

## **The Rural Church – From Where I See It**

*Rev. David Webber, who works in an extended rural parish in the Caribou-Chilcotin Region of B.C., reports his thoughts to the Presbyterian Record after his trip to visit rural churches in New Zealand. The following is but a segment of his report.*

### ***Act and Think Interdenominationally***

We have to begin to think and act interdenominationally, and by using the word interdenominational, I am not talking about the mainline church but the whole of the Christian church. There is absolutely no room for fierce denominationalism in Canada's rural areas. Interdenominational cooperative ventures have to become the norm, and to do this, it takes a huge amount of humility and love. In my context of the Cariboo-Chilcotin, especially within the close quarters and intimacy of house church, we have had to learn to love and respect and work together for Christ, in spite of a wide variety of greatly different Christian theological perspectives and practices. My theological training not only did not prepare me for this but actually trained me against it. To get through theological school, I had to tow the line of liberal theological scholasticism, and adopt the attitude that anything substantially different was not only wrong but also intolerable. As one of my contemporaries put it just before I tried to throttle him, "It is better to have no theology than the wrong theology." To minister in an interdenominational rural setting I had to work hard to step out of this liberal fundamentalism and to learn to understand and appreciate and communicate with a wide variety of people with widely differing theologies. To do interdenominational ministry in rural Canada, we need theological institutions that are dedicated to teaching theological diversity and respect to those who will be leaders on the ground.

### ***Develop Rural-based Theological Training***

The second thing that has to change is related to the above. Rural people need to be practically equipped for ministry in their rural context. We desperately need our theological schools to begin to address this. But in addressing this, what is needed is a complete shift in thinking and practice. This shift is best summed up in the following phrase: Theological schools and institutions need to begin to think in terms of training the whole people of God, the laos, and as they do this, they need to think in terms of "in service education" rather than "distance education". The difference between "in service education" and "distance education" seems profound and obvious to me. It is a huge difference in attitude and practice that sees the center of learning as being the rural context, not the theological school or institutions. This means that the one who has to transport and translate itself is not the rural person but the educational institution.

### ***Equip the Laity***

The third change that is absolutely necessary for rural ministry has to do with how we approach the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Many times and for many different reasons, now and especially in the future, the rural church will not have an

ordained minister leading it. New Zealand has met this reality head on by developing five streams of ordination, four of which address the laity. I would suggest in Canada we should go a different route. I can find no clear warrant in scripture for the practice of ordination to Word and Sacrament as we now practice it. I can find no place in scripture that even obliquely says that the one who is ordained to the office of minister is the sole celebrant when it comes to the sacraments. We need to appreciate that baptism is entry to the Table, and baptism is all that is necessary to be the celebrant with regards to the Table. It does not seem to be to be a big job to adequately equip faithful, baptized Christians to be able and good celebrants with regard to the sacraments. It is a much more biblical and more difficult job to adequately train overseers (episkope) as well as equip the laos to be preachers and teachers, and this is where most of the hard work needs to be done.

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