



**WISCONSIN
CONFERENCE**
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Report from the Rural Ministry Conference

by Rev. Rob MacDougall

Each March, the Center for Theology and Land at Wartburg Seminary (ELCA) in Dubuque, Iowa, hosts their Rural Ministry Conference. The definition of what constitutes “rural” ministry seems illusive and fluid. One presenter commented that industry and government now define rural as including towns of populations of twenty five thousand or less, whereas people in rural areas consider towns of twenty five thousand to be regional urban hubs.

There is some good humor and laughter on the part of folk from rural areas when they hear how non-residents categorize them. But beyond the humor, particularly among church people of almost all denominations and traditions, there are sobering understandings of rural life. The nodding heads of the more than one hundred clergy and lay attendees expressed consensus regarding the aging, economic decline and shrinking church membership of many rural communities. Like their urban counterparts, rural church folk are struggling with the cultural shifts of competing for people’s time, commitment and spiritual engagement.

These realities are not new considerations. One presenter suggested that rural churches are in an interim period, a time between eras of the church and Christianity. Because this is an interim time, she postulated that our approaches to ministry will need to focus on the present moment, and be flexible and evolving. Worship language, hymnody and programming in churches that elevate the permanence of church structures may feel a constant sense of loss and disappointment because the realities of our time and the desire for permanence do not match up.

There seemed to be some joy and freedom for those who embraced movement away from trying to create church life that would last for generations. Those who began focusing on the ministry needs at hand and discerning God’s call for the present moment felt encouraged. Attendees expressed hope in recognizing what might be in their hands and control, and in turning over what was beyond their control to God.

The particular focus of this year's conference was on Shared Ministry and Cooperating Congregations. The leaders of the conference confessed that shared ministry is not an altogether new notion. Churches have been sharing pastors, yoking with each other and doing cooperative programs and mission work just about forever. So, while this conference was grounded in a familiar approach to ministry, it focused on nuanced models and best practices of shared ministry. Most centrally, the spirit of the conference was proclaimed by one presenter who said that shared ministry is about thriving ministry. Shared ministry is about bringing the gifts of congregations together to serve God and communities in faithful ways. Presenters made it clear that they were not merely interested in helping church survive a bit longer, they are interested vital ministry that proclaims God's love in and beyond congregations.

Shared ministry can take on many forms and the form it takes on in any particular location needs to emerge out of the partner congregations. For shared ministry to be successful presenters emphasized a number of beginning concerns and steps. Here are a few:

- Shared ministry should be considered before churches are desperate about their situation; shared ministry is most successful when churches recognize they have gifts and strength to offer
- Shared ministry is about cooperation, not competition, and cultivating trust between partner congregations comes before all else. Building trust requires spending time together and cannot be rushed. Recognition that partner congregations are one in the body of Christ is to be celebrated
- Cooperating congregations should consider what shared ministry is already in place, and congregations should examine the risks, benefits and possibilities of what might be proposed
- Establishing a steering committee of lay leaders is essential; shared ministry belongs to the churches, not the pastor
- Nuts and bolts questions about membership, getting new members, money, church schedules, etc., need to follow after the vision of shared ministry is articulated. Some of these initial concerns are more focused on survival than vital ministry.

Rev. Marcia Kifer offered these tips, particularly for clergy, where shared ministry is being considered:

- Encourage innovation
- Be proactive
- Get out of the way when you are inhibiting movement
- Be supportive and a resource
- Be honest
- Be flexible

- Be informed
- Be a cheerleader
- Pray often.

Rev. Mark Yackel-Juleen offered a few statistics about churches today. Seventy one percent of churches have less than one hundred people in church on Sunday morning, many of these with under fifty. By 2019, twenty percent of full-time pastorates will be in multiple point calls. Medium size churches are shrinking. More and more churches are sharing resources, even across denominational lines. While these statistics, out of anxiety, may create some initial motivation for shared ministry, fear cannot sustain vital ministry. Reflection on God's calling becomes the place of strength for God's people to come together. Celebrating the ministry that has taken place in the past without it inhibiting the present and future is an act of grace.

Some sixteen UCC clergy and laity from Wisconsin attended this conference. Several of our attendees were sponsored by our Wisconsin Conference Catalyst Committee. We met as a group before the conference ended and talked about what we had learned. We decided that we would like to meet again for further conversation and support for initiating shared ministry possibilities in our regions of the state. For ministry to thrive in the Wisconsin Conference, we need to be innovative and spirit-lead people. Many of our churches are small; in rural and urban settings, turning toward each other for strength and possibilities can bring new life in our uncertain time.