

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- ◆ **Summer 2010** – *Mentoring Teams Training Program* - for clergy new to their rural setting.
- ◆ **May/June 2010** – Course: *Rites in Crisis* – A look at how community rites can be constructed to help communities in times of crisis (celebration and difficulty). With Jan Boyd.
- ◆ **May/June 2010** – Course: *Land, Community and Agrarian Issues from Moses to Now* – A look at rural-urban, land transfer, slave labour and other issues related to rural life in the Bible from OT through NT and church history. With David Jobling and Sandra Beardsall.

(Notes by Colleen Rickard, Circle-M)

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