This year the Eastern European Churches, helping to host the gathering in Germany, told how they were trying to rebuild their lives in spite of their difficult history.

The conference theme, "Hunger – A Global Challenge", focused around the need for food, water and land security. While food production can bring a good livelihood to humanity, corrupt government systems, corporations who exist only to satisfy their shareholders, and the narrow belief that science will always find solutions, have to constantly be named for the injustices they deliver.

The IRCA sees itself being a voice for voiceless people. But it reminds itself that the road to the Promised Land often leads us through the desert. Nevertheless, signs of hope and new life are witness to God's Spirit brooding over the land.

(notes by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

Recognizing Women on the Farm

Deeper understanding of a Biblical passage ...

Hats off to those women who keep the home-place going while their husbands find employment elsewhere. The women's work goes on endlessly. They not only have to raise the children on their own, but also care for their elders.

Their first responsibility is to the well-being of their own house-hold. When the budget doesn't quite stretch, they have to find the means to extend the income through their own creative endeavours.

If the family lives on a farm, there's the field work to tend to ... and the chores. There's the necessity of calling for help when a piece of machinery craters. Equally, there's the need to be there for a neighbor or friend in trouble.

Of course the children miss their dad when he's away, and the tendency is to let things slide during those few days he's back home. In-between, mother has to be the teacher, the person who lays down the law, and the one who tries to pass on the family values. It's a huge and lonely job, and it demands all the stamina and courage one can muster.

In any agricultural setting, one must also stay active, to some extent, within the social and faith communities. Friends and neighbours try to stay attuned to each other's needs.

Whether the partner works in Fort McMurray, or had to fulfill responsibility for the Jerusalem's rulers, the work of the family at home remains similar. Three thousand years ago, according to the insightful poem found at Proverbs 31, we read about the resourceful work of a persevering farm wife who fills in so many gaps while her husband is away. The ancient writer acknowledges her never-ending endeavours. There is a convergence here between the life of this Biblical woman and contemporary women.

How better to say it? "Many have done valiantly, but (she) has surpassed them all!"

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

RURAL LIFE ISSUES

An Aging Congregation (Paraphrase of Psalm 132: 1-10)

David thought that one temple would be sufficient to house the Lord. He would be amazed to see churches sprouting like dandelions in every town and city – and each one precious to its people.

With bake sales and bazaars beyond number, Lord,
we raised the funds for this building.
We held strawberry socials and silent auctions;
we raided piggy banks and cashed in savings bonds.
We could not sleep, worrying about our mortgage.
At home, at work, at play, we thought of little else.
We wanted this church!
We needed this church!
We were going to build this church!
The word of our commitment got around.
People came out of the community
like blackbirds popping from a pie.
They pitched in at potluck suppers
and hammered nails in building bees.
They joined committees and shared in worship.
It was a great time, God.
When it was finished, we held our heads high.

We flung open to door to invite you in,
and found you were already there.

We are growing old and tired now, God.
Don't leave us because we lack the energy we once had.
Don't let our church close
because disillusioned people drift away to other challenges.
You promised to be with us, always.
Don't let our church die.

by James Taylor, Everyday Psalms

Congregational Care Committee

Spiritual care for each other is central to the work of the church ...

Parish members are committed to maintaining church finances, keeping the property in order, and supporting the work of the minister. But we sit as sideliners when it comes to giving and receiving spiritual leadership.

Now there are a small but growing number of congregations who are shifting emphasis concerning how the work of the church is done.

In communities that wish to have a church presence even though their finances are tight and their numbers are few, the members form small interdenominational groupings where they share their God-given gifts and thoughts with each other. Because their clergy person is responsible for a number of smaller communities, he/she has more of an educator and advisory role.

How might this be introduced into more traditional church settings? Could we work with the idea of a "Congregational Care Committee"? This committee would be made up of regular members who try to support and accept the responsibility of caring for a selected number of individuals and families. They could help them not only find their place in the church community, but also encourage them to see how God's spirit works in their lives.

There are so many spiritual needs that we currently over-look. Take members who are 60+, who are about to retire. For them it is like entering a whole new life, and there is little preparation for the questions, the changes we have to face, the way we have to move past our regrets and recognize the gifts that lie ahead. The components of our faith can help us celebrate the gifts God has given, even while we face the tragedies and pain that comes with getting older.

The concept of "Congregational Care Committees" opens windows that let God's Spirit blow through our lives and into the lives of others.

(written by Joyce Sasse, 2010)

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

Mary and Elizabeth

Where Mary and Elizabeth's lives intersect ...

Mary, the young peasant girl, found herself pregnant and scared. Luke tells her story leading up to the Christmas event.

This was supposed to be a blessed occurrence, he tells us, but Mary was confused and alone. She thought of Elizabeth, an older relative known for her wisdom.

Imagine the scene. Elizabeth opened her door and her arms to hug the young visitor. Instinctively she felt both pain and joy. "You are blessed among woman" she whispered in Mary's ear by way of validation – and that validation helped lift the burden from Mary's shoulders.

Within a few moments the story was told, so far as Mary understood it. What a relief to feel the encouragement and to have one who would help her understand what was happening.

In due course Mary was able to express her gratitude to Elizabeth by singing "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God for – for God has looked upon the low estate of this handmaiden – for God who is mighty has done great things for me."

When Mary realized that Elizabeth also was pregnant, she stayed with her. Her youthful, infectious spirit must have been a blessing to the older woman. As they tended the home-making chores and marketing together, we can imagine them sharing details about their developing pregnancies. Laughter and tears and questions about what their children would become made the days pass quickly. Both were trying to grapple with how the hand-of-God changed their lives.

Eventually it was time for Mary to return to face her confused yet devoted fiancé. Elizabeth made suggestions how Mary might encourage him and love him through the bad times they had yet to face.

Out of the rich sharing of sisterhood both women found enough strength to nurture a new generation.

(written by Joyce Sasse)

Joseph at the Front of the Stable

Men have much to contribute at Christmas ...

Men have sometimes been labeled as the "stagehands" of Christmas: following through on the orders of their wives, and financing the extravaganza.

But when Ann Weems, in her book *Kneeling In Bethlehem*, thinks of Joseph's place in the stable, she envisions him being more central to the Christmas story.

"Who put Joseph in the back of the stable?" she asks, "to stand as background for the magnificent light of the Madonna?"

Weems recalls how faithful Joseph has been "in spite of the gossip in Nazareth" and "in spite of the threat from Herod." Actually, "it was he who named the Child Emmanuel."

He was the kind of person who guarded his family and greeted the visitors whatever their status.

"When he wasn't in the doorway, he was probably urging Mary to get some rest, gently covering her with his cloak, assuring her that he would watch the Child." Can't you imagine him holding the Baby, walking him and quieting him through the night until he closed his eyes?

"This Christmas, let us give thanks to God for this man of incredible faith, into whose care God placed the Christ Child."

Notice, too, the way other fathers reach out during the Christmas season to show the love and care they have for their families and to reflect the deep spiritual truths that makes the season special. Listen to their suggestions, acknowledge their advice, be prepared to even do things in a different way at their behest.

Think of Joseph giving Jesus a grounding so solid that he would later dare to teach others a whole new way of thinking about relationships with each other – and with God.

"As a gesture of gratitude, let's put Joseph in the front of the stable where he can guard and greet and cast an occasional glance at this Child."

(written by Joyce Sasse)

The Puppeteer

A puppet play can be as simple as this ...

The puppeteer wore an orange glove on one hand and a lime-green one on the other. The two hands imitated youngsters passing a ball back-and-forth in the park.

They laughed and giggled and enjoyed each other. But, alas, when one player missed his catch and ran for the ball, he found a mirror. Looking in the mirror he noticed the other player was different from himself. How could an orange puppet possibly play with a lime-green one?

Immediately he set a brick in the middle of the play field as an obstacle. His partner responded like-wise, overcome with feelings of anger.

The wall got bigger and bigger till neither puppet could see the other. Then they were sad for there was no one to laugh with and catch the ball.

Finally the puppeteer spoke out and asked the two what was wrong? What were they so sad? "He's different than me!" wailed the right hand. "And I can't play with some one that looks like that!" wailed the left hand.

"Now look here", the puppeteer scolded. "So what if you are different. I'm your creator and I made each of you like you are. I made one orange because I like orange. I made the other lime-green because I like lime-green." He sighed and continued. "You are both a part of me. Feel my arm, my shoulder, my head." Each puppet felt up from one wrist and across the face, to discover each was connected to the other. Each came from the same source. "There's no reason for either of you to dislike or resent the other."

Slowly the two puppets recognized a bit of the truth. They knocked down the barrier they had thoughtlessly erected, and went back to enjoying their fun games.

When we are tempted to judge another, remember the two puppets and their Creator.

(written by Joyce Sasse)

RURAL MINISTRY STORIES

A Night in Bethlehem

A wonderful way to experience the spiritual values of Christmas ...

Town-folk from Oyen, Alberta and surrounding communities came together in 2008 and 2009 to celebrate both Christmas and community. Each time they gathered, it was on a street in Bethlehem where tax collectors mingled and Roman centurions patrolled.

For Rev. Catherine, it started when her phone rang one August day. A member of the Evangelical Missionary Church was calling to ask if she, on behalf of the Ministerial Association, would be interested in meeting with others to discuss a new idea of December's Christmas event. It was a program published by *Group Publications* and tried by churches elsewhere.

And so began plans for *A Night in Bethlehem*. It was evident everyone in town could participate. Many people were recruited because of their known gifts; others volunteered.

It was a family affair, structured as an engaging and interactive experience for both visitors and participants to see what it was like in Bethlehem when Jesus was born. All who came toured a

typical street in Bethlehem, complete with Roman guards, tax collectors, livestock, first century shops, and of course, the nativity scene. Together people experienced the story of the Saviour's birth.

Word spread about Bethlehem, and the community started to get involved. Oyen's Agricultural building was donated to accommodate setup, show-time and takedown. The Knights of Columbus laid interlocking mats on the dirt floor. The Lion's Club donated booths. An electrician hung a big star outside to point people where to go. Others contributed designs and decorations to fill the street, including lights for a star-lit sky and stone walls built from sheets of Styrofoam. Still others arrived in 1st century costumes to play music and role-play as vendors offering perfumes, 'period' farm produce, tie-dyed textiles, small bread loaves, weaving and the like. Food and beverages were donated in abundance. In the 2nd year, people braved a harsh winter storm, travelling long distances, to get to Bethlehem.

Rev. Catherine described the town as *electric*. Main Street Bethlehem was so crowded visitors could hardly move. Kids were asking, "Is this what it really was like?" The next day, people were busy telling stories. They liked having the Christmas story told so they could see and experience it in their own way.

The project could have been costly, but local shared resources helped make the project a success. It was a community event, free to all with goodwill donations welcomed. In the first year they raised \$1200 and two truckloads of goods for the food bank. *A Night in Bethlehem* inspired creativity, sharing and fun. And it told the Christmas story.

A Night in Bethlehem will keep coming to Oyen as long as the communities want it to happen (see pictures on-line at http://www.circle-m.ca/rural-ministry-stories/stories_web/bethlehem.html).

(story submitted by Colleen Rickard)

CiRCLe M NEWS

Upcoming Rural Ministry Courses:

- 1. Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) in Rural Settings**
Winter 2011

Excellent educational program available in rural setting ...

The Swan Valley CPE program is located in the Swan River Valley District of west central Manitoba. It is a satellite of the long-established CPE programs at the Saskatoon Institute for Pastoral Education (www.cpe-saskatoon.com)

The Swan Valley CPE program is available to anyone. It consists of 200 hours of experience in a rural community ministry site as well as the opportunity for small group seminars and theological reflection with a trained CPE supervisor and ones' peers.

Seminars in the program focus on guided experiences in community-based care-giving together with group, individual and mentored reflection. Students learn skills related to crisis intervention, suicide prevention, mental health issues as well as working with intergenerational families and issues of loss and grief. The program includes contextual immersion and reflection opportunities including a guided wilderness walk, a tour of a farming operation, an opportunity to reflect on the interaction of aboriginal and non-aboriginal culture, attendance at a farm auction, and the opportunity to lead worship in a small village church.

Opportunities for placement include the 55 bed Swan Valley Health Centre, three long term care facilities, community health services such as Mental Health, Palliative Care and other community agencies such as the Crisis Centre (domestic abuse), the Justice System and the Food Bank.

Free billeting is available for out of town students.

For further information contact Supervisor Rev. Margaret McCallum at swanvalleycpe@gmail.com.

2. Peer Mentoring for Clergy New to Rural Settings

Date: TBA

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.

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

Date: TBA

Rev. Dr. Cameron Harder

This graduate course is the first in our STM (Master in Sacred Theology Degree) 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.

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*

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).

DELEGATE'S REPORT ON IRCA GATHERING

The IRCA meets every four years, starting in 1994 ...

The International Rural Churches Association's (IRCA) 4th quad-annual Conference was held in Altenkirchen, Westerwald, Germany on September 20 - 26, 2010.

Fifty participants (farmers, ministry and lay) from rural areas represented five continents. The conference theme was "Hunger – A Global Challenge". Several presentations addressed the theme

using a United Nations report that brings a revolutionary approach to agriculture. The 2010 Conference Resolution can be found at www.irca.net.nz, which explains the UN report and IRCA's support of its findings.

We spent a lot of time networking by hearing stories of each others' struggles and joys. In those stories we found common bonds with one another. The conference was not all gloom. We found that we have an International Rural Church Community with signs of hope and new life that shares God's love and work in each of our lands.

IRCA's constitution was passed at this conference, which will help to pave the way to become more organized as a "recognized" International Charitable Organization – a prerequisite in today's financial world to even set up a bank account. IRCA considers itself "to be a voice for the voiceless". In today's global economy many voices have been silenced, but as we see at the World Trade Organization talks, those voices will not remain silent. Thanks be to God.

Five United Church Canadians represented Canada and the Canadian Rural Church Network: Peggy and Dan Bartlett from Nanticoke, Eric and Annette Skillings from Chatham - both from Southwestern Ontario, and Catherine Christie, who is now in South Korea as an Overseas Personnel for the United Church of Canada. Catherine brought experiences from Saskatchewan and her new experiences from South Korea.

The Executive was elected; Catherine Christie as Chairperson, Kevin Harper (Australia) as Treasurer and Garry Hardingham (Australia) as Secretary.

Thank you to our past Chair Lothar Schullerus, our past Treasurer David Ruesink, and Garry Hardingham as our Secretary.

Plans are already being made for the next Conference in 2014.

For the first time, we had one delegate from Africa – Malawi. Copeland had to go through major hoops to just obtain his visa. He made many sacrifices at home to join us. We are so thankful for Copeland's determination to be part of the wider church. Also we had the privilege to meet folks from ex-communist countries such as Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Romania. Of course, returnees from India, Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Switzerland, United States, Germany and Canada were happy to see one another again.

Thank you to this year's planning committee. The conference was enlightening. The food and accommodations were fantastic. The sights, sounds and experiences were life changing. Thanks be to God.

IRCA "Conference Scattered"

Before the International Rural Churches Association's (IRCA) conference in Altenkirchen, Westerwald, Germany, fourteen participants met on Thursday, September 16th, in Neckarelz,

Germany for what we call “Conference Scattered”. The idea of “Conference Scattered” is to learn firsthand about the unique challenges of our host country’s rural communities.

It also gives us a chance to meet one another and to build relationships in a smaller group. With 14 people spending 4 days together, we learned quite a bit about each other. With four full days of experiencing the rural countryside of Neckarelz, as well as two local farm tours, we were truly immersed in rural German community.

“Conference Scattered” is a great way to be introduced to new rural experiences and to take the time to understand the uniqueness of our host country. Getting to meet several of the conference delegates before hand and to establish relationships really helps to take the pressure off those first few days at a conference when everything is strange.

Thank you to Rudy for setting up “Conference Scattered”. And thank you to Rolf for using his contacts to get us all connected so quickly.

(written by Eric Skilling, IRCA delegate and chairperson for CRCN)

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>.

Feb 2011 ***Rural Leadership Conference: Advocating for Our Communities***

Cypress Hills Resort, Saskatchewan

February 28 to March 2, 2011

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LINKS

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