

Mission Work and Outreach in Rural America

“Overcoming the Maintenance Ministry Mindset”

Minnesota River Valley Pastors Conference - Morton, MN

Pastor Mike Kuschel - March 10, 2015

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. – Luke 8:1

⁶ So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere – Luke 9:6

When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages. – Acts 8:2.

“Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full.” – Luke 14:23¹

Is it more than just a coincidence that I am giving a paper on rural outreach as I stand in a church that is at a crossroads in its history? Is it more than just a touch of irony that as we meet to discuss rural ministry you can currently visit the website for Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and see, not one, but two reminders of our seminary's recent emphasis on urban ministry? The vicar in mission settings program includes a largely urban and suburban involvement, and the annual mission and ministry day at the seminary this year was held under the theme: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?”²

Our God spoke those words in Jonah 4:11 to get his reluctant prophet's attention; to open Jonah's eyes to the LORD's great compassion. He cared about those who dwelt in that great city of Nineveh. But let us not forget that this is also the same God who cares about the people of small towns just as much as he loves those in the big city. Our God sent Jonah to that great city of Nineveh and he is the same LORD who called a number of his prophets from small towns and villages.³ Our God is the Christ who would take on flesh and who would live and dwell in the backwater town of Nazareth and preach and teach in small towns that surrounded the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is our Savior, who is the one who sent his disciples out from town to village, preaching the gospel and helping people in these small communities.

Does not our LORD have great compassion for all people, no matter if they lived in the vast city of Jerusalem or the small village of Bethany?⁴ Does not the same LORD who speaks of his compassion for the large city of Nineveh also want us to open our eyes and see the mission work and the outreach and evangelism opportunities that are in rural settings? Should we not be concerned about both the people in the big city as well as the people of rural America? Of course! The Lord has told us to go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.⁵ We have been given the message of salvation that is for Jews and Gentiles, city dwellers and those who live in small towns. If this is the case, if we are to go out and share this powerful gospel throughout the entire world, should we not be concerned if there appears to be even a hint of reluctance to view rural areas as places where mission work and evangelism can be carried out? Should we not be concerned if our rural congregations are not only struggling to keep their doors open, but struggling to share the gospel with the members of their communities? Brothers, it appears that this is more than just a somewhat uncomfortable coincidence, it appears that is more than a touch of irony or interesting timing, I believe there is a legitimate issue that is staring us in the face and our LORD would want us to give it our attention, our efforts, and our prayers.

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. c1984. Grand Rapids: Zondervan

² Jonah 4:11

³ Amos was a shepherd from a small town south of Jerusalem. Jeremiah was the son of priest in a small town northeast of Jerusalem. Jesus was of course born in the small town of Bethlehem and lived in the small town of Nazareth.

⁴ Luke 10:38, Luke 19:41, Matthew 28:19; 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9

⁵ Mark 16:15

The sustainable mission model favors the city. It is logical planning for mission work, summed up by a simple phrase, "Go where the people are." We see, even in the infancy of the Christian church, that the apostle Paul recognized this practical mission strategy.

Paul carried out his work largely in the most strategic cities of an area. They were on main trade routes; nearly all of them were on the most important highways connecting east and west. They were key provincial cities. They were places where diverse ethnic and cultural groups live and to which they traveled and intermingled... Paul evidently saw these cities as hubs from which the gospel could radiate into the rest of the provinces.⁶

In recent years our synod has followed this type of model. New missions were planted, daughtered, or given additional support in places like New York City and Las Vegas and other major cities. In his book, *Portrait of Paul*, which was published in the early 2000's, David Valleskey (seminary president at that time) makes it very clear that our church body needed to make a more concerted effort to reach out into the cities. Valleskey would go on to impress his point with the following quote and table of statistics:

In our day, cities are, if anything, even more strategically important for mission work than they were in the days of Saint Paul – but not for exactly the same reasons. Today the strategic importance of cities is seen more in terms of the number of people flocking into them than of those moving out from them into other areas. Consider the following statistics that illustrate the movement of population in the United States from rural to urban areas...⁷

| Year | Urban (in millions) | Percent | Rural (in millions) | Percent |
|------|---------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|
| 1890 | 22.1 | 35.1 | 40.8 | 64.9 |
| 1940 | 74.4 | 56.5 | 57.2 | 43.5 |
| 1990 | 187.1 | 75.2 | 61.7 | 24.8 |

Since Valleskey's book was published, this population trend has only increased. The 2010 census report indicated that roughly 80% of Americans were living in urban settings and little less than 20% of Americans were living in rural areas.⁸ Such a continuing shift in population only adds weight to Valleskey's encouragement to make a concerted effort to reach out into our growing cities, to plan, support, and do more mission work in urban settings.

As a church body, doing mission work in the city has not been our strong point...Clearly since the cities are home to such vast numbers of people of every nation, tribe, language and people, cities should be of strategic importance when planning the deployment of workers and allocation of monies... To do mission work we need to go where the people are, even though the work may be difficult and the results meager.⁹

⁶ Rev. David J Valleskey, "Portrait of Paul", NPH 2002, page 58

⁷ Rev. David J Valleskey, "Portrait of Paul", NPH 2002, page 59

⁸ www.census.gov/geo/reference/ua/urban-rural-2010.html

The urban areas of the United States for the 2010 census contain 249,253,271 people, representing 80.7% of the population, and rural areas contain 59,492,276 people or 19.3% of the population.

⁹ Rev. David J Valleskey, "Portrait of Paul", NPH 2002, page 60,61

In the past 10-15 years we have made some productive inroads into such areas of urban ministry and we praise God for results that have been more than just meager. When you look at a place like Sure Foundation Lutheran Church in New York City, or Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church in Las Vegas, how can you not be excited about God blessing His church and our synod with the work that we are doing in these and other large cities and suburban areas? We have been blessed by God's grace in our efforts to reach out to more urban areas and we have been energized in equipping and training our pastors and teachers to take on some of the cultural challenges that such mission work entails. This is commendable and God-pleasing work. This important emphasis continues to grow as demonstrated by Martin Luther College recently approving an urban educational ministry minor and calling a professor to teach courses dealing specifically with urban ministry.

However here's the thing we must ask ourselves: have we raced to the mission work in the cities with such vigor that we have left the homestead of rural churches overlooked and vulnerable? The recent emphasis of having vicars in mission settings by all accounts has been extremely beneficial, but can such a heavy emphasis on urban ministries give seminary students a misleading taste of what mission work looks like? The positive aspect would be that the seminary grad trained in an urban or suburban mission setting may bring a missionary's heart to the rural congregation where he is assigned.¹⁰ That being said, can it also lead some to think that mission work can only happen in such urban or far-flung locations? These questions are the ones that we have to at least consider.

There are plenty of advantages to a certain critical mass. It is a sound strategy to "go where the people are," nonetheless; there are people in Morton, Minnesota and Grafton, Nebraska too. There may not be millions of people or even thousands of people, but they are still souls in need of salvation. These people also need the saving gospel of Jesus and thanks to our fellow believers of generations-gone-by we already have churches in these places, or at least nearby. Pastors and members can go out from such places and do what Jesus and his disciples did in small towns and villages. They can make an impact in small towns by helping the people of the community while proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. Mission work doesn't just happen in the crowded streets of New York, Las Vegas, Hong Kong, or Toronto, but it can be done in a small white church in the country; it can be done as a few gather at the main street diner for a Bible Class, in a small class room within a local jail, or even on the soccer or baseball field in a town of about 500 people. Mission work is not just the stuff of the big city of Ninevah or Minneapolis, but it can happen in a place like Redwood Falls or Danube, Wood Lake or Balaton.

Plowing Up the Maintenance Ministry Mindset

As we have rushed to reach the cities, one could wonder if we have slanted our view of urban and rural ministry into a bit of an urban versus rural view. When emphasizing so heavily on mission work in one area have we lost focus on our in mission in the other? Can we create a better balance by means of a careful cognizant shift in our collective mindset as a synod, as called workers, and as leaders in the church, so that we might more readily associate mission and outreach in any setting; not just the urban or suburban ones? Such a mindset may be a tough one to break, because somehow it has become embedded in how we think and speak and react about certain areas of this country.

Perhaps more than a few of you can think back to the day that you were called to serve in rural Minnesota. If that was call day, think back and consider the reaction by those around you. There were probably no "oohs" or "ahs" when Minnesota was announced, as has become the custom to hear when calls to Arizona, California, or other big cities and exotic locations are read on call day. (My wife was very excited when she heard that we were called to Florida. However, when I explained to her that President Gurgle had said *Flora Township* - not Florida - and that we were headed to the Minnesota District she wasn't exactly giddy with excitement. When everything settled down, it turned out that she was more than willing to go

¹⁰ I am truly grateful for the summers that I was able to spend at Cross of Life in Mississauga in Ontario Canada, and the experience that I gleaned from that suburban/urban mission has been vital in shaping my ministry in rural Danube.

and, as always, very optimistic; which was good.) When you received that call to rural Minnesota, I'm sure you had your own thoughts and emotions, but think again about those around you. Perhaps it was someone who meant well - a family friend, an uncle, or even your father - and they came up to you and used that well known phrase that I have now come to dread: "maintenance ministry." I think back to call day and I remember that phrase distinctly. As it turns out it was not just something unique to call day; that phrase was repeated a few times at pastors' conferences when I milled about with my fellow colleagues and introduced myself and the places where I serve. "Ah yes, *maintenance ministry*," it was said with a smile and a shrug, and even an occasional sympathetic pat on the shoulder. The overriding impression was given to this young pastor, "*Hang in there, learn the ropes of being a pastor, and one day you will be able to move on up to bigger and better things. Maybe someday you will even be able to do mission work.*" Maybe you can remember more recently holding a call to a rural area and your classmate, or a member of your congregation gave a similar retort. "*That's a rural area; you know what that means; no outreach opportunities. Looks like maintenance ministry.*" That's the mindset, or it is at least the common impression that many have somehow settled into and accepted - perhaps even unknowingly promoted. Urban areas, especially those in the largest of American cities, are associated with mission work, which is good in and of itself; but rural America on the other hand has been relegated to this worn out phrase, "maintenance ministry," which is not a good thing.

This is not just an issue in the WELS, but this concept is even more problematic throughout American Christianity, especially among churches that hire their pastors and staff and use high-paying salaries to attract "the talent." A position at a rural church, in such a situation especially, is looked upon unfavorably. It is either a stepping stone that must be tolerated for a time, a place where ministers are sent out to pasture in their final days of public ministry, or it is a type of punishment or purgatory that is a negative reflection of the pastor's talents and abilities. Shannon O'Dell, the author of "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals," details what he sees as a dreadful cultural oversight within the Christian church in America as a whole.

"Unwritten" Rural Rules: Successful churches grow in thriving urban or sprawling suburban America. Sparsely populated rural communities are behind the times and not worth our time. Cities are strategic; the country is inconsequential. The best, most visionary pastors are hired by growing visionary congregations. Rural churches can only afford the leftovers from the leadership pool. If you want to be a "successful" pastor, go to the cities.¹¹

Rural America is in the middle of a massive drought —a spiritual drought caused by a lack of vision, attitude, and leadership. The fields might be flourishing and green, but when it comes to the state of the Church, it is a dusty, dry land.¹²

But I am telling you, we have made the large church the glamorous opportunity in ministry, and we have lied to ourselves while we often fail to see the enormous potential in small churches in small communities.¹³

'Urban over rural' is a concept that we need to be aware of and do away with. Therefore, the term 'maintenance ministry' must be erased from our vocabulary and our memory banks. Haul out the disc plow

¹¹ Shannon O'Dell, "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals", New Leaf Press, 2010, pages 15-16

¹² Shannon O'Dell, "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals", New Leaf Press, 2010, page 102

¹³ Shannon O'Dell, "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals", New Leaf Press, 2010, page 167

There isn't a whole lot out there on outreach in rural America but this is at the very least an interesting read. While terribly charismatic in his view of the call and a bit impractical in his overall model for rural ministry, O'Dell has some valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities that rural congregations face.

and turn over that attitude because wrapped up in that phrase is the assumption that all a pastor in a rural setting is called to do is care for the current membership and hope that the same families continue to come so that somehow the doors stay open. That model, which somehow found its way into the assumed landscape of rural congregations for the past few decades, can no longer be an acceptable model. We need to adapt because for decades now the landscape of rural America has been changing.

Those who were born during the Great Depression and World War II, the elders of the congregation, may remember a golden era of agriculture. While farm prices fluctuated in the 50's and 60's, several factors came together in the 1970s to increase the income and optimism of U.S. farmers.

Farm magazines were predicting that the 1980's would prove to be the "Golden Age of Agriculture." They could hardly have been more wrong. The prices of products declined, some say engineered by encouragement of overproduction. Declining prices led to a decline in the value of land; led to bankers' unwillingness to continue to lend the large sums of money they had encouraged only two or three years before; farmers found that they could not pay those loans; farm foreclosures soared in number; there was an exodus of people from the farms to the city or anywhere else they could find jobs... Thus began the farm crisis of the 80's whose impact continues and has caused an upheaval in American life... It is estimated that some 600,000 farmers went out of business in the 80's, and that rippled through seed companies, farm machinery firms, grocery stores, gas stations, voluntary associations, and school systems. This left virtually no rural congregation or community unscathed.

The well-being of the community no longer depended on local, owner-operator production. Much land went out of local control and operations became increasingly large-scale businesses run from elsewhere.¹⁴

This has affected our communities and our congregations especially in the Midwest, where the farming industry is directly tied to the well-being of both entities. As farms continue to grow, as families tend to be smaller, and when the community itself is no longer maintaining the same population, the concept of maintenance ministry no longer holds any water and must be quickly erased from our mindset and overall church culture.

The landscape has changed and that presents challenges. It is certainly reason for concern, but not a reason to give up on rural communities and rural congregations altogether. No matter how the landscape has changed there are still opportunities for gospel ministry. God still tells us to go out to all the nations. Our Savior's model is still there for us to see that we are to proclaim His word not only in the big city of Jerusalem but to the people in the smallest of towns and villages. As pastors, as leaders of God's church on earth, we need to plow under and do away with that term 'maintenance ministry' especially now that the landscape has changed. We must do away with that maintenance-ministry-mindset and attitude so that a new mission mindset might be cultivated. It starts with us as pastors and the mindset that we carry, the way that we speak, and the way that we value and are invested in the mission of the gospel in whatever place God has planted us. Dear brothers, as we share the gospel with our people and our communities, know and believe that the good news of salvation is needed every bit as much here as it is in the city. Know and believe that this gospel has just as much power here in rural America as it does in urban and suburban areas.

¹⁴ Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall, *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2013 page 27-29

Getting rid of this maintenance-ministry-mindset might take some time. It is difficult work to dig up and overturn such a culture or attitude anywhere. There might be more than a few times when we run into the heavy, stony obstacles of time and tradition, negativity and pessimism; but like planting a field or a garden, that old hardened topsoil has to be tilled up so that life and growth can be cultivated. Let's plow up that maintenance ministry mindset approach and attitude and turn up some fresh soil so that we may start cultivating a mission field right here in rural America.

Cultivating the Mission Mindset

Now that we have recognized a need to ground up the maintenance ministry attitude, how do we move ahead to get to that point of cultivating the mission mindset? As I was deliberating my last call, just a few weeks ago, a member took the time to express her appreciation for my years of service and encouraged me to stay. The way that this particular member phrased her plea really grabbed my attention. She told me that she thought that I should stay because I was "vital to the mission in our area."¹⁵ Her view of our local ministry was mission work. It wasn't simply maintenance ministry but she recognized – and now verbalized – that along with serving the members of our congregations we were engaging in important mission work in our own backyard. To their credit more than a few people in our congregations have used that same type of terminology when talking about our ministry together. They consider it mission work. Our mindset has become mission rather than maintenance. But how exactly, did we get to that point?

Such a mission mindset does not just appear overnight. When I first arrived in Danube, in 2007, my wife and I of course noticed that this wasn't Milwaukee anymore; but that didn't stop our members from letting us know how small the town had become. Often in those early days we would hear the stories of the glory days: a full choir, a bustling Sunday School, and an active young people's society - among other things. These trips down memory lane were usually paired with a nostalgic sigh, followed by the words, "But pastor, nobody is living here anymore." The idea that there is "nobody" living in these areas anymore isn't really true; even though this was a common consensus expressed as members enjoyed their coffee at the local diner or voiced their concern for their beloved congregation in the back of church.

Identify the Mission Field

One of the first steps to cultivating a mission mindset is to simply identify the mission field. To tackle the assumption that there is "nobody" living here anymore, one needs to find different ways to assure your people that this is not the case. During a recent planning session we looked at our local population in the Renville county area and it was reported that a recent census indicated a 3.6% decline over the last few years. Even though it was a drop, it was not as drastic as other places. If the population has dropped more considerably in your town, help your members see beyond their town and extend their vision. Where are the people? How can we serve them? Can we team up with another congregation through some form of joint ministry to share the word of God with more people? Simply putting these options and this information in front of your people can be very helpful in starting the conversation to generate new ideas for outreach and evangelism. Help them identify the mission field.

Census information and analyzed demographics of the area are not just useful for that urban mission congregation trying to decide where to build their brand new campus, but they can also be useful in our rural settings as we try to reach out to a changing community. This can be one blade in the plow that will help you turn over the old mindset as you cultivate a new mission mindset within your congregation. That little bit of census information can help dispel a good chunk of the misinformation and exaggeration that has been shared over coffee or blown out of proportion in the minds of your members.

¹⁵ A member from St. Matthew's Flora Twp shared this encouragement with me over the phone.

A member from St. Matthew's in Danube made the remark that, "Small congregations need good pastors too."

During our research for our early childhood learning center, we gathered some numbers with the help of the local school district and saw firsthand how the population drop has started to level off in our area and more young families are sticking around. The numbers that we uncovered were encouraging and even eye opening to the members of our congregation. Not everyone is leaving. No, it is not the 40's and 50's anymore, but it isn't exactly the 80's and 90's either. The farming community has forever been changed by the farm crisis of the 80's, but the industry has, for the most part, rebounded and stabilized. Recent improvements in technology and internet service¹⁶ to rural areas in the last ten years have helped small businesses and have helped make rural living a more viable and attractive option. The mad dash to the cities in the 80's and 90's has slowed to the point that population losses in rural areas like ours have finally started to level off. This may not be true everywhere, but you owe it to yourself and your congregation to at least do the research. As the old saying goes, "knowing is half the battle."

Being properly informed about the area should not be overlooked; it is only a matter of taking the time to look for such indicators and share them with our people. Looking up actual population and census numbers can be a useful thing, while other pieces of community information can just sort of fall into your lap if you pay close enough attention. Recently, a member was visibly encouraged when he shared with me a recent community survey that was taken. A new skating rink was proposed in Danube and the citywide survey reported that there were 60 children of skating age living in our town of 500. A growing demographic was identified and that was a boost to civic morale and evangelism fervor.

We need to find ways to uncover, share, and discuss these types of reports, results and facts with our people. It can be eye-opening. A simple bar graph thrown up on a PowerPoint after church, an actual percentage, or some real numbers shared in the newsletter, council meeting, or with your evangelism team can be an encouraging and even exciting impetus to break through that old mentality so that we might cultivate a mission mindset.

This got me thinking about where the rather popular view of "nobody is living in this area anymore" really comes from. After much thought and careful observation I concluded that this idea was couched in at least three different issues with which our members were struggling:

1. Many of the friends and families that they knew and loved when they were young have moved on or are no longer with us.
2. Those that have moved into our communities and who are now living in "The Heinemann house" or on the old "Butenhoff farm site" are no longer your traditional farm families who have been trained since they were 'knee high' to come to church.
3. Our members witnessed such a stretch of significant change that it is simply difficult for them to grasp what has actually taken place.

Extending our Vision to Help Cultivate the Mission

As pastors, and leaders, within our church, we need to uncover and communicate what the realities are in our rural community and then set a clear vision of how we can serve our community in its present state. We then need to extend our vision in order to help cultivate the mission. We need to look over the obstacles to see the opportunities. As long as the population is not zero there are still people to serve. It is not nearly the same kind of numbers that we once held in our region during the "golden age;" nevertheless there are still plenty of people here who need the gospel. The people living here are not all from those original families that grew up with our members. Those around town may not be your standard young married church-going farm families, the likes of which our rural population enjoyed back in the 40's. Instead, the residents of our little towns are becoming more diverse in race, social, economic, employment,

¹⁶ A well kept website or a Facebook page can be an effective outreach tool in rural areas. If you do not have one with the gifts or time to maintain the website put together a few pages that have general information that can serve as a digital business card. Our learning center's Facebook page has been instrumental in getting the word out about our center. I am not sure a Twitter account is absolutely necessary, but email and text messaging at the very least should be something that the rural pastor should be able to do. More and more of our members and our prospects prefer to communicate by texting.

and marital status. In short, the community is changing and we need to help the members of our congregations see that. Then we would also do well to equip them with how best to deal with and approach such changes and challenges.

Our members should certainly still reach out to their friends, relatives, and neighbors,¹⁷ but many of those neighbors and friends have ties to the other churches in the area. Instead of simply reaching out to the same farmers and beet plant workers that your members have been working on for years to visit our church, we should extend our vision. By all means, continue to encourage your members to reach out to those in their friend, relative, and neighbor circles, but let's start looking outside of those circles. Our Lord Jesus in Luke chapter fourteen responded to those who rejected his gracious invitation by telling his servants to *"Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full."*¹⁸ The farmer with 300 acres of land, who has lived next to you for years and whose great grandparents started the Methodist church, may have plenty of excuses not to come to your church, but there are still others to whom you can reach out to with the gospel. God wants us to extend his call to those in the city and on the farm, and he wants us to invite and call in those from the tar roads and the gravel roads, from the highways and the byways and even the country lanes, so that His house will be full. Jail ministries and finding other ways to reach out to those who are underserved and overlooked in our communities can play a vital role in today's rural church, and it is what our Lord has always urged us to do.

In my research for this paper, I sent out a short survey to a number of WELS pastors who have experience in rural areas. A common response about the challenges in the rural ministry had to do with the fact that most community members over the age of 40 have belonged to the family church their entire lives. I suppose you could label this, 'the homestead dynamic.' *Great Grandpa and Grandma Johnson helped start this church, so this is where I belong even though I don't go often or agree with what the church teaches all the time. This is the only church in town and as a pillar of the community this is where I need to be.* That's the thinking of many people in our tight-knit rural communities. The other common challenge that was sighted was the lack of interest in young people age 40 or below. Here is an answer from a survey that weaves both challenges together.

"In our communities many people 40 years and older have churches they have belonged to their entire lives. Those under 40 years old seem uninterested in church and the gospel message."¹⁹

As a Christian friend and neighbor who loves God's Word of truth, you can still share the love of Jesus and the good news of our Savior with Mabel who has been going to the Methodist church all her life and has her funeral plot picked out and paid for, complete with a headstone that is just waiting for her final dates. Although you may not be able to turn Mabel into a member through your regular sharing of the gospel, Mabel might feel comfortable enough tell you to go visit her grand-niece who has just been thrown out of her live-in boyfriend's house because he was tired of her - even though they have a child together. Don't make yourself so busy with maintenance ministry that you miss out on opportunities like this. Don't make your people so focused on grand evangelism programs that they miss out on the little opportunities like this that may spring up within our rural communities.

In our rural areas we often have churches dotting the landscape, yet somehow there is still an overall lack of basic biblical knowledge and connection to Christ because the need for spiritual care and a proper relationship with God often goes overlooked. This is especially the case for younger generations. *After all, who needs church, who needs a Savior, when you are a young person who is doing just fine, being a pretty*

¹⁷ Survey Answers: Pastor Nicolas Schmoller, Lamb of God Lutheran Church, West Lafayette, IN.

The FRAN or FRANK (friends, relatives, neighbors, and kids) form of evangelism continues to be the most effective way to do outreach and evangelism in any setting: rural, urban, or suburban.

¹⁸ Luke 14:23

¹⁹ Survey Answers: Pastor Steve Kruschel, Grace Ev. Lutheran Church, Geneva, NE & Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Grafton, NE

good person and just living life? That is, of course, a generalization and oversimplification of the complexities of spiritual apathy in a whole generation of people, but there are enough examples that give the following statement a credibility that cannot be overlooked. The perceived need for church and a stronger relationship with God often only dawns on a young person after the experience of unfortunate circumstances.

A number of prospects under the age 40 have been unearthed in our area, only after hitting a low point in their life. While interested in pursuing things spiritual, such lost souls are often afraid, overwhelmed, and frankly don't know where to look or where to start. This is a mission field that may be neglected or rejected by rural congregations who have not cultivated a mission mindset. Instead of treating such hurting young people coldly or harshly as some small towns and small town congregations do, let's treat them as precious souls that we can lead to the healing salve of the gospel! Let's do our best to create and cultivate a culture of reaching out to those who are lost!

God has blessed St. Matthew's in Danube with a growing opportunity to reach out in such a way. Here are a few of my most recent stories:

Lynn got thrown out of her live-in boyfriend's house and was looking for a fresh start. She came into contact with us through our Little Lambs Learning Center and Lynn and her daughter became regular fixtures in worship and information class. Since then she has had her ups and mostly downs and has not been to church in some time. Her case is an important reminder to my ministry that it is not just about reaching out and quickly adding numbers, but it is about connecting with and continuing to care for a soul. Through the center we are able to keep in contact with Lynn and we occasionally talk about getting back on track with church attendance and Bible Information Classes, but patience is key.

Candi was in jail, having been blamed for a crime that she could not remember doing or not doing because she was so high on meth. Hungry for renewal and strength, she received God's Word willingly as she welcomed my visits and the visits of a fellow pastor, even though we had to communicate by means of a phone on a cord connected to a video screen or in the awkward surroundings of a small cell with a glass partition. When she was finally released, she was excited to be in worship and to start Bible Information Class with her grandma's pastor.

Todd was in jail, but as he attended the weekly Bible class I conducted in the Renville County Jail, I was able to watch his excitement for God's Word grow and grow. His interest was not something that was unique to him - as many of the inmates I deal with at the time seem very much committed to God's Word - but for all too many it seems that they are like that seed on rocky soil. When they get out of jail, their faith, which has sprung up so quickly, is easily scorched and shrivels up in the heat and pressure of everyday life.²⁰ Todd was a happy exception in whom I was blessed to see the positive results of labor well spent. He had appreciated the word shared with him in the jail and was compelled enough to follow up. Struggling with the thought of being judged by the members of his old church, he made a visit to our church. He remembered the connection we made in the jail and felt comfortable enough to make the uncomfortable visit to a new church in the town where he had grown up. He sat in the back row with his wife and child, and even though he had thoughts of sneaking out the back of church during dismissal, he stayed to shake my hand. I

²⁰ Matthew 13:20-21

followed up with them the next evening, to find out that his wife was just as interested as he was. She excitedly asked questions that ranged from where she should start reading in the Bible to what were the main differences between this Lutheran church and that Lutheran church. Reeling from the consequences of her husband's poor choices, she talked about a spiritual awakening of sorts. She now had a desire to pray more and to learn more about God so that she could help others, just like a particular Christian friend had helped her.

The number of good solid farm families that regularly walk through the doors to fill our church pews and Sunday school programs is not what it used to be. Our congregations still boast a good number of faithful Christian people for us to serve and serve alongside, and we thank God for continuing to bless rural congregations with such families. However, we need to recognize that we must not only extend the invitation to hear the gospel to those that appear to be healthy, but also to the sick.²¹ We not only need to be willing to go up to our neighbor's well-kept farm house, but we also ought to be willing to go out to the streets and the alleyways, to the byways and country lanes, because our master insists that his banquet hall is to be filled. Rural America has often been painted into our minds with the soft pleasant colors of down-to-earth family values and a hard day's work, but it seems the problem of the sinful nature is not cured by the smell of fresh manure. Sin affects us all, no matter our zip code, or what the little green sign on the outskirts of town says the population is. It doesn't matter much if it is in the city or out in the country, mission work anywhere can be messy. There are people who are hurting and who are spiritually lost in both the city and the county. A pastor who participates in jail ministries or visits with hurting souls in the community, especially in a small town setting, will help create and foster a compassionate attitude within the entire congregation.

When those relationships are made and prospects who are invited come, the members of our congregation should be trained to be welcoming. This is something that can be handled in your sermons or Bible studies, a series of bulletin inserts,²² or even a one day seminar. It is an important factor that should not be overlooked. When we lead our people to understand that our mission is to not only care for our members and keep the doors open, but to reach out to the lost and hurting of our community, they will, with God's help, be more kind and welcoming, patient and understanding, compassionate and helpful, even when our visitors act like - well - visitors.

Reaching out also means building up the body of believers within your current church family. Help your people see how gracious God has been to them and how he can use them to be a part of the mission of reaching out to the community. Getting your congregation involved in Bible Study is an important step.²³ How can we expect to go out and share the message if that message doesn't weekly and daily change and transform our lives? Strive toward leading your flock to spiritual maturity, model compassion for the lost and the straying in your community, and with God's help your congregation may slowly move from an attitude that is focused on keeping the doors open to a mission mindset to where the members of your congregation are looking out your church doors and realizing that a mission field lies right outside.²⁴

²¹ Luke 5:31

²² The Commission on Congregational Counseling developed a series of bulletin inserts for a Christmas outreach effort entitled C13. The rest of the materials for Christmas and Easter outreach are under the CCC link at connect.wels.net. Appendix A

²³ Due to the dual parish arrangement we did not have a consistent Bible Study on Sunday mornings when I arrived. One of the first changes we made was to change our worship schedule so that we could include a 20 minute Bible study in between the services. This consistent Bible Study, no matter how short, has been a great blessing to our members.

²⁴ This can be a useful PowerPoint sermon idea for a mission or evangelism focus. Take a picture looking from the inside of your church out the open doors and describe how there is a mission field waiting right outside. There also has to be at least a few churches out there that have words over the door that says, "Your mission field starts here". Both ideas can serve as good reminders and encouragements for your people.

Planting the seed

Now that we have broken up the maintenance ministry attitude and have cultivated a mission mindset, how exactly do we reach out? How do we plant those gospel seeds in the community? What are some of the most important things that we need to discuss and implement? Well, let's start with everything. We need to see that every aspect of our life and our ministry is an outreach tool. One of the greatest advantages and disadvantages of rural ministry is the fishbowl effect. Even if you don't know everybody, as the pastor in a small town, most people know you. Let's turn that into a positive. The way that you live your life and let your light shine in the community is noticed more readily in a rural setting than in the city. Live your life so that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.²⁵ At the very least let us live our lives and run our homes in a way that is pleasing to God so that we give the small town gossips nothing blatant to criticize and thus malign our ministry or the very word of God. Let's make the gospel attractive by the way we conduct ourselves out in our small towns. Let's find ways to be involved and engaged. Be hospitable. Invite neighbors over for a cookout from time to time. Take a member out to eat at the local diner. Skip the Netflix marathon on Friday night and go out to the local high school football game. Go see your catechism student's display in the school science fair. Go to the smelt fry even if you have no idea what smelt is. Coach, referee, or play in pickup basketball or hockey games. Be on a town baseball, softball or kickball team. Volunteer and help at certain community events and festivals. Help your wife clean the parsonage so that she can host a play date, a candle party, or book club meeting. Let's live productive lives. Let's do a whole bunch of little things and a few big things to make a positive impact in our community. Let's figure out ways to make a difference in our community, and let's pass down and teach that same attitude to the members of our congregations.²⁶ Let's devote ourselves to doing what is good, and be motivated not by filling the pews, but let's be motivated by the love that God has shown to us. All this is excellent and profitable for everyone,²⁷ and it begins in the home and in our daily lives.

I am becoming more and more convinced that leadership in the rural church has little to do with what happens on the stage {or in the pulpit} and everything to do with what happens on the stage of life in the public arena, because in rural America, there really is very little that's private. Everybody knows your wife, everybody knows your kids.... and everybody knows your marriage. That's why I'm convinced that leadership must begin in the home. My life, my wife, and my marriage have got to be red hot, because a red-hot marriage and a functional family is the most powerful evangelistic tool in rural America. I know that sounds like an exaggeration, but I really believe it. More important than the building, {large outreach efforts}, or the Christmas cantata it is what's happening in the home, because everyone sees it and it speaks volumes about the gospel.²⁸

Whether married or unmarried it is sound advice for a small town pastor to watch his personal life closely so that his life reflects the love of Christ.²⁹ A good reputation within the community is a key component to our ministry as we seek to make inroads to share the gospel. It starts with the home life and

²⁵ Matthew 5:13

²⁶ Survey Answers: Pastor John Bortulin previously served at St. Paul's Ev Lutheran Church, Plymouth NE. John noted the importance of teaching the doctrine of vocation to our members.

My Vocation in Christ by Professor Ken Cherney is an excellent bible study on the doctrine of vocation.

²⁷ Several different references from the book of Titus... I recently taught a Bible class on the book of Titus. I highly recommend reviewing that pastoral epistle for yourself and placing its many wonderful gospel and practical sanctification gems before them.

²⁸ Shannon O'Dell, "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals", New Leaf Press, 2010.

Once again, O'Dell's book, while short on actual statistics or good theology is at the very least an entertaining read.

²⁹ Pastor David Horton you are missed today, but not forgotten.

your daily interaction with your community. It continues with the way that we carry out our actual public ministry, which of course, is of the utmost importance in sharing the good news of Jesus. From Sunday morning worship to shut-in care, from weddings to funerals, to things that are specifically labeled outreach programs, these are *all* tools of outreach and should be viewed as such, especially in a small town, rural setting.

Funerals are a means of outreach. To someone who has never served in a rural setting this might sound strange; to those that have, this is common knowledge. In a small town like mine, the church building has been filled most often for funerals. Even more than Easter or Christmas the funeral is where the small town pastor has the ability to preach the gospel to the largest gathering of souls on a consistent basis. While funerals in an urban setting tend to be more of a private family affair, the funeral in a rural setting is often a community event. Friends and relatives, neighbors and acquaintances, high school classmates, work friends, care staff, the guy who processed this man's venison and others are regularly compelled to drop what they are doing and come to the funeral. It is not a rare thing in our congregation, which averages an attendance of about 55 on a Sunday, to have 150 to 250 people cram into our building for a funeral. This presents the rural pastor with an opportunity to do outreach and evangelism in a way that is unique to the rural setting. A well-conducted service with a well-crafted message can leave a very good impression on quite a few people throughout the community. Respect and gratitude and appreciation for the pastor and for his church are built; and the best part is that this small town pastor gets to share the powerful saving message of the gospel. *The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*³⁰ The small town pastor gets to share this good news with people who have not been in church for years. Jesus has paid for your sins and mine and he gives His children the gift of faith and the comfort of eternal life. Funerals are a means of gospel outreach.

Weddings can be a little trickier. Fellowship and discipline issues need to be handled delicately. *So you want your Methodist cousin to sing and your sister to do the readings. Oh, and you are living together. Ugh.* While nerve-wracking and at times patience-straining, such conversations can also serve as an opportunity to dispel false perceptions of our church body and educate young people about why we do what we do in the WELS.³¹ Sin and grace are to be carefully applied. Classes are taught and the couple sees from the Bible how God wants us to honor marriage. Patient rebuke and consistent instruction is needed. This is time-consuming and stressful work, but it is mission work with precious souls from an important age group in rural ministry. Funerals may be a place where we engage with the elder statesmen of our communities (and a few younger relatives) but weddings can be a place where a large group of young adults from our community can hear the good news about Christ's love for all of us. Weddings in small towns, therefore, should not be overlooked in their importance as an outreach tool. Sharing in a joyous event while sharing the good news of Christ can form an unforgettable bond between both the pastor and his members. When handled carefully and done well, weddings may also serve to build the reputation of the congregation within the community as a church that has a caring family atmosphere.

This aspect of community engagement through funerals and weddings is distinctive to rural ministry. My father, Pastor Harlyn Kuschel, who served St. John's St. James in rural Reedsville, WI, referenced this aspect of rural ministry with great fondness in a sermon that was delivered this past Saints Triumphant Sunday.

Over four decades ago I began my ministry in a relatively small village in northern Wisconsin. The village had a distinctively rural flavor; and the congregation included a significant number of working farmers. It was admittedly a simpler time, and my wife and I were young. But today we would tell you, without much hesitation, that the years we spent in that village and with the members of that congregation were some of the happiest years of our

³⁰ Romans 6:23

³¹ Weddings can be seen as both an opportunity and a tremendous challenge as some young people would prefer to go to another church and avoid ours so that they can live together before there are married.

lives. Because the village was small and many of the congregation's members were related, people knew each other, and they cared about each other. A funeral marked a community loss. And joyous events were cause for community celebration. Perhaps the most memorable of the joyous events were wedding celebrations. Our church was often filled to capacity for a wedding service. And the bride's parents, as was customary back then, spared no expense to make the day memorable and happy for the bridal couple and the invited guests. A large hall was rented for the wedding dinner. The guest list included relatives, neighbors, friends, and often even casual acquaintances, sometimes numbering several hundred or more. A sumptuous meal was served. After all these years I can still almost taste the broasted chicken, the ham and the beef tips; the mashed potatoes, the vegetables, and the salads. And then there were the desserts, some of them specialty items indigenous to that part of the country; topped off by a generous slice of what had to be a huge wedding cake. And though I never became a real fan of the polka, it was fun to watch people we knew and loved enjoying themselves and, for a few hours at least, forgetting the troubles and the burdens they would all have to deal with again the next day and the days that followed.³²

Let's not forget that many of our young people do not settle down and marry another WELS Christian. Therefore a wedding can also serve as opportunity to teach, instruct, and share the gospel with both member and non-member. Rather than just going through the motions of pre-marriage counseling, let's see this as an opportunity for mission work. Discuss the importance of faith as your catechism students begin to have their first thoughts about dating- continue the discussion as those students get older, and keep in contact with young people as they pursue relationships and as they consider marriage. Encourage parents of these young people to encourage their children in the faith. Over the past few years, I have been able to take a handful of young people looking to get married through instruction class.³³ I have also encouraged my members to attend these classes with his or her future spouse. On several occasions it has been a great joy to see how my member has been encouraged in the faith, to share the gospel with the future spouse, and to watch these two young people grow in the faith together. It has also been a great blessing to have received several new members into our congregation through such instruction.

Pursing excellence in performing funerals, weddings, and pre-marriage instruction may be areas that we quickly identify as being important aspects of reaching out in rural communities, but excellence in other areas of ministry does not go unnoticed in small communities either. Care for shut-ins and those in the nursing home is a place where a good reputation can be won or lost. Family members notice and appreciate the pastor who is faithful in his calling to care for those who are shut-in or in nursing homes. Staff members at local hospitals, group homes, assisted living centers, or nursing homes, notice pastors who are there and who care. We must also be aware that the flipside of this is true as well. If this is an area of ministry that is neglected, people notice that too; and an area that could serve to build up your reputation in the community could end up leaving a stain that could be very difficult to remove.

Pursing excellence within our ministry will certainly also include Sunday morning worship and bible study. As we look to reach out let us not overlook these essential aspects of our ministry. A faithfully prepared bible study, a carefully thought out sermon, a considerate conducting of the liturgy, and a well executed variety in worship are all factors that can serve in your outreach efforts. Members will be built up in their faith and more willing to invite others to worship, visitors will be given a good first impression, and we will honor God with our best. Members can pitch in for this pursuit of excellence as well. Taking good

³² Rev. Harlyn Kuschel, *Triumphant Saints at the Wedding Supper of the Lamb*, Sermon for Saints Triumphant, Nov 16, 2014, Revelation 19:1-9

³³ I thank God for the faith that our members have carefully shared and instilled in their children so that several of our young members have recently made their faith an important part of looking for and marrying a spouse.

care of a building so that come Sunday morning the building is both pleasant in its appearance and aroma³⁴, making sure the grass is cut, the parking lot and sidewalks clear, are all things that we do out of service to God and to our neighbor.

Knowing the land

Our Lord used imagery from agriculture generously in the Scriptures. In his many references to agriculture he includes pictures of sowing seeds, harvesting grain, and planting and caring for vineyards, along with many other illustrations³⁵. It is the picture of a vineyard that might best shape our thoughts as we consider particular strategies of reaching out into our specific communities. Grapes have a reputation of being a bit more particular than corn or wheat or barley. To know where and how to plant a quality vineyard takes careful planning. You have to know the land. You have to know the soil. And even when you pay attention to these things, plans may fail³⁶ or plans may be blessed. I believe the same goes for outreach efforts. Being active in the community and faithfully carrying out the office of your pastoral ministry will help develop a better feel for the land so that you can reach out in particular ways that are going to benefit the people of your particular area.

Is a soccer camp going to work in every area? For us, it has. My wife and I both have gifts in this area and we have been able to find youth from our local congregations and volunteers from other outside sources to help us put on a quality camp.³⁷ Although our community is not really a soccer community, there were enough kids in our area to make this work. The obstacle of not being a soccer community turned out to be a blessing because there was nothing else like it in our area. Soccer in and of itself wasn't a huge draw, but we had people to hold a quality camp, and we were told that parents were very interested in getting their kids outside and involved in something during the summer. So we went ahead and started a Soccer Camp and the Lord has blessed it. About 60 children came to the first camp, and as we continue to give that ministry attention and tweak things here and there, promote it and improve it, last year the Lord blessed our camp with 94 kids. Not too bad in a town of 500. Praise and thanks be to God! We, of course, have drawn in kids not just from Danube but nearby towns and throughout the county. What we were told has turned out to be true. If there is something worthwhile for kids in our area parents will be more than willing to drive 5-15 miles to get their kids involved. Our camp has become such a fixture in our community that grandparents in our congregations and community now even plan a week where their grandkids can come from out of town and out of state to come to our camp. Know the land. Know your communities. Know your members. Use the gifts that God has given you. And you will find ways to sow the seed and plant the precious gospel in the hearts and minds of those around you.

Is a traditional VBS still the way to go? For us, it isn't. Our first year in Danube, the traditional vacation bible school program was on its last legs. Our congregation didn't have much of a Sunday school program at the time. Our congregation's reputation with the community was improving, but it still wasn't anything special. My wife and I hadn't had much contact with the community yet, and we didn't even really have time to advertize the event that well. However, we still held vacation bible school, because that's what the congregation always did. While other area churches were known for their large vacation bible schools where all the members of the churches in town came together, we were relying on just the members of our

³⁴ Shannon O'Dell, "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals", New Leaf Press, 2010

O'Dell makes reference to this more than a few times. It is not something that I have experienced as a problem in any particular church that I have walked into, but I suppose that if our church smelled musty or unpleasant it would be a huge deterrent to a visitor.

³⁵ Malachi 4:2 This is an agricultural reference that is one of my favorites. Leaping like well-fed calves released from a pen and let out to pasture. What a wonderful picture of heavenly joy that has a distinctively rural flavor!

³⁶ Isaiah 5:4

³⁷ I like to say that Danube is not in the middle of nowhere, but is in the middle of a lot of 'somewheres'. We are about a two hour drive from St. Croix Lutheran High School and Great Plains Lutheran High School, and about an hour and fifteen minutes from Martin Luther College. We have had students from all three schools help out at our soccer camp in the past. This year we have invited students from Bethany Lutheran College to come as well. Sometimes it can be very beneficial to think bigger, to extend our vision, to utilize the additional resources around us. Not only has this yearly invitation blessed our camp with good volunteers, but this partnership has created a blessed interaction between our members and students from our college of ministry and Lutheran high schools.

congregation and anyone in town who happened to see the sign in the post office. In the end, we had more staff than children. The weeklong program lasted only a day and so the traditional VBS got cut and it is yet to return. Instead, we have focused on soccer camp and after a few years of successful soccer camps we felt we had built enough credibility within the congregation that we felt we could try one day events in Easter for Kids and Christmas for Kids programs. That plan has worked and now we annually host 20 children and we get to teach them about their Savior who died and rose again to take away their sins and give them the gift of eternal life. Even through failure, a lesson was learned. Know the area. Know your strengths. Know your weaknesses. Learn from your mistakes. Plan accordingly and pray.

Is an early childhood center going to work in every area? For us, it has already been a great blessing. Childcare is not only in short supply out by us, but it has become a concern throughout rural America.³⁸ After our second child, my wife and I were struggling to find childcare when we needed it and we had talked to a few parents in the area that were having the same problem. At that time the public school in our area only offered part time preschool. Seeing a need an idea that had been bouncing around in the mind of a local pastor for years was then dug up and revisited. The three local WELS pastors that were serving four rural congregations in the area got together and thought about the possibilities. Could we supply a needed service to the community, build relationships with the young families of our community, and share the gospel on a daily basis?

We were energized by the idea and so we started looking around at our situation. We saw the need but we also noticed the gifts with which the Lord had blessed us. Through the soccer camp we had built a strong reputation in the community for youth ministry and care. The two congregations that I serve had just received generous memorials. We saw that there were four young women with experience and interest in working in childcare and education in our area WELS congregations; they could serve as a good portion of the staff. And then, when we were able to find space in the Danube school (which had not been used as the local public school for about ten years) we officially took that old idea, dusted it off and ran with it. We knew it would be nearly impossible for one or two congregations to support such a big project, but maybe four congregations could. Our four congregations along Hwy 212 had enjoyed a good working relationship for nearly the last fifteen years with multiple joint ministry efforts, and so with both caution and excitement we approached this outreach opportunity. With the help of a committee made up of members of the four area congregations, we looked at the feasibility of such a plan. We started compiling information from the area and when it was clear that this could be a reality, we thanked God that he had placed this opportunity before us and we presented our vision. The Lord has blessed our plans. After calling a few directors from the field for about five months we prayerfully took our request to the assignment committee, and even though there were only a few graduates who were qualified to be directors, the Lord answered our prayer. We were assigned a graduate. Then after much work to obtain a license and prepare the facilities, we opened in the middle of September with 8 children attending on our first day. Currently we have more than 20 children in our care and only a few of those are from families who belong to our local WELS congregations. Just this last week we had an open house that featured our Little Lambs singing songs that they learned at the center and nearly 100 people came. Members of the congregation and community, young and old, mingled and talked and the listened and watched as the children sang songs of praise about their God and Savior. God has blessed our plans which have proved to be fruitful within the framework of our community. A lot of things didn't just fall into place by chance, but we know and believe that God heard our prayers and blessed our plans; and for that we praise him and serve him thankfully.

By sharing with you some of our experiences I hope to make a few things clear. Mission work and outreach can happen even in a small town like ours. But our situation is, of course, not your situation. You might have members who just 'get after' VBS, and they put on a wonderful event. There is no need to scrap a healthy VBS to do a soccer camp because that's the new thing. Keep the VBS going and look on how to improve and grow that ministry, and if you have the personnel or ability to do a soccer camp too, great!³⁹

³⁸ Adam Belz, *Day-care squeeze hits rural families*, Star Tribune; August 26, 2014: Appendix B

³⁹ St. Peter's in St. Peter has both a strong VBS and a growing soccer camp.

Let's say you may have no skill or experience in the game of soccer, but you know drama and so your congregation starts a drama camp.⁴⁰ Know your gifts and recognize what you and your congregation can offer to the community. You have learned that your community has a strong interest in music and even though you have not been personally blessed with such abilities you come up with a plan to serve your community by bringing in students from MLC to teach summer music lessons at your church or school.⁴¹ Pastor Rick Tuttle holds a bible class in the common dining room of an assisted living facility and a class that is held in Bartz's Diner on Main Street in Renville.⁴² Pastor Steve Tews, upon arriving in Balaton, simply went from door to door and hung door hangers to introduce himself to the community.⁴³ Know your strengths, understand your resources, extend your vision, but don't underestimate the benefit of operating in the small town vacuum. Soccer wasn't a huge part of our community, but at least a part of the reason that our camp works so well is due to the fact that we are the only "show in town". Both Zion in Morton and St. John in Redwood Falls had great success this past year when they each held their own "Trunk or Treat" event.⁴⁴ This was something that they identified as unique to their area and beneficial for their communities.

These are just a few ideas that are out there. There are plenty more to be shared and found,⁴⁵ and there will be plenty more that will be dreamed up. I think we all realize that there is no silver bullet or the perfect outreach program for every congregation. Instead, mission work and outreach, especially in a rural setting, is about understanding your mission field. Identify the mission field. Get to know the local soil. Know your area. Get out among the people and discover ways that you can help the people in these small communities. Get creative and try new things. Above all, do something.

Do a few small things and you will be amazed at how quickly you can begin to foster an active mission mindset within your congregations. Small towns throughout rural American have summer festivals and parades. This can be a good place to start. Put together a float. Have the church sponsor a food stand and have information about your church and your outreach programs available and on display. Christmas postcards and radio advertisements for Easter services were once looked at as something that was unnecessary in our small town and in our small congregations. Now they have become part of annual outreach strategy that our members take great pride in. "Those postcards were very well done!"⁴⁶ The attitude has slowly changed from "nobody is living out here" to we have the gospel and we want to share it with whomever we can. We have gone from a mentality that we must protect and guard what we have⁴⁷ to an understanding that we can reach out with the gospel and we have a mission in our community and beyond.

Outreach efforts not only provide a means to reach out into the community, but such efforts can also serve as proverbial shots in the arm that reenergize the body of Christ. Radio ads are an expensive type of advertizing, but a benefit of living in a small town is that local radio stations and newspapers may offer discounted rates at Easter and Christmas (Look into it if you haven't already). The ad we ran for Easter last year didn't bring in any new families, but I realized that it was an investment that was not all for naught when a member who is in her 20s suddenly texted me, saying, "I heard my pastor on the radio! =)".

⁴⁰ Pastor Seth Bode serves Apostles Lutheran Church in Dardeene Prairie, MO contact him more about drama camp.

⁴¹ Pastor Mike Berg serves St. John's in Wood Lake, Pastor Keith Schreiner serves Christ in Marshall, MN ask them about their music camp.

⁴² Having the same kind of discussion that we would have in classrooms and fellowship halls in our churches and then moving them out in public places not only puts our message out where people can see it, but it encourages and teaches our members to express and share their faith outside of the church building.

⁴³ Pastor Tews' epic door hanger is included in the appendix of this paper: Appendix E

⁴⁴ Trunk or Treat involves decorating cars and lining them up in a parking lot so that children can go trick or treating from trunk to trunk instead of house to house. Apple cider and other refreshments can be held in the church. Information about your congregation can be shared through handouts and conversations with parents. Pastor Horton was able to report that 6 children were baptized at Zion in Morton recently thanks in part to this Trunk or Treat outreach.

⁴⁵ Schools of Outreach are a tremendous source for such ideas, or ask your brothers in the ministry about ideas they used or heard of.

⁴⁶ www.outreach.com will not only print you custom postcards, but they will mail them to the postal codes of your choosing. Small town pastors, with part time or zero secretary help, rejoice! We will send out about 500 postcards at Easter and the cost is less than \$400.

⁴⁷ Your members might have a few stories of the pastor of their youth drilling into them that ideal of protection rather than reaching out. A member told me recently about how her pastor wouldn't let her friend bring her boyfriend on the Young People's Society hayride because he wasn't a member of a WELS church.

Our efforts will be more than mere postcards and programs, one week camps and single day events, but they serve to promote our overall ministry. There are a good number of community events held by churches that quickly fill up the calendar in rural America, but often there's no effort to follow up and make a connection to God's Word. The Methodist Ice Cream Social is a big hit and serves as a good fundraiser. The Catholic Church Ham Dinner usually brings out a big crowd and helps meet the budget. However, as we implement outreach strategies and consider how we can help our communities, we should always remember that we are more than another place promoting mere social activity. Our purpose is to be group of believers who is active in offering the members of our community rest for their souls. We have more than soccer instruction, ham dinners, and ice cream socials. We have the message of salvation in Christ Jesus to share with them. We are interested in more than serving up a tasty meal or meeting church budgets. We have the bread of life and eternal riches to offer those in our community. We have a solid foundation for life. We have the means of grace. We exist to preach and teach the powerful word of God. Our goal is something that is far greater than to simply compete with or outlast the Methodists so that we can keep our doors open longer than the other church in town. Because of this we must prayerfully consider and identify how we can, with God's help, sustain and support, extend and expand, our mission to rural America because the people of rural communities will always need congregations that proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.⁴⁸

Use your personal gifts, utilize the resources and talents of your members, team up with those within our greater fellowship, and don't be afraid to take some big swings. We have this mighty God who has made and controls all things, but sometimes we act with such a little faith.

Too often rural churches have the attitude that since we don't have tons of resources, nothing can change. But let me tell you it's not what we have but who we have.

I'm telling you, God can do it. He's in the business of feeding thousands with a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. He knows how to stop the sun in the sky and give you a couple extra hours to fight. He knows that the widow gave more with her mite than all the other big-time donors gave through their endowments. My friends, we simply have to get thinking outside the box or we're going to get so claustrophobic and so self-focused that we shrivel up and die no matter what.⁴⁹

Remember that our Savior himself tells us this truth, *"I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and it will be done."*⁵⁰ *If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.*⁵⁰

⁴⁸ As a confessional Lutheran church built on solid doctrine we can also be a community voice that has a backbone that other churches lack. In 2012, Pastor Joel Luetke, Pastor Rick Tuttle, and I conducted a seminar on biblical marriage in the community centers of Olivia, Danube, and Renville. In that same year, and on that same topic, I was compelled to write an editorial for the local paper.

It is included in the appendix: Appendix C

I think it was in 2010 that all three pastors attended a meeting for Islamic understanding and acceptance hosted by the Methodist pastor and his church. At that meeting I was thanked by a number of community members for speaking up and testifying to the truth of God's Holy Word while the pastor of the Methodist church was willing to stand next to the Muslim men that he invited to speak as he gave his approval to the lie that we all really believed in the same God.

⁴⁹ O'Dell, Shannon, "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals", New Leaf Press, 2010

⁵⁰ Matthew 21:22-22

Sustaining the Mission includes Communicating a Clear Vision

We have a powerful God who blesses us in many ways. He not only gives us spiritual blessings but he has blessed us physically. We can trust in him. We know well that our God will daily provide: *clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, and all that I need to keep my body and life.*⁵¹ The Lord gives us all that we need, and even more than we need, so that we can give out of the overflow of his goodness to support the ministry of His church and our local congregations. The Lord provides for us richly and yet we are often filled with more worry than trust. A proper stewardship emphasis in our rural congregations will need to go hand in hand with an increased outreach and evangelism emphasis.

In our rural congregations, with declining church membership and sagging attendance, there may also be certain financial limitations and challenges that stand in the way of pursuing an increase in outreach and evangelism efforts. This is an undeniable part of the landscape of rural ministry. Congregations can find themselves so concerned about maintaining the current ministry and building, that outreach or evangelism is neglected or chopped out of the church budget altogether. This is especially the case if outreach or evangelism is more of an undefined concept rather than a carefully detailed plan of action. For years we had a local outreach fund that saw only a few contributions annually, but since we have started our 212 WELS Soccer Camp and our Little Lambs Learning Center, those specific ministries have been blessed with a remarkable amount of offerings. This demonstrates a tendency that has been proven more than once: people prefer to give to something tangible rather than a concept.⁵² So give them reasons to give. Communicate the mission and lay out a plan of action. Many of our members in rural settings have been blessed with gifts and a heart for giving and all they need is a specific reason to give. Give them reasons to give! Break up that maintenance ministry attitude, cultivate the mission mindset, and then show them how we plan on planting the seed as a congregation. Come up with and plan specific ministries and efforts projects and programs, put them in front of your people and then pray. You will be amazed at what God can do through his people.

As pastors in rural settings, we are aware of the challenges and sensitive to the financial limitations that we might face. But let's not be so timid that we never talk about money. As leaders within God church and with His help let us muster up the courage to preach and teach proper stewardship.⁵³ Let's find joy in teaching and preaching the joy of giving. Let's lay out a plan of encouraging stewardship in a variety of ways. We are not looking to squeeze money out of our current membership in the hopes of gaining a few more members, but we are addressing people who have been blessed by God spiritually and with material means. Find a number of ways to encourage giving out of the overflow of the heart; to share in this mission of reaching out with the eternal blessings of the gospel.

If we are faced with the limitations of an aging congregation, this may again be a place where we would do well to extend our vision. Bring in the local WELS representative for Christian giving every five years or so to help people see their options in the areas of deferred giving and estate planning. As our membership begins to sag this is an opportunity for our current faithful to leave a lasting legacy that will support ministry into the future. There would be no Early Childhood Learning Center in Danube if it was not for generous estate planning. In fact, St. Matthew's Danube and St. Matthew Flora Twp would have likely been among those rural churches that closed their doors if it wasn't for several extremely generous memorials. Those who were givers in life have now passed down a legacy of giving in their death and that has not gone unnoticed, as we have invested a good portion of their gifts into current outreach and evangelism efforts.

⁵¹ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, Explanation to the First Article

Luther reminds us that God has given his people land and cattle and all that we own.

⁵² Giving to synod can be difficult when it is just a concept or ideal, but it becomes easier with tools like the WELS Connection, Forward in Christ, and Together Newsletter which help our members see and grasp the mission and the work that is being done.

⁵³ The recent emphasis on Schools of Stewardship is a definite step in the right direction. Encourage your people to attend. Use the materials yourself and share them with your congregations and church councils.

As we have a desire to reach out, we must also realize that we may be facing some lean years. It may not be a direct application from the text, but I believe that we can glean some important lessons from the account of Joseph and the seven good years followed by the seven lean years.⁵⁴

During the seven years of abundance the land produced plentifully. Joseph collected all the food produced in those seven years of abundance in Egypt and stored it in the cities. In each city he put the food grown in the fields surrounding it. Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure.⁵⁵

During those good years each town was blessed with great abundance and so Joseph stored the grain that was produced in the surrounding fields in storehouses within each city. Each town was blessed. Each storehouse in each of those cities was filled. When the lean years came, the individual blessings of each town was used to help the entire area. Can we in rural America learn from such an example? There was a time that each rural congregation in our area was blessed greatly in attendance and these congregations were subsequently blessed financially. Memorial funds and endowment funds are evidence of such good years. As we look around and see that our rural congregations are enduring some leaner years the question is, can we put aside town pride or our congregational pride, and bring together our blessings in some way that could prove beneficial to a larger area? Our soccer camp would not have been possible without the support of other area congregations. Our early childhood learning center would not have been a reality without the tremendous support of all four congregations along the highway 212 corridor.

Whether we are in challenging times or not, the Lord has called us to be good stewards of the gifts that he has given to us. God has not called us to store up in barns,⁵⁶ or bury our treasures or talents, but he has entrusted these gifts to us so that we may use them.⁵⁷ Does not the Lord encourage us to take what He has given us and use it to make an impact on our communities and share the gospel while we are still able?⁵⁸ I hope that our members would agree that we ought to “make hay while the sun shines”.

It has truly been a blessing to work alongside members who have a clear desire to use the blessings that God has given to them in this way. The members of St. Matthew Flora Twp (which is nearing 143 years of God’s grace) have especially embraced the attitude that they are going to use the gifts that they have to support the mission and ministry throughout our entire area. The members are well aware of their less-than-ideal location and that they might have to close someday soon, but by all accounts this congregation has adopted the attitude that boldly seems to say “if we are going to go out, we are going to go out swinging.” What a blessing it is to serve in such a setting! However, it would be naïve to think that every congregation would be so quick or so willing to embrace such a bold mission mindset. There is much careful instruction and encouragement that must be done in our rural congregations so that others may even consider, let alone approach, a similar attitude.

On a synod level there are other challenges. One in particular, is the reality of worker shortages. A scan of the call list indicates more than a few vacancies. A scan of the list of graduates assigned on call day indicates a growing need to pray for reapers.⁵⁹ If our church leadership continues to follow the very logical “go where the people are” philosophy how will that affect any vacancies or pastoral needs for congregations in rural settings? This may be just another one of the reasons that we need to extend our vision and think creatively as a synod and as those serving in rural settings. Instead of just hanging on until the bitter end, let’s look for different opportunities to more efficiently and more effectively support and carry out ministry.

⁵⁴ Pastor Mike Kuschei, *7 Good Years*, Devotion, October 2014: Appendix D

⁵⁵ Genesis 41:47-49)

⁵⁶ Matthew 6:19, Matthew 6:26, Luke 12:18

⁵⁷ Matthew 25:14-30. Include this valuable stewardship text in our preaching and teaching. (Pentecost 24 – Year A)

⁵⁸ John 9:4

⁵⁹ Mary H. Maxwell, *Saints of God, the Dawn is Brightening*, Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal, 578 v 1

Is there a better way to do this? Should we more actively pursue dual parishes, multi-site arrangements⁶⁰, and school federations rather than waiting until we have to close down rural schools and small congregations? Again I think these are important questions that we have to at least consider.

There are plenty of challenges that face ministry in rural settings, and I haven't even touched on the fact that time heals some wounds and not others. Nor have I touched on the challenges of reaching out to communities that have strong ties to the boy scouts and other community organizations that may stand in the way of our outreach efforts. But with all the challenges, there are still people living out here and as long as there are, there is still a mission field. The fields are ripe and the harvest is waiting and I pray that God will provide faithful and passionate workers who willingly say, "Here I am! Send me! Send me!"⁶¹

Final Encouragements

Paul ends a number of his letters with a few final encouragements. After charging his way through letters that detail the gospel as well as practical application after practical application, he often ends in a way that is a welcome breath of fresh air. He wraps things up with a few final words of greeting and thanksgiving, a few final summaries and instructions, and a blessing that reminds us of the power and goodness of our God who is control of all things. After charging through this practical paper about proclaiming the gospel I will leave you with a few words of gratitude, a number of useful summary points, and a blessing.

I want to thank my brothers in rural ministry for your input. I thank God for men who have served faithfully in rural ministry, those who served in rural ministry in the past, those who I have served alongside, and those who continue to labor in the small congregations dotting the countryside throughout our nation. May the Lord continue to bless our synod with dedicated men who are invested in rural ministry and have a heart for God's people who live in the small towns of America. Even though only a few survey answers were mentioned or quoted directly, this input was greatly appreciated as it helped confirm or alter my thoughts as I formed and wrote this paper.

The general outline of the paper was fashioned so that you might be able to take away a few practical points as you consider rural ministry. May the Lord bless our efforts to:

- ❖ *Plow up the Maintenance Ministry Attitude*
- ❖ *Cultivate a Mission Mindset*
- ❖ *Plant the Seed*
- ❖ *Sustain the Mission*
- ❖ *Communicate the Vision*

Pastor Shannon O'Dell in his book, *Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals*, offered a useful summary as well.⁶² He encouraged pastors and lay leaders to VALUE rural ministry. Using a few selected portions from his book, here is my summary of his summary.

⁶⁰ Shannon O'Dell, "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals", New Leaf Press, 2010

O'Dell's model for the multi-site Brand New Church in rural Arkansas is an example that is most likely beyond our capabilities or desires in the WELS, but such a model of multiple congregations coming together to support the ministry or even form a new congregation is something that we need to consider more and more in rural settings. Currently St. Matthew's in Danube, St. Matthew Flora Twp, St. John's in Renville, and Zion in Olivia are discussing what the future might hold for our ministry. We have seen the great things that God can do through us when we work together in joint ministry, why shouldn't we consider how we can more formally bring our ministry together?

⁶¹ Daniel March, *Hark! The Voice of Jesus Crying*, Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal, 573

⁶² Shannon O'Dell, "Transforming Church in Rural America: Breaking all the Rurals", New Leaf Press, 2010

VALUE

Vision:

Have an overall organizational vision for your church so that you have a clear path of ministry for everyone to pursue.

Attitude:

Have a passionate servant attitude like the one Christ Jesus demonstrated. Nothing depletes the effectiveness of your vision more than a bad attitude.

Leadership:

Leadership is brought and taught.

Leadership means that you are willing to resist the urge to settle and to move on with the vision.

Understanding:

Each event and leader should stand under and support the vision.

Enduring Excellence:

Too often rural churches have the attitude that since we don't have tons of resources, nothing can change. You can do excellence on a zero budget! Excellence does not cost a lot of money: it costs in time and vision.

So dear brothers, value rural ministry; see it as a blessing from God and as a place where mission work and outreach and evangelism can happen. For those who serve in such a rural setting, take time to plan. Have a vision. Know your gifts. Know your people. Get to know your local soil; and be patient. Like a farmer waiting for his crop to come in, we too must be patient. Understand that things don't change overnight, but trust that God's Word has the power to work wonders. Plant and water, weed and feed. Proclaim the gospel in season and out of season⁶³, take your people and yourself to the living water. Beware of things that would choke out the gospel in your personal life and in the lives of those you serve, and be patient. There is a good argument for passing up those first few calls in order to establish yourself as a trusted fixture in the community, to give your congregation much needed stability, and to follow through on the plans that you have developed. If you do stay in a place for a while refuse the urge to settle and continue to be passionate. As the pastor you are a leader and if you have passion for your ministry your people will too. When you see that there is a mission in your small town your people will be able to see it also. Pursue excellence in your devotional life, in your preaching and teaching, in your care ministry, and in your outreach and evangelism. Pray boldly and know that others are praying for you. Look to Christ and to his forgiveness and love, to his gifts of faith and strength and eternal life. He is with you and working through you.

May God bless his servants who take the good news of Jesus to the small towns and villages, to the gravel roads and country lanes.

*¹⁴ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. ⁶⁴*

⁶³ 2 Timothy 4:2

⁶⁴ 2 Corinthians 13:14

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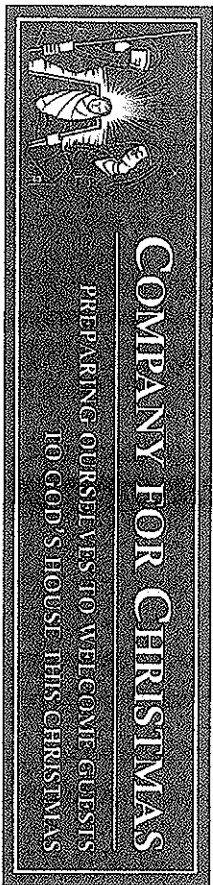
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A Culture, Not a Job

There is an old saying, "*If it is everyone's job then it is no one's job.*" In other words, if you assign responsibility for a task to everyone then that task will probably not get done, because everyone will assume someone else will do it.

There can be some truth to that. Therefore, it is good to have certain members assigned "jobs" on Sunday morning: greeters, ushers, etc. But ultimately, for a church to be properly equipped to welcome visitors, *every member* needs to think of that as their God-given job too. "*Practice hospitality,*" St. Paul says (Romans 12:13). And he wasn't talking just to greeters.

Maybe instead of thinking about welcoming visitors as a "job," think of it as part of your culture. Every church has a culture — a "*this is how we do things around here*" mentality. Isn't that true? If someone suggested moving the Christmas tree from the pulpit side of the church to the lectern side, inevitably someone would object, "Why, that's just not how we do it around here!" Well, what would happen in your church if everyone thought of the following as "how we do things around here"?

- Every member made it part of his or her Sunday routine to learn the name of one person they do not know. And that member made it a goal to remember that name the following week.
- Instead of beginning worship by launching into the first hymn, the pastor would greet the people and then give them 60 seconds to greet one another. The pastor would instruct them, "Say hello to those you don't know first."
- Your members refused to leave a visitor standing alone either before or after worship. If a member was talking with a visitor,

that member understood that the only way he could walk away was if that visitor left or if he introduced that visitor to another member.

- Your members, rather than sitting in "their pew," would look for and sit by worship visitors. That way, if the worship visitor seemed lost, the member could help the visitor find the page in the hymnal. (Or just use worship folders and eliminate this concern altogether.)
- Every leader in the church agreed that no church business would be discussed Sunday mornings. Sunday was *just* about two things: contact with the means of grace and getting to know people better. If business *had* to be discussed on Sunday, it would be discussed after everyone else had left.

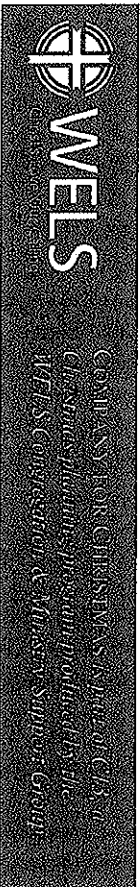
- If a member made a good connection with a visitor, they would ask that visitor if he would like to grab some breakfast after church. Chances are the visitor will say no. But what an impression will be made!

What would such a church be like? One might say, "Such a church would be a lot of work! All this stuff takes time." Yes. Such a church would be "a lot of work" if you view serving Christ and loving your neighbor as a chore... *a job*. But if Christ is your first love, then serving him even in the most difficult of circumstances will be a joy. And sharing your time and yourself with members and worship visitors will not be everyone's job, but everyone's delight.

We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

1 Thessalonians 2:8

May God grant it.





Day-care squeeze is hitting Minnesota rural families hard

Article by: Adam Belz
Star Tribune
August 26, 2014 - 4:43 PM

MONTEVIDEO, Minn. — Eight months before her due date, Angie Steinbach started calling day cares to reserve a spot for her baby.

Nobody had an opening as far as Marshall or Willmar — both a 45-minute drive away. Steinbach got on waiting lists “behind people who hadn’t even conceived yet,” she said.

When Steinbach’s boy was born, her husband — who had just earned a degree in computers — planned to stay home with their son. The couple didn’t find a way for them both to work until a relative tipped them to an opening at a child care in Granite Falls.

“You just don’t realize until you actually experience it firsthand just how bad the shortage is,” said Steinbach, community development director for the city of Montevideo.

Large parts of rural Minnesota don’t have enough child care for working families. Finding a place for newborns is especially difficult. And it’s not just a parenting challenge, it’s an economic problem.

More than one in 10 parents statewide, and one in five poor parents, [report](#) that child-care problems have kept them from getting or keeping a job in a given year. When parents can’t work for lack of baby-sitting, businesses struggle to fill jobs, young mothers and fathers miss out on precious wages and a thin rural labor force gets thinner.

“How could it not, if you have good employees and they don’t have anywhere to put their children?” said Ann McCully, executive director of Child Care Aware. “We still have a pretty good population of folks that use grandma, and auntie and neighbors and that kind of thing, but most of those folks have to work too.”

David Clusiau, owner of a car dealership in Hibbing, sees his employees miss shifts because they can’t find steady child care. “What I hear is that my valued employees can’t come to work, because they have no place to leave their children today,” Clusiau said. “They really have no choice.”

Many businesses are trying to adjust and fill the child-care gap in some way. Digi-Key, an electronic parts distributor in Thief River Falls, [offers extra cash](#) to day cares that will extend their hours into the evening for second-shift workers. The Gardonville Telephone Co-Op in Brandon is [opening its own day-care center](#).

The problem in Montevideo became so severe that the city helped pay for Trisha Hering, director of the nonprofit Kinder Kare, to add a room at the early childhood center on the south side of town to serve 12 infants.

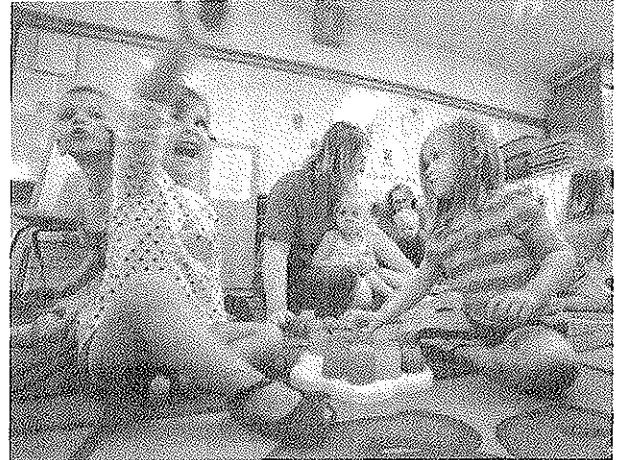
“If you have a child right now, you have to quit your job, because there is nothing available,” Hering said of the area around town.

She will open the infant room in September — all the spots are full.

Market failure

In Minnesota, [74 percent of children under 6 have both parents working](#), compared to a national average of 65 percent.

As a result, demand for day care across the state is deep, but somehow, there’s not enough supply. The market for child



Trisha Hering runs a Montevideo child-care program called Kinder Kare that is at capacity with 64 children.

Photos by GLEN STUBBE • gstubbe@startribune.com,

care in rural parts of the state, especially infant care — isn't working. Profit margins in child care can be as low as 10 cents per child per hour in the Twin Cities, and rural child-care businesses often operate at a loss.

The new infant room in Montevideo, on its own, will lose money, Hering said. Even with \$10,000 from the city to build and equip the room, it will run \$2,125 negative per month at \$140 a week per infant, she said.

"The need is so dramatic out here, that if there's a way to make it happen, we're going to make it happen," she said.

Overall, the nonprofit will be able to break even. Hering is raising rates slightly on preschool children, who require less staff to care for. Also, the school district discounts Kinder Kare's rent, while the city and county together will pay \$18,000 of the \$24,000 annual lease.

In Minnesota, about 186,000 children under 6 live outside the Twin Cities, where families pay about 75 percent of the going rate in the metropolitan area — \$132 weekly for in-home infant care, compared to \$175 per week in the metro area, according to Child Care Aware Minnesota. Workers in southwest Minnesota, however, earn only 61 percent of what the average worker in the Twin Cities earns — \$661 weekly compared to \$1,087 per week in the Cities.

"Parents can't pay out of pocket any more than they are, providers can't afford to charge any less than they are," McCully said.

A delicate balance

Because of tight margins and relatively stagnant wage growth, choosing child care in rural Minnesota can become a difficult balance between the desire for quality care and financial or geographical realities.

The problem of overcrowded and unregulated day cares was brought to light by the Star Tribune's 2012 reporting on unsafe — and sometimes deadly — day cares.

The regulations are stricter now and better enforced, but quality still varies, and the good day cares fill up fast. Providers are incentivized not to take on infants, who are the most costly to care for and tightly regulated, said Mary Franson, a legislator from Alexandria who used to run an in-home day care.

She said most child-care providers do an excellent job, but the already tough business of caring for babies has only become more difficult thanks to increased training requirements, and variation in how counties interpret rules on holding sleeping babies or staying within earshot of them.

"Rising costs stem right back to rules and regulations the state imposes on child-care providers," Franson said. "But yet child-care providers can't raise costs, because wages aren't rising."

Even for parents who can afford day care and find a spot for their child, the uneven quality of what's available can cause paralyzing worry at work.

Jessica Olesch, who lives near Marshall, returned to her job as a bank credit analyst in March after having a baby boy. She called 40 child-care providers that were full or didn't call back. Finally, a local child-care business was able to get a two-month variance from the state to add an extra spot for her son.

When that variance expired, Olesch had to start over. The next day care she found for the 4-month-old boy made her feel uneasy, but she had no choice.

"It was completely terrifying to have your baby away from you and with someone you didn't fully trust," Olesch said. "But we were in a terrible spot. We needed to work and that was the only day care with an infant opening."

She pulled him out this summer and platooned child-care duties with baby sitters, her husband and her father — all of them burning vacation time until they found a new spot earlier this month.

The benefits of child care

Quality day care doesn't just help parents work, advocates say — it helps prepare children for school.

Kids who show up at kindergarten ready to learn require less remedial work and in the long run tend to earn more money, pay more taxes, and commit less crime, said Rob Grunewald, an economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis who's been researching the economic development implications of early childhood care and education for years.

When child care is lacking, the spark that early education provides is even less available to poor children, said Heidi Hagel Braid, the Minnesota director for First Children's Finance.

"When it's not available to families who can't afford it, that's an even bigger problem," Hagel Braid said. "If you are a poor kid in greater Minnesota, that means you have even fewer options available, and you're at the most risk of not being ready for kindergarten."

Roughly 74,000 Minnesota children under 6 live in poverty. About 31,000 children statewide received child-care assistance in 2013, but public money is helping in other ways.

The Legislature allocated \$46 million for scholarships in 2013, which will help pay for some 10,000 kids to get child care. A federal Race to the Top grant for another \$45 million will pay to improve early learning opportunities statewide.

Ann McCully, at Child Care Aware, said the new funding is good, but many parents, especially those in rural areas, still can't pay enough for child care to make it a viable business.

"The funding is much more than we've ever had, which is great," McCully said. "The fear is what happens when interest in that potentially wanes. There's always the nervousness in our community — are we the shiny object of the moment?"

Franson, the legislator, said the regulatory environment is partly to blame for the shortage, and the paperwork has become too much of a hassle. Until the economy strengthens, wages rise and the economics of caring for babies start to add up, parents will struggle to find good care, she said.

"The state can increase funding all they want," Franson said, "but that doesn't solve the shortage issue."

Adam Belz • 612-673-4405 Twitter: @adambelz

It's not about hate, it's about love.

This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome. (1 John 5:3). Voting "yes" on the Minnesota marriage amendment is not voting to put hate on the Minnesota constitution. Voting "yes" is an opportunity for a Christian citizen of Minnesota to show love for God and to follow his command to honor marriage. It is indeed unsettling, counterproductive, and wrong when those who are opposed on this issue - or any issue for that matter - resort to name calling, shameful remarks, shocking signs, and other acts of hatred. As a Christian it is not out of hatred, but out of love for God and love for my neighbor that I defend God's Word and speak out against what is contrary to God's will. As a Christian I will speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) and the truth is: God's Word says that homosexuality is wrong and against his natural plan (Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26, 27). God's Word says that marriage is to be a lifelong union between one man and one woman. (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:4-6). God's Word says that marriage is to be honored by all (Hebrews 13:4).

God's blessings of sexuality and marriage are certainly not always honored; on the contrary, they are often abused. However, it is not the institution that is broken, but it is the people who are broken. Every single one of us has fallen short of God's perfect will. In his love for broken sinners Jesus came into this world, God became flesh, to pay for all our sins in full. And now those who believe in Jesus live their lives for him who died for them and was raised again. It is out of love for Jesus, who loved me first, that I want to obey his commands.

The argument that this is purely a political issue is to leave God out of something that clearly has his fingerprints all over. This is not simply a case in which we would, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's"* (Matthew 22:21). Marriage is a civil union, but it is also a blessed institution that God established. We cannot simply leave it up to the government to define what marriage is or what marriage is not. Not when God is the one who created the institution and has previously defined it. The word of God tells us that the Lord created man and woman for each other and gave them to each other as the standard for what marriage should be. *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh* (Genesis 2:24). God created them male and female and then united them together. Within the bonds of marriage he blessed man and wife with companionship, with a natural sexual relationship, and through that sexual relationship God brings about the blessing of children. Within his institution of marriage God lovingly laid the building blocks for family and for society.

God set the standard that we have followed for years and this is the standard that we have a right to uphold and defend. To say that voting in favor of the marriage amendment is "a vote to put hate on the Minnesota constitution" is simply not true. This is an opportunity for a Christian who lives in Minnesota to exercise his or her right as a citizen. It is an opportunity to help the government 'get it right' when it comes to something that God lovingly established and has already defined.

In love God created mankind as the crown of his creation. In love he created them male and female and joined them together in what would be known as marriage. In love God promised a Savior to live and die for all the sins of the world. Therefore, *"we love because he first loved us."* (1 John 4:19) This is not about hate, this is about love. *This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.* That is why I am voting yes.

Serving Christ Jesus,

Pastor Mike Kuschel

St. Matthew's Danube & St. Matthew Flora Twp. MN

Appendix D

"Seven Good Years"

Pastor Mike Kuschel

*St. Matthew's Danube & St. Matthew Flora Twp.
September/October Newsletter Devotion - 2014*

Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he stopped keeping records because it was beyond measure. - Gen 41:49

The account of Joseph and the 7 years of abundance makes us pause and consider the abundant goodness of our God. He brought remarkable blessing to Joseph after he had suffered so much. And he blessed the land with remarkable abundance in order to supply for the people in the seven years of famine. Most importantly he brought all this about as part of his plan to send the Savior into the world. What remarkable things God has done!

Dear friends let us pause and give thanks for the wonders that God has done for us. Consider the abundance of his kindness. Our gracious God forgives us our sins and gives us our daily bread. We have all that we need for our daily life and then some. And to top it all off we have the promise of eternal, never-ending, countless blessings in heaven through faith in Jesus Christ! How abundant the love of our God!

Recently events in our congregation have made me pause and give thanks for the blessings that God has poured on us as a body of believers. On August 20 a meeting was held in which leadership from each of our four area WELS congregations discussed the future of ministry in this area. We talked frankly about the financial challenges that face each of our congregations. But we also were able to discuss the many blessings that we have seen as individual congregations as well as collectively in joint ministry. In the past 7 years, these 4 WELS churches along highway 212 have joined together in several ministry efforts and the Lord has done some wonderful things through us and for us.

Our local youth group has enjoyed the blessing of joint ministry. For the last 7 years the congregations in this area have been to hold a soccer camp for the children of this community. We had 94 children attend our camp this summer. And of course we are about to embark on a joint ministry of Little Lambs Learning Center. Here children, from the surrounding communities will be able to hear God's Word on a daily basis.

Each congregation has been blessed with their own storehouse of blessings and we have been able to work together so well. God be praised! And so at the meeting on August 20 we talked about how we could share such blessings to effectively continue the work of the gospel in this area. The idea of sharing two ministers for the four congregations and the blessings and challenges this would entail was a topic that was discussed. We are still very much in the beginning stages of this conversation and so when you hear about such meetings, please do not think the worst. Do not spread thoughts of gloom and doom and the end of congregational life as we know it. Consider the challenges, but do not be paralyzed by them, do not stare at them and press your nose up against them so that you can't see beyond them. Instead pause, take a step back, and consider what the Lord has done. Consider the challenges, but then think about, pray about, the possibilities, consider what things would be like if we could join together and not be so burdened, or so conscious of, or so limited by the funds, or the manpower, or the resources, that we do or do not have. Think about how we could work together to share God's Word throughout the Hwy 212 corridor and beyond. Think about the wonderful and amazing things that our God has already been doing through us, the miraculous things he is capable of doing in the future, and how he wants us to be a part of his glorious gospel work. Think about it, pray about, and trust that God will lead us in the right direction.

Who would you
rather have on your
front porch?



A. The IRS telling
you, "You're being
audited."

OR



B. A scary monster

OR



C. The new pastor in
the area who just
wants to say "Hi"
and get to know the
community better.

