

Newsletter #31 - January 2017

CRCN – CiRCLe M NEWSLETTER

A Joint Publication of
CANADIAN RURAL CHURCH NETWORK
and
CENTRE FOR RURAL COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND MINISTRY

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*God's mercy can make even the driest land become a garden,
can restore life to dry bones (cf. Ezekiel 37:1-4)
... Let us be renewed by God's mercy, let us be loved by Jesus,
let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too;
and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water
the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.*

Pope Francis

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The CRCN is an organization of persons (lay and clergy) who have a passion for enhancing the quality of life in rural communities. Their vision is to be a supporting network for rural church and rural community development in Canada.



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CiRCLe M is a non-profit charity created by the seminaries of the Saskatoon Theological Union. The Centre's mission is to equip clergy and lay leaders in rural and remote places to help their churches be catalysts for the development of healthy Canadian communities.



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FAITH MATTERS

Boomers Not in Church

Why are the Boomers staying away from church? What do they mean when they call themselves “spiritual but not religious (SBNR)” ...?

By Joyce Sasse

Why are the Boomers staying away from church? What do they mean when they call themselves “spiritual but not religious (SBNR)”? These are some of the questions Sheila MacGregor addresses in her excellent article “Bring Back the Baby Boomers” (United Church Observer Dec 2016). Many of her observations come from her participation in the “*Boomerstock*” conference she attended in Nashville this fall. The participants’ concern was to address “how churches can engage boomers”.

Many Boomers are the “un-churched” folks who “didn’t leave the establishment because they were angry ... but left because they no longer saw the point.”

This generation includes those who find it difficult to believe religious dogma, statements about absolute truth, sin, heaven and hell and life-after-death. Nor do they have a tolerance for religious exclusivism. But they are asking profoundly theological questions and are seeking to fulfill spiritual needs in personal ways. They believe in a spiritual force and are “interested in world religions and other religious paths and practices.” Hence the expression “spiritual but not religious”.

Members of the Boomer Generation, according to MacGregor, have experienced the following traits: brokenness (because of having witnessed numerous traumatic public events), loneliness (note the high divorce rates), and fear that there may not be a future.

The antidote suggested – “a sense of belonging” such as can be experienced within a community of faith. The messages shared within such a community, in addition to Scripture studies, might include wellness programs that enhance physical and mental health.

Faith communities can “call on Boomers’ idealism and activism” by “responding to their needs and including them” in their fellowship. Such endeavours would allow for roots and a sense of belonging to deepen. In this context, they could find opportunities to serve and have access to spiritual nurture.

Judas (written by Amos Oz)

In preparation for Lent, a fascinating read ...

Commentary by Joyce Sasse

In preparation for Lent, a good read might be “Judas”, a novel written by Amos Oz.

Jerusalem 1959 is when we meet Shmuel Ash, a biblical scholar, who finds work as a caregiver for a cantankerous old man named Gershom Wald.

Oz's writing is imaginative and beautiful, and the unfolding of his story is captivating. It covers many topics that are still relevant today.

- Shmuel's concern is to try to discern the unique role Judas played in Jesus' story. Might he have been a more learned man (as compared with the other disciples) who was not a traitor but tried to act as an advocate of Jesus' behalf? As we listen to the unfolding dialogue, clues are given to the way various Jewish thinkers approach the question "who was Jesus of Nazareth".
- As the one-state, two-state Israel political debate continues to be one of the most contentious issues of our time, the novel skillfully takes us back to the beginnings in the Forties and the head-on collision between Arabs and Jews, and mulls over whether an Independent Israel should never have been sanctioned.

Religion and Ethics Newsweekly (PBS)

Viewing the Religion and Ethics Newsweekly is a good way to start the week ...

Recommended by Joyce Sasse

Viewing the "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly" is a good way to start my week. It examines religion's role and the ethical dimensions behind top news headlines. It asks significant questions, profiles notable people and groups not only in the U.S.A. but on the world stage, and is both inter-denominational and inter-faith.

Some of the recent features I have appreciated include: Mercy Chefs, Restoring the Buffalo (spiritually important to the Blackfeet People), and the lives of those who form the Threshold Choir (who minister to individuals and families facing death).

RURAL LIFE ISSUES

Reconciliation: Actions Must Follow Words

Phil Fontaine points to specific actions that might be taken by those who talk about reconciliation ...

Notes from Prairie Messenger December 14, 2016

Speaking on the meaning of reconciliation, aboriginal leader Phil Fontaine addressed a group assembled at St. Thomas Moore College about the need to focus on recognizing and working through our burdens together as a people.

- 1st, there needs to be acknowledgement that wrong has been committed.
- 2nd, there is the burden of guilt borne by the institutions that inflicted the harm.
- 3rd, consider the harm done by the residential schools.

Once harm has been recognized and admitted, reconciliation can begin. Words that are sincere flow into action... for example, in the hiring of indigenous people, and in teaching history with a colonizing world view. Enlighten Canada's origin-story so we understand that it is a 3-nations story (British, French and First Nations).

It is necessary to highlight the pain that all people have suffered, and the desired intention to restore relationships for all people affected by this hurt.

Fontaine highlighted how crucial it is to build on hope and look for stories of success. For example, consider the increasingly high enrollment of indigenous students in post-secondary institutions, indigenous peoples being represented in many levels of politics, and the 40,000 businesses in Canada owned and managed by indigenous individuals.

Farm Women, Faced by Loss, Reach Out to Others

Because farm family businesses are super complicated, a farm accident can be more than devastating. But one group of widows speaks out ...

Western Producer December 22, 2016

Because farm family businesses are super complicated, a farm accident can be more than devastating. But one group of widows speaks out. The Western Producer article about their experience and their presentation at the "Outstanding Young Farmer" national conference can be read at www.westernproducer.com "Forever Changed by Loss ..."

Their suggested headings for helping others develop their own "Because I Love You" lists can be used as a guide as families list their own details:

- **The help:** Short-term help, longer-term help;
- **Standard operating procedures;**
- **Passwords, location of keys to equipment;**
- **Lists and location of important documents:** RRSPs, TSFAs, and other investments; insurance policies, bank accounts, business agreements, lease agreements, mortgages, vehicle ownership;
- **Names of personal trusted advisor and mentor;**
- **Professional contacts:** accountant, lawyer, banker, doctor, dentist, childcare provider, financial advisor; processors, elevator manager, commodity broker, input suppliers, veterinarian, equipment dealers and repair, vendors;
- **Contacts for the Fix-It folks:** mechanic, electrician, plumber, furnace, septic, welder, security systems;
- **Legal:** power of attorney, executor, guardian, organ donation, cremation, funeral arrangements.

Websites for Rural Churches

Church websites: do we see them to be an obligation or an opportunity for communication ...?

By Joyce Sasse

Alex Sim tells of being taken to a chicken coop by one of his instructors. The man invited Sim to look in the corners of the coop, push away at some of the straw with his foot, sniff the air ... Then he asked "Would you want to live here?"

That's what I think needs to be done with regard to rural church websites. Look closely. Is there anything about your local website that enthralls you and invites a 2nd look? Can a Facebook network be developed for sharing information? At the very time when we have access to technology that allows us to present ourselves to a wide audience at almost no cost, we need to be reminded to at least practice the basic rules of communication.

What's your appeal? Where's the excitement? Why would anyone of any age waste their time here? It needs to be apparent your web-master is connected with real people who can live and work together.

If we want to connect with children and youth, if we want to invite others to become involved, if we want to share a vibrant Gospel message, we've got to get with it. Invite participation from the kids and tie in to their social network. Build bridges between Seniors and Youth, celebrate the new baptisms and marriages, share the wisdom of the elders on the website. Use the communication skills that are innovative and interactive. The website should be at the forefront of our life together as a community of the faith-filled. Participants need to also develop face-to-face relationships. Invite everyone to come together for occasional pot-luck supper gatherings, messy-church activities and worshipful events.

Spiritual nurture can happen in any variety of ways. Let go and let God lead us into the future.

Suggestions of Some Positive Things So as to Not Unravel

Based on material shared by others who have faced extreme rural distress...

- **Look after the Body:** exercise, drink lots of water, use all your senses to affirm your being ...
- **Look after your Mind:** make priority lists and enjoy the satisfaction of ticking off each item. Make choices about how you breathe, the tone of your voice, the way to move ahead constructively.
- **Look after your Emotions:** "a laugh is as good as a flush". Don't bottle up. Find ways to share unexpressed feelings of frustration, anger, guilt, bitterness and disappointment.
- **Be still and Refuel:** after speaking with God, let God speak with you. That Presence is within reach – through prayer, in scripture, through mentors and advisors, and in the still small voice.

Try to understand how it is that nothing can separate us from the love and grace of God, made known through Jesus, the Christ.

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

Prayer of Thanksgiving

By Reverend Vienna Cobb Anderson

God of all blessings,
source of all life,
giver of all grace:
We thank you for the gift of life:
for the breath
that sustains life,
for the food of this earth
that nurtures life,
for the love of family and friends
without which there would be no life.
We thank you for the mystery of creation:
for the beauty
that the eye can see,
for the joy
that the ear may hear,
for the unknown
that we cannot behold filling the universe
with wonder,
for the expanse of space
that draws us beyond the definitions of
our selves.
We thank you for setting us in
communities:
for families
who nurture our becoming,
for friends
who love us by choice,
for companions at work,

who share our burdens and daily tasks,
for strangers
who welcome us into their midst,
for people from other lands
who call us to grow in understanding,
for children
who lighten our moments with delight,
for the unborn,
who offer us hope for the future.
We thank you for this day:
for life
and one more day to love,
for opportunity
and one more day to work for justice and
peace,
for neighbours
and one more person to love
and by whom be loved,
for your grace
and one more experience of your presence,
for your promise:
to be with us,
to be our God,
and to give salvation.
For these, and all blessings,
we give you thanks, eternal, loving God,
through Jesus Christ we pray.
Amen.

Remembering Those Affected by Bovine TB - A Prayer of Lament

Thinking of the many who have been affected by issues around Bovine TB ...

By Joyce Sasse

We come to you, O God, remembering people who are hurting because of issues around Bovine TB:
our ranchers are hurting, their families are hurting, their communities are filled with
anxiety and pain.

There is so much uncertainty. Where did the TB come from? How far has it spread? How did it get here? Why do so many animals have to be destroyed when most of them have not even tested positive?

Specialists are struggling to move as quickly as they can, but their understanding and capacity to act has its limitations.

Rancher optimism is being challenged. Even though their industry has no guarantees, they try hard to hold on to having faith for the future – for that is the real gift that You give.

Herds are more than chattels, more than commodities to be sold. While they are raised to be slaughtered for food, they also represent years of careful breeding and thoughtful herd-building.

Hear our Prayer of Lament. Grant the virtues of patience and understanding for those who work through this time of crisis. Whether it be with families, neighbours or the strangers who happen to be specialists in dealing with this disease, remind everyone that humans are subject to limitations.

Lift our sights that we may be generous, supportive and caring. Give us hope. Amen

RURAL MINISTRY STORIES

Finding Peace Amid Suffering

As we work our way through Lent, we look at how we might cope with the heaviness in life ...

By Joyce Sasse

Maybe you feel despair because you can hardly pay the rent, or because you have been diagnosed with a horrible condition, or you are a caregiver whose physical and spiritual resources have been depleted.

Whatever your burden, or the burden of someone you love, insights shared by Viktor Frankl may be helpful. In Nazi death camps during WW II he clung to life and later shared his experience about how he kept going with the world.

“When we are no longer able to change a situation,” he wrote, “we are challenged to change ourselves.” Even to the very end, we have the freedom to look beyond our fear and despair to ask what we can do that is positive.

Survival with dignity depends on our attitude. Disappointment, anger and bitterness will weigh us down. But forgiveness, acceptance and love can lift us. We are blessed with an incredible capacity to carry on with grace.

What does it matter if we notice we are aging? Or if we have made a huge mistake? Look with pride at life's rich moments. Hold tight to humour. Laughter "gives us the ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds."

During the day, we may find distractions for our agonized thinking. But in the dark of night, when resentment and anger churn our thoughts, we have the freedom to release the negative and search for that which will help us move forward with dignity and grace.

In the end, when we have fought the good fight, may we feel at peace as we prepare to meet our Maker.

Frankl wrote "Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose."

Daddy Sherry's Hunt

Every rural community has at least one outstanding character ...

By Joyce Sasse

Every rural community has at least one outstanding character. In W.O. Mitchell's novel *The Kite* that special person is Daddy Sherry – who, at 111 years, was believed to be the oldest person in the world!

When the fall colours come into full bloom and the geese are practicing formation flying, one particular story in this book overflowing with stories comes to mind. It's about what happened when Daddy Sherry was in his hundredth year.

This man was crotchety, proudly independent and set on having his way. He had a dream about taking his old gun out for one more goose hunt. The local doctor, minister and undertaker decided they would try to make his dream come true.

After carefully calculating his requirements, and when and where the geese were coming in for a feed, the guys went to work. They dug a pit large enough for Daddy's rocking chair, himself and a companion. Fall mornings being what they are, they lined the pit with hot rocks and carpeting and carefully lowered Daddy and his chair. Then they covered the whole thing with artificial turf from the funeral home. Only his head was exposed.

You have to read the book to learn the outcome. But if you know small communities you can imagine the comradery, the familiarity of living together for decades, and the importance of helping a buddy live out a dream.

What I appreciated about the book is the way Mitchell so clearly named the values handed on to others. The boy, Keith, was proud to have Daddy Sherry be his mentor, but he also clearly understood his role in helping Daddy face some of the rough spots that accompany aging.

Whether our roots are in the city or the country, we find truths told that we can identify with as we find ourselves ripening. These may be “rural” values, but they stand strong in our Global Society.

An Appeal for Funding

Along with an application for funding a community-development project, I was asked to address the subject ‘What is Rural’. The following may suggest an approach by which other appeals for funding can be approached.

By Joyce Sasse

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on the topic ‘What is Rural’. It is a topic that has given purpose to all of my life and ministry.

WE START WITH A STORY:

In the mid-seventies a group of rural church folk developed an Experimental “Saddle Bag Ministry” Project in the rural region surrounding Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan – and they employed my services. Our joint understanding of “rural being a culture” fit together like hand-and-glove.

- Schools, businesses and services (including the church) had all become centralized in the city – and the surrounding communities no longer had a viable identity.
- It was assumed the whole region would automatically become urban centred. But the Saddle Bag initiators begged to differ. They believed rural people working together could and should control their own destiny. Our task was to find out if this presupposition could be confirmed... What we found was that a very relevant rural culture remained in the hearts of the people.

One of our most successful ventures was to engage in a community history-book-writing project.

- Since people identified themselves in terms of their old school districts, we found a respected, retired teacher (who had worked in many of these one-room schools) who volunteered as the project facilitator.
- With the use of an opaque projector (none of the IT equipment of today), and a small Community Hall, she got people together to share black-and-white pictures, to try to identify individuals and the occasions for the picture-taking. Slowly they rebuilt the story of their history.
- Neighbours, who hadn’t been in each other’s homes for years, were suddenly inviting themselves back and forth because a found picture brought back a memory they wanted to share ...
- With each Hall showing, the crowd grew ... and so did the casual visiting and the community re-development.
- Eventually many of those stories were written down, pictures were labeled, family histories were assembled, and a manuscript was sent to be published – it was one of the 1st hard-covered community history books produced at that time.

The Homecoming Event, when the book was released, brought more than a thousand people together ... The book has been an encyclopedia of information and the process a pattern for numerous other regions to follow over the next 20 years.

The sub-titles for those community history books are definitive of the culture from which they grew. "Good land, good water, good people." "From sandstone to settlers". "The hills of home."

- They talk about land and landscape.
- They talk about families and people voluntarily working together to build community.
- They highlight the special happenings and make reference to the hardships and struggles.
- They intimate, without using fancy theological language, a sense of working in partnership with God. Terms like "Next-year Country" were statements of faith.

Story-telling continues to be the chief means of communication for rural people.

"WHAT IS RURAL?" YOU ASK!

"Rural is a culture – and the basic values of that culture include

- Respecting **land and landscape**
- Being part of **community**
- Caring about **the pain** faced by individuals (the sick and aging, those facing hardship) and by the community as a whole (the drought, the flood, the fire)
- For the most part, members of these communities are both **fiercely independent**, and are aware of the need to be **interdependent**.
- Regular church attendance may not be a priority for many, but when there's a funeral, or when an event is seen to be soul-nourishing, their support is most evident.
- If you use charts and graphs and fancy brochures from Government offices to try to convince people about a particular financial initiative, piles of them are found in the Post Office garbage. But couch that same info in **story-telling** format at a meeting or on coffee-row and every angle of the subject at hand is discussed.
- **Story-telling** is the means by which both traditional knowledge and future visioning are shared.

Rural is a Culture. There was a time when that fact was a presupposition of everything we did – because rural was the dominant culture.

- But today there's an inversion that threatens our rural culture.
- The dominance of urban based media, technology, educational and political influence ignores the unique gifts our rural culture has to offer.
- We must affirm our cultural values, put them in words our kids will understand and help the newcomer absorb them as they share with us what it is they have to offer.

When people in rural communities shake their finger and cry because there are no jobs here for our youth, I shake my finger back by asking "What have you done to nurture rural roots in your children? Give them roots, then encourage them to go elsewhere to develop their wings and discover for themselves who they are and what they have to offer. That is what frees them to choose to return – enriched with gifts and a sense of belonging.

INTERNATIONAL RURAL CHURCH CONFERENCE 1998

In 1998 I was invited to participate in an International Conference on *Rural Culture and Spirituality* in Durham, England.

- 110 of us were in attendance from nine countries, four continents
- Our key phrase was “Rural is a Culture”, and we affirmed it was an International Culture.

I quote a part of what I reported on my return home.

- “We need to affirm ourselves and each other by saying ‘Rural is a culture’. It is my culture ... or it is the culture of the community where I live. It is what feeds my roots.”
- This is so “whether you are the technologically sophisticated farmer, or the wind-power business person, or the oldster waiting for medical tests, or the educator at the Composite High School.”
- It empowers you, gives you energy, and is a base over which you can relate to the rest of the world. Once we have that focus, we are then free to grow in whatever direction opportunity affords.

Three First Nation’s People were the key presenters at our Conference

- A Maori from New Zealand, a Ute (Indian) from Colorado, and a Native of Zimbabwe
- Each had come from a culture that had been suppressed by a more dominant race.
- That dominance tore at the heart of the people until they rebelled and started to re-identify themselves and celebrate their own cultural values.

Just think what it can mean for us to affirm “Rural is our culture”!

- Our young people would appreciate the strength that comes with their rootedness. They could go anywhere with pride, and return home when they felt the need.
- Educators, politicians, health care professionals and so many others would have a framework against which they could deliver their services (*the Rural Medical Initiative of the Associate Clinic in Pincher Creek, Alberta is considered to be exemplary*).
- Churches would focus less on institutional survival and more on the spiritual health of the whole community.
- New-comers, whether by marriage or business transfer or retirement or whatever ... would help us blend what they offer with who we are. Their presence would be seen to be an opportunity rather than a threat.

One of my chief involvements these days is with **Circle M** (Centre for Rural Community Leadership and Ministry) working out of Saskatoon.

- Our role is to try to equip rural clergy and rural leaders to try to help revitalize our communities by helping them to understand what our rural culture is, and how to work with folks within that culture.
- It is about affirmation, and about building from within – rather than about imposing ideas and disciplines from outside the culture.

THE STORY-TELLING CONTINUES

It is said the “**telling our story helps us make sense of our lives**”.

- Going back to our community history-gathering project in 1975, ... since then the members of countless rural communities have worked together to **re-member** and **record** their community stories.
- What a wonderful way to celebrate and give voice to their legacy!

I would like to conclude with an appeal for you to help me repeat this process here, in our Chinook Country region of Southwestern Alberta, with my ***Annora Brown Life and Legacy Project***.

I speak of a woman who grew up in small town Southwest Alberta and attended the Ontario School of Art. She was compelled to return home to care for her parents – and stayed on in her small home-town for the next 35 years.

She was a single professional woman in a remote region of the province, whose work was meticulous and prolific.

However, she worked herself to exhaustion and had to retire before her extensive body of work could be written into history and be brought to full bloom in our region.

Recent events, including a Gallery-showing of her art, and the photographing, digitizing and public availability of 260 of her paintings stored in the Glenbow Museum archives, has revived interest in her Life & Legacy.

This application for funding is so that community members may further collate details concerning her story, her work, her pictures and memorabilia ... and discern her legacy.

To my way of thinking, this is the very essence of WHAT RURAL CULTURE is about!
This is at the heart of why I am “Proud to be Rural”.

CIRCLE M NEWS

DMin Program: A Synopsis

by DMin Director Rev. Dr. Jennifer Janzen-Ball

The capstone course for DMin students who are close to finishing the program, was held at St. Andrew’s College from January 10-13, 2017, facilitated by Dr. Christine Mitchell (St. Andrew’s College). Students presented their draft project reports and offered helpful and insightful feedback to their peers. We look forward to some upcoming project report presentations in the spring, prior to convocation in May!

Students who just recently started (fall 2016) continue to work on elective courses this semester. The students are in the process of thinking about their projects and putting together ministry teams in their ministry sites. They will gather again in May 2017 for a qualitative research methods course taught by Dr. Lynn Caldwell (St. Andrew’s College).

DMin Program Strengthens Rural Ministry

Rural ministry is an integral part of the church and there is need for us to get focused and reach out to where the people are...

by Wilson Gonese

The Doctor of Ministry program has had such tremendous positive impact on me. What attracted me specifically to enroll into the Doctor of Ministry program is its focus on rural ministry and development. As someone who has the passion for rural ministry and serving in a rural setting in Newfoundland, this program has helped me a great deal. I have come to understand that rural ministry is an integral part of the church and there is need for us to get focused and reach out to where the people are, meeting them at their very point of need.

Since I started this program, my ministry setting has come to understand that they are very important in the ministry, life and work of their church. I have also worked hard to encourage members of my congregation to believe in themselves, accept that they are valued in the church and know that without their involvement and dedication the church cannot succeed.

The people have come to know that they are the owners of the church and there is no one who can do their share of work in the church other than themselves. I have also realized that the ministry and mission of the church must be contextual in that it should be relevant to people in their specific set up right where the people are. The success of the church's ministry and mission depends on how people are involved in the daily work of their church.

Working on my project has given me an opportunity to connect with people one-on-one. I have also learned that it is very important for us as leaders in the church to listen and hear what people say. Each person has to be valued and given a voice. People's suggestions matter in the life of the church. I have also learned through the Doctor of Ministry program that co-operation and respect are key to the success of the church. A question that inspired me during the course of this program is: How are we doing ministry and how can we enhance it to meet today's challenges? This has become my mantra and is helping me think of new ways to fulfill God's call.

I am very proud to be in the Doctor of Ministry program and as I approach the end of the program I have learned that we have to connect with our environment and respect the cries from the land. I have also learned new ways of serving and I am very pleased and confident that the Doctor of Ministry program will continue to inspire and shape ministers and church leaders to be fruitful and effective in their ministry in different contexts. Our calling is to serve and going out to make a difference in the world knowing that God will enable us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Quoting from an article in the Fall 2016 edition of "In Contact" (St. Andrew's College Newsletter) ...

*St. Andrew's is one of the colleges working with Circle-M
to help equip persons for rural ministry and leadership.*

Small is the Right Size

Rural communities are the “right size” for many things...

By Cam Harder, Executive Director, CiRCLe M

In the December 30, 2016 Saskatoon Star Phoenix, Andrea Hill and Morgan Modjeski note that rural municipalities in Saskatchewan are shrinking in size; almost two thirds now have populations less than 500 people. The smallest has 73. While rural population in general is holding its own in Canada, there is a general movement off farms and into larger towns, especially those close to the cities.

That shift changes the self-image of a community. Valued facilities get relocated to regional centers. Key leaders move away. Folks may begin to feel poorly about their community, as if it “isn’t what it used to be” or “it’s not the sort of place people want to settle down.”

But a few years ago I helped lead a study in the “spirit” of rural communities that included interviews with Grade 10 students in a rural town. Surprising to some, most students said that once they got an education and got married, they’d like to settle down in their home town. They didn’t know if there would be jobs for them. But they loved the lifestyle.

Their parents need to hear that. Town leaders may say “small is beautiful” but their wry smile suggests that “beautiful” is just a consolation prize. Deep down they often believe, as our society generally does, that “bigger is *better*.” We justify rural school and hospital closings, corporate farming, and regionalization of our stores by appealing to “economies of scale.” We assume that when things get bigger they produce more bang for the buck. But strangely the term “economies of scale” originally did not mean that bigger is better. It meant that there is a “right” size for everything.

The truth is, rural communities are the “right size” for many things. Governance is close to home. Everyone can have a voice. Political decisions are more likely to take local realities fully into account.

And education really benefits. Rural schools often cover several grades in a single classroom. That might seem counter-productive. But ERIC, an educational resource centre, examined studies of how students perform in schools with a wide range of grades. They found that students did consistently better than in schools that were purely elementary, junior or senior high. They also noted that multi-grade classes allowed stronger students to “listen up” to lessons from a higher grade, while weaker students could “listen down” to pick up what they had missed from a lower grade. And older ones could mentor young ones, learning the material better themselves in the process.

In Nebraska rural sociologists Cornelia and Jan Flora found that small rural schools graduate 97% of their students from high school compared to the state-wide average of only 85%. And the smallest schools send 25% more of their grads to college than the largest schools. The Floras also point out that the college-educated earn 65% more (and pay that much more in taxes) than

high school drop-outs. They are two and a half times *less* likely to be on social assistance, and three and a half times less likely to end up in prison. So it turns out that when *all* the costs and benefits are calculated, small schools do a better job of education *and cost society less per student* than the bigger ones. Of course the success of small school education makes sense when you think about it: a teacher that has fewer students can give more attention to each one.

It's true for churches too. Many in western Canada have less than 30 on a Sunday morning. I tell them, "You're just the right size for the mission God has given you." Archaeologists have found that the early church almost never gathered in groups of more than 30 for the first three centuries, until the Roman Empire took control of it. The early church knew they were in the business of forming Christians—making disciples—not putting on religious theatre for the masses.

And making disciples is best done face-to-face in groups of one or two dozen (like a school classroom). In gatherings that size everyone has a chance to speak, ask questions about the Bible texts, and share prayer concerns. People can know and care for each other in personal, effective ways. Individual birthdays, anniversaries, life transitions can be celebrated, or lamented together. Lay people are more likely to take leadership. Decisions can be made quickly and efficiently because there's less red tape. They put the young in close touch with the old, remembering and passing on their histories. And they hang onto their members better.

For the most part, our rural communities and congregations have nothing to lament population-wise. They are the right-size for building strong, healthy human beings. They have the skills, the connections, the resources to do that work well if they are open to seeing and creatively mobilizing them.

The grade 10 students we interviewed could see that. Maybe we need to start listening to our young folks, and start building the conditions that will allow them to come back and settle down in a few years.

LINKS

1. Reaching Out Through a Blog

A weekly *spiritual reflections blog* called "**Country Preacher's Notes**" (found online at <http://circle-m.ca/blog>).

By Joyce Sasse

It can be delivered to your e-mail box if you let Joyce know your address. Email jsasse@telusplanet.net.



2. TIPS ON HOW TO LIVE WITH RESPECT IN CREATION

A column on thoughts, facts and practical suggestions for living sustainably...

<http://www.circle-m.ca/rural-issues/social-concerns/index.php#environment>.