

Feeling a Sense of Ownership for Community

Local minister seeks to engage young adults in community-building.

The Doctor of Ministry program through Lutheran Theological Seminary Saskatoon and CiRCLe M required that I conduct a project that researched the effect of community and church engagement. I chose to work with young adults since this age group is noticeably missing at both church and community events, and yet there are many young people living the area. My project sought to better understand their lives. Further to that, my research asked the question, what happens to their sense of community when they are given to opportunity to talk about what matters to them? I believe our culture makes it difficult for young people to engage in meaningful public discourse. I see the church as having much to offer as the church naturally brings people together to publicly engage in matters of the deepest kind, such as forgiveness, life, death, restoration, community, identity, God, and so on. The church has a role to play in community development just by doing what the church does.

The core group was made up of ten young adults who met in the church basement on Tuesday nights from March through June. The group included a cross-section of young adults from the rural community west of Millet, Alberta, 18-33 years old. They were a good mix of single, married, divorced, Christian, agnostic, seeking, Catholic, Lutheran, Mormon, Christian Reform, male, female, professionals, trades people, unemployed, moms, dads, new to the community and lifelong residents.

We met to share photographs of our lives. The photos were used as springboards to meaningful conversation about what it is like to be a young adult in rural Alberta. The most positive thing that happened was that the young adults in the group got to know each other – their own neighbors – and discovered they had much in common – similar questions, struggles, anxieties, experiences, and values. Friendships were fostered and participants expressed a sense that “we care about this place and want to invest in it.”

My tangible goals were modest, yet significant. I wanted the wider community to wake up to the fact that young people live in this neighborhood and care about it. I wanted our community associations and the church to begin to engage them more intentionally. As a pastor I wanted to know the answer to Jesus’ question to his first disciples. “What are you looking for?” I saw this question as a good opening to meaningful dialog with a population that has not been engaged in local activity, religious or otherwise. I saw this project as opening a door to further partnership and focused ministry to young adults. On an emotional level I was interested in giving these young people a sense of ownership in their community, as well as an opportunity to express their hopes and concerns and to develop some leadership skills in doing so. I also hoped the project would renew my

congregation's sense that we have something to offer our neighbours. The church has a wonderful ability to convene people around things that really matter.

(By Pastor Tim Wray, St. Peters, Millet, Alberta)

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