

MISSION MOMENT

Small Town & Rural Ministry: Gratitude for and Connections to How Your Weekly Offering Helps the Church *By Deacon Vicki Hanrahan*

Two of the three tenets of our mission are to equip and connect the congregations of our synod to be the heart and hands of Jesus. On Sunday afternoon, eleven of our congregations and one from the Northern Illinois Synod connected for conversation at the "Rural and Small Town Ministry" event hosted by Sugar Creek Lutheran Church in Elkhorn. We were led by Rev. Dr. Mark Yackel-Juleen, Director of Small Town & Rural Ministry for the Center for Theology & Land. Rev. Dick Inglett, pastor of Sugar Creek Lutheran and Bishop Thomas-Breitfeld opened the event.

Why this matters . . .

This event is a kick off to introduce a new rural/small town ministry leadership partnership between Wartburg Theological Seminary, the South-Central Synod of Wisconsin and Sugar Creek Lutheran Church to offer a training "equipping" resource for rural and small town ministry that builds faith, relationships and service. We explored the current state of rural and small town ministry, our challenges, our hopes and our current outreach ministries. Dr. Yackel-Juleen shared interesting data to frame up our conversation. For example:

- 90% of US land mass is rural. 20% of the population is rural.
- Until 1920, a majority of our population was rural. In 1920, this flipped.
- The world population transitioned to majority urban in 2007.
- 71% of congregations in the U.S. have fewer than 100 in average weekly worship attendance according to the National Congregations Study. (63% in the ELCA).
- A small town is generally considered to be 10,000 or less in population; although some consider anything under 25,000 to be a small town.
- More and more congregations and ministers are combining resources to approach mission jointly. Because of economic challenges and trends in religious demography, the number of ELCA multiple-church arrangements will steadily rise above its current level of 13% of all congregations.
- ELCA Research and Evaluation projects that by 2019, almost 20% of the full-time calls available in congregational settings will be in multiple-church arrangements. Another 2,000 congregations will not be able to afford full-time ministry, and many of them will move into multiple-church ministries.
- At present, 90% of multiple-church ministries in the ELCA are in open country and small towns of fewer than 10,000 people. Sixty-one percent (61%) of first calls are to rural and small-town settings where many seminary graduates walk into multiple-church ministries. After ten years in ministry, the percentage is still over 38%. Therefore, people in seminary ought to learn best practices for multiple church ministries, small churches and rural.
- 1,313 prospective MDiv students have visited the 7 ELCA seminaries this year. Of those numbers, historically about 16% actually enroll. That will yield about 210 degree candidates. Currently, there are about 2,776 vacancies, of them 1,000 are full-time called. To meet the number of vacancies, we would actually need 6,250 visits by prospective students.



Dr. Mark Yackel-Juleen received training in this process from the Division for Outreach of the ELCA and has led it with more than 180 different congregations.

The writing is on the wall. The need for shared ministry is great. Our congregations in attendance had an opportunity to connect with each other and form cohorts to begin the important work of creating a Task Force that works with a facilitator to process information, discuss possibilities and make recommendations for shared ministry. The congregations, through their constitutional process approve whatever recommendations are made. The ultimate purpose of these conversations is to develop strategies that sustain and grow the mission and ministries of the participating congregations. It is NOT to close or merge congregations. An underlying assumption of the process is that there are things that we can do more faithfully as Christians if we cooperate.

So what is in store for the future of Small Town and Rural Ministry? According to Dr. Yackel-Juleen, "We will need more cooperative forms, more clusters, more area parishes, more ecumenical cooperation and more deployment of variously gifted and variously trained leadership."

Thank you to Sugar Creek Lutheran Church for their financial support in making this event possible, their members for hosting and serving the potluck, the attendees for bringing dishes to pass, and for enlivened conversation about moving forward in mission together!

If you would like to learn more about this initiative, contact the synod office.