

Preserving and Growing Rural Congregations

By: Eldor Meyer

Preface

Born and raised on a farm near Okarche, Oklahoma, I attended a small parochial school and belonged to a rural congregation in this rural community of nearly 400 people.

As a boy and young man, I had no intention or desire to enter the pastoral ministry. Rather, I spent many hours playing with my farm toys in Oklahoma dust and sand and dreaming of becoming a big wheat farming cattleman. Since my father insisted I go to college, I received a BS degree in Agricultural Engineering from Oklahoma Agriculture and Mechanical College (now Oklahoma State University) in 1951. My last year at the University my Dad sold his holdings in Oklahoma and relocated in Southeast Kansas (Girard) where he purchased more acres, so his son Eldor could realize his dreams of being a big farmer. I farmed in partnership with my father for eight years, until I sold my interest in the operation (1958). Obviously, the Lord lead me out of farming and headed me to the Seminary.

My first “call” was to a triple rural parish, St. Paul, Hollandale; Our Savior, Blooming Prairie; and St. Luke, Lansing, Minnesota, (1964-66). I enjoyed and appreciated my association and relationship with the rural people which kept me in touch with my rural roots. I identified with the rural students as campus pastor at Kearney State College (University) (1966-71) as 90 percent of the students were from rural Nebraska. Trinity Lutheran Church, Grand Island, Nebraska, a large church with a large school, which I served as pastor and director of ministries, was a rural congregation in a larger town.

The 13 years (1978-91) as District President of the Nebraska District involved me in various struggles and problems of rural congregations. Around 200 of the 246 congregation in the Nebraska District are considered rural.

I am serving as vacancy pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Girard, Kansas, (since March 1, 1993), a small rural congregation which in 1992 was considered to be dying and to close—with worship attendance of 25-35, no Sunday School, and no youth ministry. The Lord is blessing our ministry—the congregation is revitalized, membership has increased 60 percent; average worship attendance over 100; Sunday school and midweek classes each have more than 30 students. The congregation resolved to hire an architect to do a feasibility study for either expanding the present facility or relocating with a new facility.

This report flows out of my experiences in rural ministry and the study of 47 congregations in six Midwest Districts.

“Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Ephesians 3:21,21).”

Statement of Need

Congregations in rural America provided the roots of The Missouri Synod. These congregations built our Synod by providing financial resources and a strong rural heritage.

Rural congregations are feeling the impact of the decline and are concerned about their future. Hence many rural congregations talk in terms of survival or anticipate their closing in the next decade or two, continuing to drift downward in a maintenance mode of ministry.

Several questions are being asked which indicate the need for this research: Why are some rural and small town congregations growing and others declining when the same Word of God is preached and the same Holy Spirit works through the Word? Can the rural church survive? Should the rural church even be encouraged to survive? The rural one-room country schools have all but vanished by consolidating with small school districts. Will the church vacate rural America as we have vacated the inner cities a few decades ago? What is the best approach for the pastoral and lay leadership as they attempt to assist rural and small town congregations?

Rural ministry is at a crossroads. If nothing is done to assist rural congregations, like the trend of the one-room rural school, vanishing rural communities will become a continuing reality for rural congregations. They have a choice of either following the rural trend and anticipate closing—many will by the year 2010--or accept the opportunity and challenge to revitalize the ministry to members and community. Revitalization requires much effort, energy, and commitment.

Process of the Research

The Synod has always recognized the blessings of rural congregations and simply taken them for granted. It has accepted their human and financial resources but concentrated its resources and energies on urban, metro, foreign ministries, and internal institutional problems, by default neglecting rural America. Rural ministry has often requested financial and human resources which were not readily available.

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Phase I consists of a literature review, an initial research, and a developing evaluation of ministry instruments. Nearly 50 congregations were visited and evaluations of their ministry received at a meeting to which the membership was invited, using instruments Exhibits 1-4. A needs assessment of the ministry was received, focusing the group as a “Think Tank” session using instruments, Exhibit 5 and 5a. These sessions were attended by 10 to 45 members of the congregations. Pastors and three to five lay leaders were individually interviewed. Three to eight members of the community were interviewed on the street or in their place of business.

Phase II develops individual congregational reports of individual ministry, delivered to and shared with the pastor and the leadership. Attendance at reporting sessions varied from four to 16 lay leaders. Exhibits 6, 7, 8, and 9 give the members average evaluation of their ministry. Exhibit 10 is the instrument used in developing the age profile of the congregation. The bar graphs of the age profile, Exhibit 11 and 12, are valuable for planning and setting goals for ministry. The 1990 census data of population facts received from Lutheran Church Extension Fund on the ministry service area gives the congregation vital information for effective planning for ministry. Congregations are encouraged in their report to study their evaluation of ministry, establish goals, and accept the challenges of a declining rural population as opportunities for a unique full-service ministry in an expanded Ministry Service Area. All but three of the congregations in the project stated, the evaluation and the recommendations were on target and would benefit their ministry if they would implement them.

Phase III generates a composite report of study and research designed to preserve rural congregations and to encourage their growth. The project director has given major presentations at more than a dozen circuit convocations, pastor’s conferences, conventions, seminary convocations, and to church leaders. The composite report is being shared with Aid Association for Lutherans, LeRoy and Jean Thom, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the Council of Presidents, the Districts, congregations involved in the project, and others who request.

The materials in this report are summaries gleaned from a variety of informational sources such as observations, personal involvement, comments, opinions, and conclusions regarding rural ministry. Some statements will seem reasonable and correct. others might represent a divergent view of general perception. For example, personal interviews permit reading body language and other contextual clues, such as individualizing information according to the uniqueness of each rural situation which are not available in telephone or written surveys.

The value of this composite report, resides in the entire body of information rather than merely focusing on a few specifics.

Overall Objective of Researching Congregations

To assist the national church (LC-MS), its districts and congregations, in understanding, appreciating, and preserving the ministry of rural congregations;

To set in motion the process that will result in a revitalization of rural congregations;

To renew spiritual growth;

To increase membership;

To provide a more viable, visible Christian presence in rural and small town America.

The Rural Scene

A brief look at the rural scene is necessary as we study the rural congregation. Rural churches not only grew out of rural culture, but were the vital influence of rural culture. Many rural institutions have faded into the past and disappeared such as the one-room school house, but rural churches have not disappeared.

The definition and designation of “rural” varies. The standard definition, determined by the United States Federal Census, describes “rural” as non-metropolitan communities with 2,500 or fewer population, a standard used in this study. In reality many communities larger than 2,500 population are considered rural by the people who live and work there, especially when their industries, businesses and services relate directly or indirectly to agriculture.

Before the 20th century and during its first half, farming was a family operation, a strong tradition in America. Of course, larger operations such as the plantations existed in the South with slaves and other hired hands. The size of the family farm in the rural Midwest was small before mechanization in the late 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. The number of sons greatly influenced the size of the family farm. If a family had three sons—normally all three wanted to farm—the acres would be increased by purchase so that each son could have his own farm of 80 acres; thus, a family farm often gave birth to several family farms. This arrangement was possible as long as homestead acres existed, land to the west lay unclaimed, and local acres were available for purchase.

During the agri-community crisis of the eighties the strong cry was “save the family farm,” a serious concern from many segments of rural America which wanted to save the small “family farm” as existed during the twenties and thirties. But the family farm had changed, getting much larger and more mechanized. Now many family farms have become family corporations which changes how the family is involved in the farming operation, impacting rural communities and the rural church. The family farm continues as a strong institution and influence for rural America and changes as influenced by technology, the agricultural economy, and the world food needs.

The rural scene influenced and determined the character of the church during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rural congregations were organized by the farmers as soon as they staked out their claim and often before the first crop was harvested. Transportation determined how close the distances were at which the farmers established churches. The church was very important for mutual support and strength during trying and difficult times. It also provided for the social fellowship needs of rural American families. The early rural church was a family church. Three to five families with their children and grandchildren made up nearly the entire membership. It was difficult for an outsider to become an insider in the rural church. Even today a large majority of the members is direct descendents of one of the founding families. Also families are often related to those in neighboring congregations.

The rural population has declined and continues to decline during this last decade of the 20th century. The rural congregation which offered strength and served as the back bone for rural America is declining in membership and often struggling for its survival, thus feeling neglected and forsaken by its denominational leadership. The rural scene changed radically from horse power to tractor power and highly specialized farming. The rural congregation, however, found it difficult to change many of its traditional characteristics and values. That “change is difficult in a rural congregation” is the consensus of congregations in this research.

Change in rural America didn't stop when all available acres were claimed for farms. In the late 20's and 30's there was a strong move toward mechanization. For most people the decision was when to become more mechanized, not if. A few held on to their horses as long as they could. I remember in the thirties when a farmer bought a tractor, the neighbors would speculate by saying, "I wonder how long Bill will keep his horses?" The farmers had a strong attachment to their work horses. They often kept them around for years after they had tractors. They fed, sheltered, and pastured those horses even though they seldom, if ever, used their horses in the farming operation. This behavior indicates a strong attachment to God's earth and His creatures, indicative of the rural scene. Here changes come hard. As tractors and farm implements got larger, the family farm increased in size, depending upon sons interested in farming.

Rural communities have made some drastic changes over the last several decades and continue to change. The population of the United States directly involved in farming continues to decrease. Rural areas were once populated with three to five families living on a section, but today there is fewer than one family per section. The federal census of 1990 indicates that 2.45 percent of the population is involved in farming, forestry, and fishing. Notably farming is no longer a single category for the Federal census.

Farms today range from small, hobby type farming to thousands of acres. A farming operation of 100 quarters which (16,000 acres or 25 sections) is a reality and will become even more numerous. Quite a change over the last 70 years! Farms size varies from area to area and depends upon topography and soil type. Today one man easily farms 1,000 acres by himself. There is no denying that farms are going to get larger and fewer in number, also the consensus of the congregations and communities examined in this study. The impact on rural congregations continues.

The number of family farm operations of one quarter to a whole section (160-640 acres) is still common in rich farming areas, but continues to decline. Many of these farmers, older and not too far from retirement, have no sons or daughters who desire to maintain the operation because they say, "There is no money in farming." Some parents hesitate to encourage their sons and daughters to take up farming since they also feel that there is "no future in farming." A grandfather, son, and grandson, a third generation farm operation of over 3,000 acres stated, "There is no future in farming." The family is discouraging the grandson from taking over this family farm operation. He is taking agricultural economics at a state university and plans to get involved in agri-business. In about ten years, this family farm will go out of existence and be absorbed by other farmers. A feeling and trend among most of the communities visited.

To increase the size of the farm operation without a hired hand, a husband and wife may form a partnership team. Teenage and college children assist when they are not in school. Husbands and wives working side by side—in the fields, on machinery, in the feed lots—and making cooperative decisions are common and will increase. The slightly involved children are often not interested in farming. Indeed the family farm of today is different from what it was during the first half of the twentieth century and will continue to change. Though the family farm continues, it assumes a different size, style, and form.

In the 1980s the number of farms declined drastically because of the agri-community crisis. In the 1990s, decline will continue but more gradually. Many older farmers in their late fifties and early sixties will retire by the year 2000, many of whom have no son or daughter who wants to farm; these farms are absorbed by neighbors or larger operators. It is a trend that is accepted and carries a high level of concern in rural areas and their congregations.

We need to be reminded what "rural" actually means. Rural designates being related to open country and agriculture. Rural is a group of people who have a common interest in the soil, who love the open spaces, and who have a special appreciation for working with God's earth and with His animals, especially, cattle, sheep, pigs, and etc. Rural towns and villages have changed in many ways during this century. Even so, the quality and style of life in rural areas remains important to the inhabitants of rural culture and to the people of rural congregations.

Rural is a mind-set and a way of life. It is not poor or rich; not necessarily educated or uneducated; not necessarily better or worse than other life-styles. "Rural" helps describe not only what people think but also

how they think and how they perceive reality (Hunter p. 16). Values which shape the lives of farm people express what has been called the “agrarian ethos” rural beliefs about life.

Since mechanization lead to larger farms, the world has fewer and fewer people who are genuinely rural. Whereas 90 percent of the people in the United States produced 100 percent of the food 100 years ago, now only 2 or 3 percent of the people produce at least 20 percent more food than is presently consumed. As the number of agricultural workers decreases, the number of rural churches will decline. As non-agricultural rural people (NARP) fill rural churches and become a significant majority, a transformation occurs and the church becomes a different kind of organism (Hunter p. 17). It changes from a rural church to a church in the country. This change is very difficult for rural churches to accept.

The rural church, often maintaining a traditional mind set, finds itself in a much different setting. Rural towns and villages have changed in many ways during this century. Fifty to sixty years ago, a small town of 200 to 300 people would be a full service community: one or two implement dealers, a car dealership, a hardware store, several grocery stores, a drug store, hospital, doctor and dental offices, several bars, a good school system There were plenty of customers since three to five families lived on each section of land. As mechanization took over and technology became a greater part of farming, small farmers sold out to larger ones, the number of people in the community declined and available customer clients declined, all making a further impact on the rural church.

Multiple businesses declined to a single implement dealership who services an entire county and often more. A small grocery store may become a mini-stop, such as a “7-11 Convenience Store.” Satellite medical services offered by a larger clinic or hospital in a large town or city replace the hospital and doctors in the town. When one of the major services leaves, a domino effect takes place, and other businesses close, changing the community drastically and leaving it without cultural resources.

Communities are embarrassed when another business closes, a building goes vacant, and the store front is boarded up to prevent vandalism. Many villages have more vacant building boarded up than those containing active businesses. These communities gradually become ghost towns since nothing attracts new people or keeps the present population. People hesitate to retire in a village which offers minimal or no services. As time passes, the community simply accepts as fact, vacant and deteriorating buildings, producing a decline of small town and rural esteem. However, the rural congregation has survived, having the opportunity to be a service center to the remaining people but failing to seize the opportunity. It is determined to be the last institution in rural America to close.

The owners of the vacant buildings walk away from them, fail to pay taxes, and cause property to go to the county. Several communities have done a good job of razing condemned buildings, planting grass, and improving the landscape. Most of the small villages permit deterioration to continue without interference. Many conditions exist which call for community improvement and involvement. Here is an excellent opportunity for the church to get involved in the stewardship and beautification of God’s creation; however, they are caught in this same process of declining members and low church esteem. Progressive communities are neat and clean. The people take pride in their property, mow the grass, keep streets in good repair, and eliminate junk on vacant lots or on residential property. Other communities, however, have vacant buildings and property with abundant weeds and unsightly junk. Rural churches and their cemeteries, with a few exceptions, are neat, clean, and in good repair which indicate pride in their property, reflecting care and respect by members. There is quite a difference between the communities which have a high level of pride and community esteem and those which are dying with no intentional effort to live.

We have seen that the trend in the rural Midwest is quite clear and highly visible. small towns and villages were full service communities for most of the twentieth century. The decline in rural population the last several decades has caused many full service communities to become mini service ones; many continue to decline and become communities with no. services at all. Ghost towns and the remains of former rural towns and villages all over the rural Midwest, tell the story of the rural people with their character, strength, and love for the rural areas of God’s creation. Rural churches have survived these drastic changes caused by the decline in population and poor agricultural economy, but not without pain and loss. How much longer will they

survive? Are they destined to follow the same trend of demise and death as other institutions of service in rural America have?

The Rural Culture—A Way of Life

Why do people live in rural and small rural villages which are declining in population? A common set of characteristics and values which people share become reasons for living and remaining in small rural communities, very minimal services notwithstanding. Agreement by the congregations on these values is nearly unanimous. These characteristics and values are similar from one rural community to the next, impacting the church and focusing quality of rural life and culture.

A. Trust/Safe is a value dimension of the rural American, highly important to the congregations in this research. The high level of trust among the members of the community requires a minimum need for police or sheriff protection. Unafraid, farmers and residents leave their keys in their vehicles both at home and in town. During the congregation evaluation meetings, normally all the members present had left their keys in their pick-ups and cars. Often the pastor was the only one present who had removed his keys. One member who owned and operated a business stated, “My keys are in my pick-up and the receipts for today are in a bank bag on the seat. It will still be there when I leave.” People not locking their homes indicates a high trust level. One person told the group, “When we purchased our house, I put the keys in some drawer in the house and I don’t remember which drawer. So we have no house keys. Our house hasn’t been locked for 25 years.” He is doing his part to keep the high trust level in his community. He will refuse to lock his home for as long as he can and will only lock as a last resort. Nearly every congregation in the research gave similar comments and illustrations indicating a high trust level across the community. People feel very safe. This feeling also generates a high level of respect for each others property which is also a strong rural value.

Farmers and rural people have a high level of respect for each others property and help one another in protecting and improving it. Rural people live the meaning of the seventh commandment—“...help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.” Many farmers post their property with “no hunting” privileges just to protect it from thoughtless “city hunters”, especially if cattle are present. Farmers don’t appreciate trespassers on their property. A concern is that this high level of trust and safety of rural America is diminishing and losing ground with the nonagricultural people who move into the rural areas. This problem is especially true for farms within a fifty mile radius of larger towns and cities.

B. Caring-Neighbor—A caring community with caring people is always stated as a plus, a value, and a primary reason for living in rural open country and small villages. One of the strengths of rural areas in the past is “being a neighbor,” a personal caring for one another. They understand Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37. Rural communities have a very close, personal relationship with all the members of the community. Everyone knows everyone else’s needs and hurts. In contrast, larger communities, especially metro ones, the people often don’t even know their neighbors next door or across the street. Farmers and people of rural open country and rural small communities, Christian and non-Christian, churched and non-churched, Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic..., all reach out to assist the family or individual in need. When a farmer gets hurt in a farm accident or a family has a crisis, the neighbors come in to take care of the chores and crops. The people of rural America live the Word of Christ when He says, “Love your neighbor as yourself” Mark 12:31. “Being neighbor” crosses all denominational lines in rural America. However, as farms have gotten large with large farm machinery, the farmers have gotten more independent and the “being neighbor” has lost ground and importance. A concern in rural America is that “being a neighbor,” a strong value and quality of rural and small villages, is being lost. The strong personal caring aspect of “neighbor” needs to be reclaimed

because it is a rural American heritage. It should not be lost; therefore, the rural church must assist in preserving the “being neighbor” quality of rural America.

C. Good Place to Raise a Family—This value is consistently given as a primary reason and benefit for living in a rural community. I asked a lady in a small village why she lived in this village even though she and her husband each commuted separately 20 miles to work: “Wouldn’t it be cheaper to live in the larger town instead of each commuting at different times?” She replied, “This is a good place to raise my family. Everyone in town knows my children. My children have the run of the town with their friends. If one of my children gets hurt, they know how to find me or someone will take care of them until I get home.” After school and during the summertime, the children can roam the community to visit and play with their friends. Parents are comfortable. Parents realize that everyone knows their children and if one should get hurt when the parent isn’t around, other parents will take care of them just as their own. This behavior indicates a high trust level and gives the dimension of extended family to a community which crosses all denominational lines. Yard fences and fences to keep children at home are not apparent or necessary; rather they are frowned upon. The value system is identical among all the members of the communities visited. The community serves as a strong support group for rural individuals and families.

Farm children often show a high level of maturity at an early age because they shared responsibility on the family farm. They are involved in chores, made responsible for livestock and often share in the income. They see life in God’s creation—birth, care, marketing, and death of livestock; and seeding, care, and harvesting of grain. Farm families appreciate the privilege and opportunity of raising their children on the farm. Raising a family on the farm is thought to be raising them in a quality environment for a fuller life. As fewer families live on a farm, their positive impact on rural America and our nation is diminishing, a great concern in rural communities and churches.

D. Friendliness makes no distinction among political or denominational persuasions. People speak to everyone on the street and in the stores. They drive with their hand on top of the steering wheel and wave to everyone. (Incidentally, the privacy glass in new cars and pick-ups is not “user-friendly” for rural people.) Rural friendliness requires a relaxed environment. People stop, talk, drink coffee, and visit about common concerns and joys.

Friendliness is a very important dimension and quality for rural communities but also for congregations. A young seminary graduate was placed in a small town rural congregation. He felt the ministry was going really well. In his fourth year at his first place, he received a call to a congregation in another District to a larger community. He asked for comments on his ministry. An elder said as he pointed his finger to the young pastor, “You are not friendly.” “What do you mean?”, the pastor responded. “You don’t wave at people and you don’t greet everyone you meet and see,” the elder said. “Where I come from (Detroit), you don’t wave and greet everyone,” the pastor replied. “You are in rural America, not in Detroit and its important here,” said the elder. This young pastor in four years of ministry did not grasp the rural culture’s importance placed on waving and friendliness. Also indicated is the problem of placing young graduates in rural America who don’t understand the rural culture and have no desire to learn it. Those who don’t wave and greet are considered outsiders. It’s difficult to become an insider in the rural community if “waving and greeting” (a rural friendliness) are lacking.

Friendliness also assists in making community warmth an important quality. Friendliness and warmth are the base and mortar which adds firmness, depth, width and strength to all the special values of rural Midwest America. Since their founding, rural churches have drawn on the quality of friendliness and have the challenge of preserving this quality for future generations. The quality of friendliness is diminishing as the non-agricultural rural people move into rural communities. They lack the common interest, vocation, and associations.

E. Cohesiveness—A strong bond of fellowship and togetherness in small rural communities provide a genuine unity among the people. Closeness emerges from common interests, common background, and similar goals and vocations. A sense of “community” is a recognized gift to the community that comes from rural culture. Names and faces come together more readily within the experience of shared space. People meet and interact at the post office, the grocery store, the coffee shop, the gas station, the seed and fertilizer dealers, and at school athletic events. The fellowship at school events is a strong contributor to the cohesiveness of the community. Rural churches, especially Missouri synod ones, are not always strong contributors to cohesiveness because of their aloofness toward the community. A majority of pastors in this research saw no need for involved support of community activities. Congregations of such pastors are unhappy with their attitude.

F. Community is Extended Family—Cohesiveness relates strongly to the community as an extended family. Again close, personal relationship to the members of the community cause people to reach out to assist others in time of need. Meeting each other regularly and daily develops a relationship which is close, supportive, and family-like.

People in rural communities have three extended families—biological, community, and the local church. During the first half of the twentieth century the biological and congregational family was considered as one within the extended family base. The congregation was made up of several biological family groups, often inter-related. The focus, strength and extended family base has changed the past several decades since most of the youth who leave for college do not return home but get jobs elsewhere. Thus, the biological family groups in the congregation have gotten smaller. The local congregation as the extended family tends to be restrictive and often not community minded and involved. The community as the extended family has become more significant since it is more inclusive of community residents and not restricted to small denominational groups, an act appreciated by the community and also by the LC-MS lay members, but not always by the LC-MS clergy.

G. Schools—County and community residents consider the location of schools within the district to be very important. The schools in rural areas provide the gathering place for the fellowship opportunities of community members. Athletic events and other celebrations provide the opportunity for members of the community to share needs and concerns and provide support for one another. School events, provide a place, occasions and time to maintain and increase the sense of “community” spirit. Churches in times-past provided a communication center, fellowship, and opportunities for mutual support. But this function has now been shifted to public schools. The church, especially LC-MS ones, failed to meet the social fellowship and communication needs because of its failure to become involved in community celebrations and school events.

Many school districts have been consolidated once or twice and the communities recognize that, with the continued decline in rural population, consolidation will happen again. The number of school districts will decline one-third by the year 2020. Consolidations are feared and strongly resisted because they often become ugly and destroy friendships within school districts and villages. One county presently has four school districts and realizes that “down the road,” perhaps by 2010, there will be only one school district in the county. They anticipate two consolidations: from four to two, and then from two to one. They are planning to resist it with great energy and money. Excessive time required for children to ride the bus and distance to support athletic events are given as a reason to fight consolidation. Rather than consolidate people would pay higher taxes to maintain quality, and thereby keep their schools.

Rural consolidated schools pride themselves in providing quality education for their constituents. Recipients of education in rural areas are considered quality individuals. Graduates of rural schools are able to compete with graduates of large metro schools and excel in all disciplines. Colleges and universities normally appreciate students from rural schools because they add a quality to student bodies.

Rural congregations have not consolidated and merged as rural schools have. The questions being asked: “Should churches follow the same consolidation trend ?” Can they survive if they don’t? Could more effective ministry be provided through rural congregations merging?

H. Fellowship—People who “neighbor” associate with each other and look for opportunities to chat. Farmers drive to town daily and meet for coffee. This activity is an important part of each day. Only variable is the planting and harvesting seasons. Coffee time is well-known throughout the community. The early coffee-shift is 6:30 a.m.; a second shift at 9:30 a.m. They “neighbor” by sharing concerns, giving counsel, and listening to each other’s needs. Topics discussed daily are futures, prices, hedging, harvest, rain, the best seed, politics, etc. This farmer talk crosses all denominational and political lines.

Rural churches previously provided the necessary opportunities for fellowship among the farmers. The need for fellowship expanded to include other farmers beyond their own church members. The local coffee shop or other gathering place took over what the church gave up, thus losing this opportunity of fellowship service. Our congregations lost by default their leadership position regarding fellowship.

As Nebraska District President I suggested to rural congregations, especially to those in small villages, to make their facilities available for coffee and conversation for the farmers and community people and a gathering place for the elderly. They offered the excuses: we would have to get someone to keep it clean; it might interfere with members using it; maintenance of furnishings and equipment would be difficult; etc. None of the congregations accepted the challenge and all failed to see the opportunities and importance of serving the community.

I. Reasonable, Low Rent and Low Cost of Living—The price of good homes in small communities is very reasonable. A nice home in a small community might bring \$15,000; the same home might bring \$30,000 in a large community. This condition doesn’t encourage building homes for rentals in small rural communities. People will build homes for themselves in small communities if they plan to live there permanently and are not concerned about the services available. People are willing to commute 15 or so miles one way because of the low cost of rent. Rentals are usually occupied at half or less cost than those in a larger community.

J. Less Crime and Drugs—It’s difficult to steal and commit crimes in a community where everyone knows everyone, and also knows what piece of equipment, automobiles, bicycles, etc., belongs to which neighbor. The people admit that crime and drugs exist, but on a small scale and often not visible. The common rural value system is a crime and drug deterrent.

K. Strong Work Ethic—Farmers work from early to late, sun up to sun down and longer if necessary. Farmers are not inclined to think in terms of 8 to 5 clock hours but are more inclined to work until the job is finished, especially during the planting and harvesting season. Businesses and manufacturers enjoy setting up their business in rural and small town communities because of a strong work ethic which contributes to the quality of rural living and assists the economy by providing job opportunities.

In rural areas everyone knows what everyone else in the community is doing. Everyone is planting at planting time; everyone is harvesting at harvest time. The farmer not only looks forward to the harvest but is involved in it, an excellent example for the members of the rural congregation. Life is a natural cycle from preparation to seeding and harvesting. Each year the farmer repeats the acts of the previous year, but always tries to improve by raising better crops, improving the cow herd, etc. There is a joy in having a new start every

year, a chance to do better and to improve. This creates a cohesiveness and a strong bond among rural people and promotes positive interpersonal relationships within rural communities.

The rural culture promotes a value system unique to itself, especially to the Midwest. Rural culture is a way of life expressed in its heritage. It is a valid culture like Black and Native American cultures are. The rural culture is considered to be a quality life style appreciated by those who live in rural America. It becomes part of the person - "You can take the person out of the rural culture, but you can't take the rural culture out of the person." If people are truly rural, they will always appreciate their rural background and heritage, even if they are removed from it. When congregations and communities celebrate a centennial or similar anniversaries, former rural people will travel many (thousands) miles to celebrate their rural heritage with family and friends. Thousands of people have left the rural areas over the past four decades for jobs in the cities. Today, many of these same people are seeking ways and opportunities to return to the rural areas and enjoy the benefits of their cultural roots. Rural areas, especially in a fifty mile radius of large cities and job centers, are growing in population. This is a special opportunity for ministry and growth for the rural church. The future of rural culture is unknown, a grave concern for those who love it and want it for their children and grandchildren.

The Rural Church--Congregation

The rural Lutheran church of the Midwest has its roots back to the time of the 1862 Homestead Act. Great numbers of people poured into the Midwest, some directly from Europe. Others had been members of Lutheran congregations in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. They were lured into the Midwest because of cheaper land and sometimes free land for homesteading.

Family members, friends, and relatives would settle in a given area. Strangers and those not related to the group would be brought into the community and become one with them because of common concerns, needs, and work. To their credit, many of these pioneer men and women, though they sought and found a new home for themselves, were not satisfied until they were also supplied spiritually.

Preaching stations and congregations were organized because of the zeal and faithfulness of some of these Lutheran pioneers. They did not want to live without the Word and Sacraments. Districts and Synodical leaders considered it important to provide pastors to congregations on the Midwest frontier. Though pastors served many congregations, missionaries at large—often call circuit riders—were called to explore the vast unchurched portions of the Midwest and gather scattered Lutherans into congregations or at least hold them for the church by holding occasional services until a congregation could actually be organized. Many became members of Lutheran congregations by their association with members in the community with little and often no instruction in Christian Doctrine.

Our LC-MS church's in the Midwest, (Kansas, Nebraska, and North and South Dakota) made a concerted and determined effort to gather together the many scattered Lutherans within the state. It was impossible to reach all of them because not enough missionaries were put in the field of the Midwest as new settlements sprang up rapidly so that the pastors in the field were not always aware of them (E.F. Wegener, p. 14).

Many early rural congregations, especially the Missouri Synod and the Catholic ones started parochial schools shortly after they became organized. They sought to provide spiritual nurturing for their children and basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. They determined to give direction in all subjects taught. Congregations with parochial schools were and are close knit congregations with a strong cohesiveness as they had and have a special ingredient of sharing a common need, joy, and joint involvement with educating their children in an environment controlled by them. In the early years, the pastor also taught the children in the school. Early parochial schools had a strong similarity to the rural one-room school buildings-structure, size, subjects taught, etc.

Congregations placed a high importance upon rural parochial schools throughout the 20th century until the present day. Financial support per member for the Lord's work of congregations with schools has always been higher than that of congregations with no schools. Levels of spiritual maturity and Biblical and doctrinal knowledge are higher in congregations whose children have an hour, five days per week, of Catechism and

Bible history instruction. Memorizing the catechism and some hymns increases the level of Biblical knowledge and also puts the roots of the congregation and its members deep into its traditions.

The early church along with early settlers in the Midwest endured many hardships such as droughts, grasshoppers and other crisis, leaving permanent effects on the rural church. Like the settlers and their families who were rugged and strong individuals, the rural church was also strong and tenacious.

According to the history of the Districts, the early rural church grew by gathering in scattered Lutherans who moved in to claim and settle on land claimed by homestead and purchase. Once the congregations were established and the frontier vanished, the congregations continued to show biological growth. A rural farm family would give birth to two and more farm families depending on the number of sons desiring to farm. The rural Lutheran congregations from their beginning were self centered, turned-in, concerned about themselves, and not really concerned about the unchurched. This aloofness has remained a characteristic of the rural church to the present.

Rural congregations were established where clusters of families settled. Church buildings were all traditional, often located on a hill, and visible for miles. Assisted by members, the trustees took care of maintaining church building and grounds. Since many of the rural church buildings were built in the early part of the 20th century and are still in use, the style and shape of the rural church buildings remained similar until recently. Many are not handicap accessible and in need of maintenance. A majority of the rural-small town churches is in good repair, some with vinyl siding.

Rural congregations motivated for growth are aggressive and committed to ministry. Many have added new narthexes which contribute to fellowship before and after the worship. Some of these same congregations have made their facilities handicap accessible. The pastor's office and a few rooms for Sunday School are often part of a new narthex.

The ministry service area, a six to 10 mile radius, related to the transportation and communication available when the rural congregation was formed. This narrow focus has remained to the present time. In nearly every congregation studied, the ministry service area was the local village and a small radius around the church of six to 15 miles. Congregations do recognize that this service area should be extended.

The local congregation, the center of the social function and activities, held mission festivals once or twice a year with special guest preachers, a carry-in potluck dinner, and refreshment stand, a high point of the year for the rural congregation. Neighboring congregations were invited and many attended. This gathering offered opportunity for special fellowship in the best rural tradition. Those few who still have a mission festival omit the fellowship and special speakers.

The rural congregation served as the social and communication center up through the Thirties. Because of this service most of the people in a given ministry service area belonged to the congregation. Walther League served as the social and spiritual function for the youth. Teenagers were not given a choice of whether to attend or not to attend. They just went as was expected of them because parents believed they needed this spiritual and social contact and wanted the church to serve as the center for their fellowship activities. Funerals were an important event for the members and the community. The people's close tie to each other and to the land served as a strong support group for the deceased member's family. Funeral worship services often have as many non-members in attendance as members of the congregation.

During the decade of the Forties and Fifties, the church lost some of its influence as the social, fellowship and communication center of the community. The one-room schools were being closed as rural school districts were consolidated into new ones. Frequently, new modern school facilities were built in the open country or near larger towns and villages.

By the late Forties and early Fifties the schools with their athletic events became the social and communication center of the rural community. This strengthened the ties with non-members in the community and diminished the ties with congregation members. Then, as now, the farmers, their families, and small-town people attend all the home games and often travel to out-of-town games. At school events, they keep up with each other and share concerns, joys, and successes. During half time, they mingle, drink coffee, and visit. For many this fellowship is the important feature of the school events. Farmers stand outside the fence of the

football field and visit during the whole football game, keeping one ear on the game but are really more interested in the conversation with fellow farmers. They know the players, but also the parents, brothers and sisters of the players and remember how the older brothers and sisters played when they were in high school. This strengthens the extended family of the community and diminishes the extended family of the congregation. The church lost its second area of influence when it lost its position as primary extended family for the community. The congregation is on the outside looking in, as a spectator. Not being involved in the community and school activities in 90 percent of rural congregations is a glaring weakness among them today.

Membership size of the congregation is a non-determining factor regarding its “ruralness”. Several congregations in rural America have over 400 members. Congregations in rural communities of less than 2,500 population are considered “rural” regardless of the size of membership.

Denominations continue to be asked “Can the rural churches survive?” If present trends continue, people fear that only a few rural churches will survive. The net loss of members in LC-MS rural congregations is substantial overall. The present net loss of rural congregations in our Synod is small, different from the trends which apply to other institutions in rural and small town America. Since the small rural open country one-room schools are nearly eliminated, what about the rural church? Some county governments are considering consolidation with neighboring county governments. Business will consolidate and offer services to two or more communities. Insurance agencies, medical services, photographers, etc. will have an office in each of several communities. Other businesses and entities merge or close when population declines and the cost of operations increases. What does this strong trend say to rural churches?

A rural church is a congregation of Christian people whose lifestyle is agriculturally oriented and who belong to the agricultural community (Hunter, p. 16). Rural orientation carries with it characteristics which have an enormous impact on a Christian church. It helps describe how they think—and how they perceive reality, thus, suggesting how they perceive their church (Hunter, p. 17).

While rural schools did not survive, rural churches in small communities and open country have survived. Rural churches are not in serious jeopardy in our Synod at this time but will become so if we ignore them. Only a couple congregations in each of the Midwest Districts are thinking in terms of closing, a very small percent. They are tenacious, they hang on, and they keep on serving because rural ministry, a consistent way of life, is more about presence than programs. Rural ministry is a way of life and hasn’t changed. Programs developed by the National church body normally don’t fit well with rural ministry because of its unique communal orientation. Indeed, the rural church with its giftedness has much to share with the people of God and the community. Good gifts, recognized and developed, are reasons to celebrate. The rural churches are valuable and important to the rural communities and the denominations to which they belong.

We need to give attention to rural congregations in our districts, their ministry and organizational characteristics, and to the relationships of rural congregations to their communities. When some services are lost in the community, when a community goes from full service to mini-service or no services, the church can and should have a greater importance as an institution in rural communities. Very few congregations have considered the opportunities to become a strong pillar of strength and stability for the community. Established on God’s Word, they continue to do the important things—Sunday worship, ministering to the members, supporting foreign missions, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School—but often in isolation, somewhat unaware of or even unconcerned about whole community needs.

Rural congregations relate to their community in a variety of ways. Some claim no identity and remove themselves from physical conditions around them. Others are minimally involved and visible. The majority of the congregations identified considers AAL benefit events as an important dimension in assisting them in social ministry and in meeting the needs of the community. These benefit events relieve their guilt and make them feel good because they are responding indirectly as a church in the community.

Quite obviously, our rural congregations are not involving themselves in extra local programs and activities. Rather they remain what they were in the past, local institutional organizations of limited involvement in the community with their primary attention focused within themselves, their own congregational programs and activities.

Community involvement is a must for pastor and congregation in rural communities. Areas of possible involvement vary from place to place since each community has unique opportunities and needs. The congregation must determine how to get involved and put forth an intentional effort for involvement. Fewer than ten congregations in the research were involved in special ways—providing meals for the elderly; supporting and participating in a community teen center; leading a clean-up of God’s creation (ecology) in communities and roadsides; giving special attention to senior citizens; developing a community child care and senior citizens center; and community service organizations.

Members of the congregation expect their pastor to be visibly involved, known and appreciated by the membership and also by the members of the community. Farmers come to town and drink coffee at a common gathering place—a local cafe, the feed and seed house, or co-op station. The business people drink coffee with them. Only fifteen percent of all the pastors in the research avail themselves of this opportunity to drink coffee with the farmers and business people. The pastor’s drinking coffee with the farmers, church members, community members and leaders, and town business people is an excellent way to learn, observe, and see the hopes, joys, concerns, and problems of his members and of the community. When the pastor drinks coffee with the farmers and business people, the members love it and consider it important for ministry. A young pastor in Iowa drinks coffee with the farmers every morning at 6:30 a.m. He often makes the second run at 9:00 a.m. Many members made a special point to inform me that their pastor drinks coffee with the farmers at 6:30 a.m. They appreciate that he is an early riser. Farmers do not appreciate a pastor who sleeps in and is a late riser.

The primary social event in small rural communities is athletic games and other functions of the local school. These are important events and are attended by the members of the community, even those who do not have children in school. The community appreciates when their pastor attends these events and mingles with the people of the community. This event provides another opportunity to learn, observe and recognize the hopes, joys, concerns, and problems of his members, the community members, and the community as a whole. He will be viewed as a contributing member of the community and will experience opportunities for ministry.

Communities and schools expect pastors to be involved in their programs and celebrations. Some pastors are involved, and are quiet about their involvement. The majority strictly follows Synodical guidelines. Members of the congregation accept a pastor’s refusal, but are not happy with his decision, often blaming Synod for this kind of pastoral behavior.

Church esteem, a determining factor for rural ministry, is commonly at low level in rural and small town congregations. The esteem of rural congregations has eroded considerably since the agri-community crisis of the 1980s. Currently it seems to be leveling off somewhat but is on the low side and still on a downward trend. Individual self-esteem and church or congregation esteem have several similar features. The symptoms and outcomes of low church esteem follow the same course as a low personal self image does. Depression and apathy are characteristics of both.

Individual members make up the corporate congregation and express the individual feelings about the congregation. These feelings are expressed in many ways and together become the feeling of the congregation. Member feelings toward their congregation reflect the church esteem of the congregation. The following are some of their feelings: “We are a small congregation; we can’t do much. We are not very good; we can’t expect much. If only we had more members.” The declining rural population contributes to the low church esteem because it is perceived that congregations will get even smaller. “We have no future as a small rural congregation. We can’t afford a pastor of our own. We have to depend on a neighboring congregation to share their pastor with us. We only have a part-time pastor. We just hold our own. We are not worth much and are not important since we can’t afford a full-time pastor.” Church esteem is affected by a part time pastor and a dual parish, indicating a less than ideal situation.

Small rural churches very often call Seminary graduates who sometimes have no desire to serve in rural parishes. A mismatch between congregation and pastor causes many graduates to stay a very brief time, two to four years. In a period of 15 years a congregation may be served by four or five graduates with a vacancy period after each. Congregations “keep shifting gears” from one graduate to the next. Congregations feel as if they are being used as a stepping stone for the graduate to get to bigger and better places. Congregations don’t

appreciate being “used” or “walked on.” This condition keeps church esteem very low and makes congregations feel second rate.

A mismatch of pastor and people causes a high level of anxiety. A conflict normally develops and unity of ministry and congregation erodes. Ministry is hindered and people begin “to go inactive” and some leave. “We can’t afford to lose members” is voiced by concerned and active members. It is difficult for a congregation to maintain a good feeling about itself when it loses members. Losing a good member causes a deep wound, leaving a scar which remains tender for some time. Seeing the former active family around the community on a regular basis reminds the membership of their conflict and mismatch of pastor and people. People who leave a congregation over a conflict, seldom, if ever, return when the conflict is settled and the ministry is going great under new pastoral leadership. Rural congregations have tender scars which frequently get bumped, reminding them of previous pain.

The close communion practice caused very little concern fifty years ago. Pastors, parents, parochial school teachers, grandparents, and relatives told teenagers to find a Lutheran spouse. Very few married outside the church and if they did, they were expected to join the Lutheran church. Today a Lutheran marrying a Lutheran is an exception, not the rule. A LC-MS marrying a LC-MS is even a greater exception. Almost all families have either a son, daughter, or grandchildren who have married outside the church. Family members and other members are pained when members of a family who were former members are denied the sacrament because they are no longer affiliated with the LC-MS. Nothing has changed between the members of the biological family, even though several may be members of another Christian denomination. “They believe the same as they did when they were LC-MS,” so they state with much feeling. Rural people have a close relationship with members of the community and do not make or accept the theological distinctions which denominations make, especially the very conservative LC-MS pastors and churches.

Members do not feel good about their congregation when it places their Christian friends and relatives in a lesser Christian category, especially when they realize that some LC-MS pastors and congregations practice “close” communion instead of “closed” communion and would commune their relatives. A husband-father attended worship with his family because his wife has a Lutheran background. He went through adult instruction class twice, but didn’t join. He continued to worship with his family on non-communion Sundays. He refused to go on communion Sunday as he was offended by the practice of “closed” communion. He recently joined an LC-MS congregation with a more evangelical stance.

Families with members who have married other than LC-MS spouses are increasing in number and getting more negative and unhappy with their church. “Closed” communion is causing some very negative and derogative comments. “The LC-MS communion practice is like sorting cattle at the loading gate,” expressed a layman whose congregation is in conflict with their pastor over his “closed” communion practice. “It is very difficult to feel good about your congregation if your (Christian) biological relatives and Christian friends can’t commune with you and you plan to spend eternity together in Heaven,” sums up the pain and guilt for many, especially those who have family members in other Christian denominations. There needs to be a high level of understanding and sensitivity among the members and pastor on such issues as communion practice.

We are a needs-oriented society. Everyone has physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs. Members expect their congregation and their pastor to meet these needs. Rural congregations seldom seek to determine member needs, let alone community needs. When spiritual and other needs of members are not met, the members have bad feelings about their congregation, producing low church esteem.

Can low-level church esteem be reversed and improved? It is a very difficult task and takes joint and concentrated effort and energy of pastor and members. The grace of God, the forgiveness of Christ, and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit are the realities that build self-worth of all Christians and congregations. God still chooses to work through His people. He doesn’t choose to give or increase church esteem by the Word of His power as He did at the creation when He said “Let there be --- and there was ---.” It takes serious high level energy, effort, time, and involvement by the pastor and members. Satan is happy and thrilled when a congregation has low church esteem and works at keeping it low. Satan continues to build barriers and obstacles so that church esteem remains low.

Church esteem improves as the members grow to feel good about the congregation, its ministry, and its members. The congregation needs to see successes and celebrate them and experience a quality ministry. Intentional time, energy and effort needs to be given at developing quality ministry in all areas. Members and guests are not satisfied with mediocre products needed for family and farm. Neither are they satisfied with mediocre ministry because members and guests are not motivated by mediocre worship and ministry.

A Full Service Ministry

Our Lord Jesus Christ gives us a perfect example of ministering to people through His Life and Word expressed in Matthew 20:26-28; “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” Christ’s earthly life was one of service to all people. Our life as individuals and as members of the local church should show that we follow Christ’s example—living a life of service as His ministers.

The word “church” is not necessarily descriptive of ministry. Pastors in their confirmation classes define the word “church” to indicate 1) the visible church of God; 2) a denomination; 3) a local congregation; d.) a house of worship. The word “church” doesn’t assist people, especially the unchurched to understand what takes place at the church location or by the people who frequent the place. Ministry Service Center is a good term for the church, the congregation and its ministry. It is descriptive of what the church is about and membership in it. The ministry of God’s people should follow the pattern of Christ’s ministry. The ministry of the congregation should be a ministry of service to God’s people and the community.

“Ministry Service Area” denotes the immediate, local and geographical area for ministry by the members of the Ministry service center. The term is descriptive and indicates a necessary base which is broad and inclusive, expressing what the church is all about and still maintains. Rural congregations had and still maintain a rather narrow focus of ministry; their membership only seldom include a broader community. At best, included is the small local community.

All but five of the congregations researched have a very narrow focus for their ministry. Their ministry service area is their community within a radius of five to ten miles. Many rural congregations have several small villages within a fifteen mile radius and have never considered those villages or the open country around them as their ministry service area. Several congregations in the research have more than five small villages within fifteen miles. The ministry of rural congregation focuses on the members and thus the ministry service area is neglected and without serious consideration. A third of the people visited on the streets and in the stores are not attending a church and our congregations are giving no special and intentional effort to reach them.

“Areas of Ministry” and “Ministry Areas” are used interchangeably to indicate activities such as worship, outreach, youth, music, etc. These two terms speak about the specific areas of ministry which can be addressed by people in a tangible way.

A strong relationship exists between a full service community as a Service Center to meet community needs and the congregation as a Ministry Service Center to meet the spiritual needs of its members and the Ministry Service Area. When communities (towns) no longer have full services for its people, nothing really maintains its present population or encourages numerical growth. When a community loses a particular service—educational, medical, or other service—a domino effect often occurs and other services also leave. Communities work hard and are willing to spend much money for resources which enable them to remain a full service community, a life and death matter for them. The same is true for the local congregation. When the congregation determines, by default or otherwise, not to offer full service ministry as a Service Center, there is little to maintain and encourage its present membership size or growth. When the congregation, for whatever reason, drops or loses a ministry service, again the domino effect occurs and other services are minimized or lost.

If a congregation doesn’t offer a youth ministry program, families with teenagers will not have their spiritual needs met, causing unhappiness and dissatisfaction. It will also be difficult to attract new families, especially those with teenagers. When the teenage ministry is dropped, teenage Bible class is dropped and

Sunday School also is affected since many families have both teenagers and younger children. Without a youth ministry, congregational worship and other areas are also affected, beginning a decline toward demise. People will avoid joining and associating with a dying congregation and seek out other churches and organizations which will meet their spiritual and other needs. A LC-MS family moved into a small community and visited the LC-MS congregation. Sunday School is offered but not for the age groups of the visiting family. The members immediately offered to start a Sunday School class to meet their needs. However, the family visited other Christian churches in the community and joined one with a better Sunday School. A Sunday School meeting their need is more important than remaining with LC-MS. The congregation needs to be aware of this condition and be willing to spend the time, energy, involvement, money, and other resources so that full service ministry continues to be offered to the members and the Ministry Service Area. Members need to realize that it is a life and death matter for the congregation.

Fewer than half of the nearly fifty congregations in this study have a full service ministry. In discussing this issue with them, they agreed to having seen the similarity between the decline and demise of rural communities and the decline and demise of rural congregations. Rural congregations which have accepted and adopted a declining trend of rural communities as inevitable are not motivated to change it. They firmly believe there is nothing they can do; consequently, a defeatist attitude occurs which generates a high level of apathy throughout rural communities and congregations.

A full service ministry of high quality is critical to a congregation's vitality. Mediocrity is never acceptable in any area of ministry. The full service ministry should focus and be directed toward both the members and the community. If the ministry of a congregation is full service, one of good quality and which is directed at the needs of both congregation and the community, that congregation will grow both spiritually and numerically. The twelve areas of ministry for a full service congregation are as follows:

1. Worship: _ Worship carries a high priority in ministry and especially in a full service ministry. God works through the means of grace, the Word and Sacraments, in directing and changing peoples lives. The Gospel needs to be given central focus as, "It is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes" Romans 1:16.

The average worship attendance in the six participating districts ranges from 36.6 to 41.1 percent. In the nearly 50 congregations in this project, the ranges are from 33 to 73 percent of the baptized membership (1991). A low average worship attendance indicates dying congregations with an older membership, mini-service, self-centeredness, a focus on traditional worship, and only a concern for their active members. The high average worship attendance are full service ministry congregations which are visitor and nonmember sensitive, have a good music program with several choirs, and show an intentional effort for worship to be of high quality and joyful.

The congregation members need to maintain and keep a high level of commitment to Word and Sacrament ministry and recognize that they belong to God's family which is built on the teachings of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the Chief Cornerstone and foundation Eph. 2:19b-20). The early disciples and the first Christians had a strong commitment to the Word and Sacraments as expressed in Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to breaking of bread and to prayer." The Word and Sacrament ministry is the basis of all ministries and must be preeminent. The power is the Gospel clearly indicated in Romans 1:16 "I'm not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of every one who believes."

Common concerns are that "the youth and young adults don't worship." "The people who worship are older and with graying hair." "When visitors worship, they don't return to worship again." The youth, young adults, and the inactives have seldom, if ever, been asked "why they don't come and are not involved?" The active and traditional leadership believes the youth, young adults, and inactives should appreciate what is offered in worship. After all, its meaningful to them and "this is the way its been done for years."

Rural congregations are traditional in their worship. Many still use The Lutheran Hymnal (1941) and a good number are using Lutheran Worship. The older generation appreciates traditional Worship because it meets their needs—they have it memorized and know what comes next. A lady said, “I like the old hymnal as I have it memorized and I don’t have to open the Hymnal to the liturgy.” If their mind wanders, drifts, it is easy to pick up and get involved again because they know the liturgy. Their primary concern and need seem to be self-serving.

Traditional worship is unfamiliar to visitors, non-Lutherans, inactives, young adults, teenagers, and does not meet their needs. Printed orders of worship helps the pastor develop a worship service which is sensitive to visitors and the unchurched. The worship can be designed around the theme of the day, with liturgy emphasizing the message of the Scripture lessons. Since it is contemporary, the liturgy is understood and appreciated because it uses our language of today and speaks more clearly to their needs and those of the community. It takes a great deal of the pastor’s time, but he’ll find the effort worthwhile.

A pastor of a congregation in the project began using Creative Worship (CPH) and developed orders of worship for every Sunday. In order to meet the needs of the traditional older members, once every other month he would use page 15 of The Lutheran Hymnal. In the tenth month, when he determined to use page 15 of The Lutheran Hymnal, an elderly lady in her 80’s said to the pastor right before the service, “Do we have to use that old liturgy?” She frowned and indicated that the new printed orders which change from Sunday to Sunday are better. The pastor smiled as the lady entered the sanctuary and thought to himself, “We are home free, if this elderly lady in 10 months can grow and appreciate “Creative Worship” more than The Lutheran Hymnal liturgy, we can move ahead aggressively to meet the worship needs of the unchurched, inactives, teens, and young adults.”

Those regular members, firmly in the faith, and active in worship, should put aside their needs of traditional worship and adapt and learn to appreciate new forms of worship which meets the comprehensive needs of all kinds of worshippers. The pastor and the congregation leaders must decide between meeting the worship needs of the traditional and active members or meeting the needs of the unchurched, inactives, young adults, and teens. A majority of the congregations in this study admit that their worship is focused to meet the needs of the active and traditional members. Most could understand the issue but were not yet motivated to make a strong commitment toward worship as an entry point of ministry for the unchurched and inactives.

A congregation, devastated because of a mismatched pastor, lost nearly half of its membership in the conflict. The worship attendance declined to about 30 per Sunday. The congregation revitalized itself under the leadership of the next pastor, an older man about to retire. The worship attendance increased to an average of 95 per Sunday during his first full year. It was quite common to have 15 to 25 percent visitors in worship on a Sunday. This large increase in worship is attributed to “user friendly” and joyful worship. Printed orders of service are used every Sunday which are member and visitor sensitive. Here the pastor relies heavily on Creative Worship (CPH).

Congregations are well-served if the members are given the opportunity to evaluate their worship service once or twice a year. Input from the congregation assists the pastor and elders in their planning by designing an appealing worship focused on the spiritual needs of the members.

The congregations should ask guests and visitors at worship services to evaluate and share their feeling regarding the worship experience. An evaluation form could be given to all visitors as they enter the church. They should be encouraged to fill it out and leave it on a table in the narthex or give it to an usher after the service. This information helps the pastor and the congregation to determine how well they are meeting the needs of their visitors. It assists congregations to give attention to visitors and remain focused on the Great commission. Since motels, restaurants, and other service organizations offer their guests the opportunity to evaluate their services and accommodations, congregations might as well take advantage of the same process.

The congregation must be willing to accommodate to the changing needs without compromising the substance of their faith. They must labor prayerfully, cautiously, yet intentionally to seek a balance between the old and the new, the traditional and the contemporary, the predictable and the surprising, the Law and the Gospel.

The congregation will improve itself by making a strong commitment to increasing worship attendance by a certain percent. A ten percent annual increase would be a realistic achievable goal and a very important ministry to its members and to the Ministry Service Area. The commitment of members urges them to share personally the joy and blessing of the worship experience with inactives and unchurched in the Ministry Service Area. When members continue to invite inactives and unchurched to meaningful, joyful worship, growth takes place and the congregation lives the love of Christ and the Great Commission. If there is no joy in a worship and of mediocre quality, members will hesitate to invite their relatives, neighbors, and friends. Statements of members frequently heard, “I don’t invite my friends to worship because nothing is offered,” and/or “I don’t invite my friends to worship with me on the Sunday when the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, because I’m embarrassed by our church’s position and practice of the Lord’s Supper.” The congregation should keep doing what they do well and what is appreciated. They should evaluate, improve, seek ways to reach the unchurched, and increase the worship attendance. Worship should be of good quality, “user friendly,” and especially “visitor sensitive,” with a strong focus on the Gospel.

2. Music Ministry: Music plays a vital role in ministry. Choirs enhance worship, assist in leading, add an element of celebration, and make it more vibrant. Singing, very much a part of Old Testament worship, is clearly indicated in many of the Psalms: “Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song” (Psalm 95:12). Congregational singing and choirs are a rich part of our Lutheran heritage.

Less than 20 percent of the congregations studied have a good aggressive music program. A few congregations have an adult choir which sings at special and festival occasions but lacks the every-Sunday enhancement of worship. Music ministry is a very weak area in over half of the rural congregations in the research. A few congregations have the Sunday School children sing once a month or every other month, a good practice worthy of expansion. One congregation in this project has three choirs—an adult, teenage and children’s choir—and three choir directors. One of the choirs sings every Sunday. Their average worship attendance is the highest of the nearly 50 congregations in this study. This congregation of 209 baptized members (1990) shows a high level of commitment on the part of members and choir directors.

Rural congregations would do well by having an active Adult, High School, and Sunday School choir. If each of these choirs would sing once a month, the congregation would enjoy special music and singing nearly every Sunday, thus soundly enhancing services. Special music at every worship service appeals to visitors, guests, and members because almost everyone appreciates hearing choirs, solos, good congregational singing, and good music. Growing congregations of all denominations consider good music and singing an important element to maintain growth and vibrant ministry. Rural congregations which want to grow need to expand their music ministry.

3. Bible Study- Adult: A Sunday morning Bible class is an excellent practice for all rural congregations. A valuable addition would be several home (cell) Bible study groups led by lay leaders. Bible study is important for our spiritual nurture. Accordingly, God, through the apostle Peter (I Peter 2:2) encourages us, “Be like newborn babies, always thirsty for the pure spiritual milk, so that by drinking it you may grow up and be saved (TEV).” We should have the same craving for God’s Word as an infant craves the milk from its mother’s breast or the bottle.

Adult Bible Study is a weakness in rural congregations. Half of the congregations in the research have a Sunday Morning Adult Bible class. About 10 percent of the adults in these congregations are in Bible study with fellow Christians. The most common excuse for the lack of Adult Bible study classes is, “Our pastor has a dual parish and can’t teach one on Sunday morning.” “We can’t find a layman to lead it.” “Our people aren’t interested in Bible Study.” There is a lack of motivation and commitment on the part of the members to be involved in Bible Study. The growing congregations of the project have over twenty percent of the adults in

Bible study. Spiritual growth is in direct proportion to member involvement in Bible Study; i.e., numerical growth relates directly to spiritual growth.

The number of participants in Bible Study increases when the participants share their joy and spiritual growth in the Word and continue by inviting others to attend. Personal witness and personal invitation are the most effective way to increase the Bible Study participation. Christ Jesus encourages in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20), especially verse 20, "...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you..." As the number of participants in Bible Study increases, every area of congregational ministry improves and strengthens. Adult Bible Classes should be an outreach arm of the congregation, but only a couple congregations in the study use it as an entry point for membership and ministry.

4. Bible Study - Teenagers: Teaching people was an important dimension of Christ's earthly ministry. "And He was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village" (Mark 6:6). Jesus clearly indicates that teaching is the way to increase our faith. The teenage years are important and opportunities for spiritual growth are vital. Teenagers, having special needs and interests, need their own Bible Class for spiritual growth. Even if only one or two teenagers attend the Bible Class, it is still valid, offering a faith growing rewarding experience.

Only one in three congregations in this project offer a Sunday morning teenage Bible Study, a very weak area of rural ministry. The most common reason given: "The teenagers don't come to church or Bible class." "We have only a few teenagers." "They aren't interested in the church." The members share a rather hopeless and helpless feeling when they discuss Sunday involvement of teenagers. I perceive that congregations haven't evaluated or explored why their teenagers lack involvement. Congregations feel and think that developing a ministry for only a few is not worth the effort and isn't effective, a feeling that needs correcting.

Bible Class for teenagers is an important dimension of a total youth ministry. The teenagers involved in Bible Study will be blessed and well-prepared to meet the challenges of life. The Teenage Bible Class needs the personal commitment of parents and the available teenagers. The class should discuss and evaluate available options which might increase attendance and encourage a group commitment toward nurturing teenagers spiritually. I believe that there are teenagers in every Ministry Service Area, including non-members, who are not attending Worship or Bible Class. The Teenage Bible Study group should be an outreach arm of the congregation, inviting the non-member teenagers of the Ministry Service Area to Bible Study and Worship. Teenagers are an excellent group to train for witnessing, sharing the Gospel, and inviting their friends to Church and Bible Study.

5. Sunday School: The Sunday School is a very important dimension of the total Christian Education of the congregation. There should be a regular evaluation, at least annually, which involves teachers, pastor, and parents, regarding the effectiveness of the Sunday School, the curriculum, and reaching the unchurched in the Ministry Service Area. This commitment should not merely maintain something that is good and effective, but should improve the quality, involvement, and outreach.

All but two of the congregations in the project provided a Sunday School for their children. A congregation which didn't is very near closing because the young families with children have left. They offer mini-service ministry—only Sunday worship and the Lutheran Women's Missionary League. Another congregation was devastated by the previous pastor who was mis-matched with the congregation, resulting in many members leaving. Worship attendance dropped to 25 per Sunday. Sunday School was dropped. They lost all hope because on many Sundays not a single child was in church. Many members and many in the community believed this congregation was on the verge of closing. Under the leadership of their new pastor, the congregation is growing and has a Sunday School with nearly 30 enrolled. The Sunday School is very important in revitalizing a congregation.

The Sunday School area of ministry received more favorable comments and good ratings of all the areas rated. Congregations consider Sunday School important since it gives children important spiritual nurture. The congregations seemed to have enough teachers, mostly mothers, with a commitment to teach. Eighty percent of the congregations rated their Sunday School from good to very good. Available children is always listed as a concern of the congregations which are becoming older and grayer. Half of the congregations also list as a concern not having enough available teachers. None of the congregations used Sunday School as an intentional entry point for new members and is a strong weakness.

The Sunday School should certainly be an outreach arm of the congregation. The Sunday School teachers, on a regular basis, should encourage and equip children to invite their friends to join them at Sunday School and worship. There are children in the Ministry Service Area of every congregation who relate to no church or Sunday School. Children are not bashful and find joy in having their friends join them at Sunday School. The Sunday School assists parents in fulfilling their responsibility of bringing up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4).

6. Mid-Week School: Nearly half of the congregations in this research offer a mid-week Christian education program. The majority of those who offer this special program believes that Christian education gives a strong base of Biblical knowledge and enhances the Christian life. Most congregations focus nurture on the members. Only two congregations consider mid-week class an entry point into the ministry of the congregation. The congregations which do not offer mid-week classes have no motivation to initiate one.

A small Bible church of 30 family units, a total membership of 130 people in a community of 2,500, has a midweek Christian education program attended by 120 children, K6; 20 from middle school; and 30 of high school age. They have 42 adults giving leadership to the mid-week program. The attendance and involvement increases annually as four years ago the attendance was 45. Thirty percent of the children in attendance are members of the Bible Church, 30 percent are members of other local churches and 40 percent attend no church. This Bible Church has a larger attendance at mid week classes than at Sunday Worship. The pastor states that four years ago, he and the lay leaders were determined to discover some needs of the community and try to meet them. The need for Christian education and youth ministry surfaced as a strong need. Obviously, the small congregation is meeting their Christian education needs and making an impact on the community. It is using Christian education as an entry point for congregational ministry. A year ago the Lutheran Church in this community had six in mid-week classes. This clearly indicates that the Lutheran Church had not discovered the need for Christian education in the community and the Bible Church had discovered a need and met it and using it as an entry point of ministry.

A regular annual evaluation of the Christian education needs is important to ensure quality is maintained for the congregation and its children. The Mid-week Christian Education program is a very important agency for the congregation's total education program. It serves as a preconfirmation program for the children. A congregation in the study has a mid-week school enrollment of 34 of which a fourth are non-member. They receive several families annually by using it as an entry point for ministry. The congregation, through their total education program, is assisting parents to fulfill the encouragement of Christ Jesus in Matthew 19:14, "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'" The congregation benefits by offering a Mid-week program to the lower grades—a special blessing to the children, parents and congregation because it offers a good base of Biblical knowledge before confirmation instruction.

7. Vacation Bible School: Nearly every congregation in this project, "Preserving and Growing Rural Congregations," offers a Vacation Bible School. Several congregations didn't offer one because they "can't get teachers and no one would take the leadership." Only six congregations had a large number of non-members attending and one had as many nonmembers as members. Only a couple of congregations

use Vacation Bible School in an intentional way as an entry point for ministry. It is looked upon as ministry to “their own” and invited non-members.

One of the congregations in the study conducts its Vacation Bible School in June; another Protestant Church conducts one in August. All of the children in the community attend both VBS’s with teachers from both congregations. This ecumenical Vacation Bible School is appreciated by members of the LC-MS congregation and the entire community. Ecumenical VBS’s will increase as the rural population declines and our congregations get smaller. The extended family of the community is increasing in importance. This affects the community’s VBS offerings and other activities encouraging joint efforts by various Christian churches.

Vacation Bible School plays an important role in the ministry of congregation and Ministry Service Area, giving both spiritual Christian witness and growth. Vacation Bible School offers an excellent opportunity for the congregation to market its ministry. A strong Vacation Bible School of good quality should be used as a marketing tool, promoting a positive outreach in the Ministry Service Area. The Vacation Bible School staff should evaluate VBS immediately following its sessions to see if having a second VBS in another part of their Ministry Service Area is advisable. Quite possible is that certain villages in their Ministry Service Area do not offer a VBS to their immediate community. This activity would be an opportunity for the congregation to sponsor a visible ministry in a neighboring community.

8. Youth Ministry: Youth ministry is one of the weakest areas of ministry in rural congregations. Less than 10 percent of the nearly 50 congregations indicated an effective youth ministry program, but even these acknowledge a need for improvement. Nearly half of the congregations had no intentional youth ministry program. The common excuses given: only several teenagers in congregation; teenagers not interested; and no support from parents and lay counselors.

I perceive the congregations are not motivated to determine the needs of youth and not motivated to develop youth ministry to meet their needs. Congregations feel trapped. Declining rural population and church membership, produce a low church esteem and a “What is the use?” attitude. Rural congregations will continue to decline toward demise since half of the rural congregations have no intentional youth ministry program, or at best, a poor one. I am convinced that congregations can reverse the present trend.

Congregational members and youth profit when the congregation offers a program of the ministry for its youth. Size and numbers are not the issue but, rather ministry to individuals who have needs is the important concern. A youth ministry needs lay counselors who work with the pastor and with teenagers. Lay counselors need to be commended for their involvement in this special ministry. It is very likely there are a number of youth in the Ministry Service Area who relate to no church group, or whose congregations have no youth program. Counselors and participating youth should consider developing the youth ministry program as an outreach arm of the congregation, to serve youth in the Ministry Service Area, who have no active church home, and to be their Christian support group. There are probably some small congregations in the Ministry Service Area who offer no spiritual program for their youth; hence, congregations with youth services could fill a spiritual need for those without service to youth.

It is becoming common for small Christian congregations in rural areas to encourage their youth to attend a program of another denomination rather than offer one for only one or two people. An LC-MS congregation in the Sandhills of Nebraska, has a youth ministry of Christian education, a mid-week fellowship in its small village. The Catholic priest and the Methodist minister tell their parishioners to send their youth to the Lutheran Education and Fellowship program because of its excellence. The LC-MS congregation’s quality program of ministry serves the needs of members and the community, making an impact on this rural community.

Projects of ministry for teenagers are important and excellent training for living the Christian life. These projects should serve both the congregation and the community and should include relationships with people who have needs. A clear vision and definite goals expand the youth ministry for both members and

non-members. Youth ministry is one of the most sought after ministries when people decide upon a church home.

9. Elderly - Older Adult Ministry: One ministry area among older adults is for the sick, home bound, those with elderly handicaps, and those residing in nursing and long term care homes. Many rural congregations have as many and often more members above the age of 65 than 21 and under. Common in rural congregations is to have about 25 percent of their members above the age of 65. All of the congregations considered ministry to and for the older adults to be very effective and positive. Graying congregations consider their ministry to older adults highly important; also, the older adults give a large amount of the financial support.

A second area of ministry is older adults serving others. Only a couple of congregations had an intentional effort which involved older adults in ministry. Many older adults who are very healthy, would benefit greatly from active involvement in ministry. "Older adults calling on older adults" gives valuable assistance to the pastor. Congregations should seek opportunities to involve older adults in all areas of ministry. An excellent way to increase staff and work force is to involve older adults who are superb volunteers because of their wisdom and experience. They "know" the congregation and the community and have the available time to serve well.

10. Outreach-Evangelism-Inactives: Outreach Evangelism is a very weak area of ministry for rural congregations. The pastor is expected to do all of the evangelistic work. The members are not motivated to do outreach ministry because they feel uncomfortable calling on neighbors, relatives and friends. Evangelism is not easy when "everyone knows everyone else" and consider everybody "good people and Christian."

Only a couple of the congregations have an evangelism training program. Several pastors are active in outreach calls and said: "If it's going to get done, I'm going to have to do it." Seventy-five percent of the congregations have no intentional outreach to the unchurched and inactives in their ministry service area.

A congregation in the project which is growing has no formal outreach - Evangelism program. When the pastor and lay leaders were asked, "Why are you growing when you don't have an Outreach Ministry?" They responded: "Outreach and Evangelism is a way of life for our congregation." All areas of ministry, the boards, committees, and officers, have as their primary purpose reaching the unchurched, sharing the Gospel, and showing a spiritually caring attitude. When evangelism is a way of life for a congregation and its pastor, spiritual and numerical growth will certainly take place.

The rural areas have a surprisingly large number of unchurched people. Congregational consensus asserts that 10 to 50 percent of their Ministry Service Area is unchurched. Over a third of the congregations indicated that a third of the people in the Ministry Service Area are active in a congregation, a third are inactive, and a third are unchurched. Congregations seem comfortable with this consensus though unmotivated toward outreach to the unchurched and inactives. When a person considers the inactives and unchurched as prospects, about two-thirds of the rural areas are prospects for our rural congregations. The rural field is ripe and ready for harvest.

The members should recognize the opportunity to reach into outlying communities. Congregations need a prospect list (file) which is current and used by the pastor, lay leaders, Sunday school teachers, and those involved in outreach and evangelism. Lazy sales people have very few sales without a good prospect list. Likewise the congregation will find it difficult to grow without a prospect list of people who are unchurched, inactive, or have some need. A prospect list is useless unless it is for making calls. Only ten percent of the congregations in the research have a current prospect file for use by pastor and members.

People of rural congregations have the privilege of responding as "sent ones" of the Gospel. Christ Jesus said, "Do you not say, 'Four more months and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (John 4:35), and waiting for workers. Pastors and members of rural

congregations must open their eyes to see the rural harvest. Members should be like Jesus. “When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into the harvest field’” (Matthew 9:36-38). Rural congregations have superb opportunities and challenges in their rural mission fields. The only limitation is the lack of involvement of members in outreach.

Rural congregations need to make a strong commitment to reach the unchurched in the outlying communities of open country. These communities are an important rural mission field “in the front and back yard” of the congregation. The congregation has members who live in some of the villages and communities who offer an open door, an entrance into these communities and the wide-open country areas. The congregation has the privilege of sharing the Gospel, indicating commitment, and acceptance of their role in the Great Commission: “Therefore, go and make disciples...” (Matthew 28:18ff). The congregation should set a goal of an annual ten percent net increase in membership. Such a goal is achievable and keeps the congregation focused on the Great Commission.

Established goals to increase the membership is an exception, not the general practice among congregations in this research. Goals established were normally those set by pastors or the lay leaders, not a firm, intentional goal of the congregation. Only ten percent of the congregations thought in terms of establishing a goal to reach the unchurched and increasing membership. The congregation’s primary goal should be reaching the lost, the unchurched, even as Christ indicates in the parable of the lost sheep in Matthew 18:12-14, “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.” Every congregation of every denomination has members who have wandered off and many have never returned. Christ says in the parable, we (pastors and laity) should leave the faithful (the ninety-nine on the hillside), give our time and energy in seeking those who have wandered off and bring them back to the family of faith. A joy in ministry is bringing back to the faithful those who have wandered off from every denomination. We have established that many are unchurched and wandering, who are, perhaps, heading for hell. Therefore, the congregation needs as its highest priority reaching lost wanderers with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

11. Caring Ministry - Fellowship: Rural congregations are “small enough to care” and have a strong heritage of being “a neighbor” (Matthew 22:37-39), an important and positive feature of rural congregations. One of the strengths of rural areas and congregations in the past was the caring for one another, being a “good neighbor.” Farmers and people in small rural communities can really live the Word of Christ in Matthew 22:39, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” As farms and farm machinery have gotten larger, farmers get more independent and “being a neighbor” has lost some importance. Rural congregations should draw on this strong heritage of “being a neighbor” and become the most caring congregation in their Ministry Service Area. “We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The caring ministry is not just the pastor’s responsibility but the responsibility of every member. Older adults have the time and special expertise to be the care givers in a special way. Teenagers, too, have excellent opportunities to be care givers.

Rural congregations expect the pastor to call on them. Hence, successful rural pastors minister to their people by visiting them in their homes, a strong rural ministry tradition. The pastor calls on them not only when they are sick or dying but also to spend time with his people, showing them that he loves and cares for them. A close relationship between pastor and people is developed through pastoral calls. He should establish a goal of being in the home of his members at least once a year. A highly successful pastor in this research calls on his members twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall. A congregation will overlook inadvertent mistakes and poor sermons if he has a good pastoral relationship developed through member visitations. A

“calling pastor” will know the needs of his people and the needs of the community, enhancing his ministering to them. A pastor who visits is a pastor who genuinely cares for his people. People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.

The necessary personal touch in caring is important and possible in small and rural congregations. The congregation and its ministry profit when the pastor sends a personal note to members and non-members in the community for some special achievement and recognition. The birthdays and anniversaries of members are an excellent opportunity for the pastor to give his personal touch by sending a card with an appropriate message. A card with only a signature is cold and mechanical and not always appreciated. A lay person can send a note on behalf of the pastor and congregation, but this is not as effective as the pastor doing it himself in his own handwriting. In addition to the pastor’s contact, a lay person should also do this same kind of care-giving by notes and/or telephone on behalf of the congregation. Acts of charity are a special blessing in a small congregation and contribute to effective ministry. It is especially important to express special thanks to members involved in ministry as often they are taken for granted. The more frequent the contact with members by care givers, the stronger the cohesiveness within the congregational community, keeping members active and involved. (The congregation should pay for the postage, cards and note cards.)

12: Stewardship: Stewardship in rural congregations has been acts of giving to specific needs which are often determined from time to time. It is quite common for a rural congregation to build a new church or parsonage and have it paid for by dedication or within a couple years. If a new roof is needed, they do it themselves or have it done, and often pay for it in a couple of years. The Stewardship of needs (giving to specific needs) is considered a strength of rural congregations. After all, it has worked for a century in many rural congregations and served them well. Conservative and traditional rural congregations do not appreciate a debt. They would rather have money in the bank and many do.

The congregation should offer Bible Studies on Sunday morning and at cell groups to examine Scriptural stewardship, a total stewardship of time, talents (abilities) and money. By sharing the New Testament teaching of proportionate giving, participants through Bible study can experience joy and continued growth in the grace of giving. Too, the members would grow in their involvement in ministry as a portion of their total stewardship. Members of rural congregations experience joy in giving financial support for the Lord’s Work as the church is a vital part of their total life.

The congregation which lacks any of these 12 areas is not a full service ministry congregation. If a congregation by default or omission drops any of these 12 areas of ministry, it will begin to decline in membership and fail to meet the needs of the membership. For example, if a congregation drops the Teenage Bible Study, the next area to be dropped will be the Youth Ministry. Members who have teenagers will tend to be unhappy with the lack of ministry to their teenagers and may begin to look for another church in the area where ministry is offered to teenagers. Prospective members with teenagers would not consider joining a church which doesn’t offer a ministry for teenagers.

Each one of these twelve areas of ministry are very important. once a congregation is no longer a full service ministry, it becomes a mini-service ministry congregation. Even so mini-service ministry congregations can provide a valuable service to the members and the community, providing basic needs such as worship, funerals, Sunday School, etc. It will not grow, however, until it provides more services to and for the members and the community and works to become a full service ministry congregation.

Features which Enhance Rural Ministry

The twelve areas of ministry of a full service congregation work together and relate to each other as a unit. Eight additional features enhance, support, and add dimensions of quality to the full service ministry:

A Rural Style of Pastoral Leadership

Over the past two decades, pastoral leadership, important and critical for the rural congregation, is one of the primary causes of hurts in rural congregation. Since the middle 1970's, a mismatch between pastor and congregation has caused serious problems. A common and frequent comment by laity is, "Two (three) of the last four pastors we had were losers. We lost members which we could not afford to lose. The Seminary doesn't train pastors for rural ministry. They don't understand rural culture and its values."

Pastoral leadership must understand the rural congregation, agriculture, and the rural cultural heritage of the community and congregation. Rural congregations expect the pastor to call on them at their homes and farms. They expect him to be visibly involved in the community. Pastors in the rural parish must appreciate and understand rural people and grow in the knowledge of them. He must be one of them. A lay person said, "Christ came into the world and became one of us, but without sin. We expect our pastor to come to us and be one of us rural people." Christ served people, washed the disciples' feet, healed the sick, fed the people, traveled the dusty roads of Palestine and Galilee, and wore the same kind of sandals as did the people. And He is the Son of God. Pastors of rural parishes, under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd, must become one of the rural people and serve the rural people even as Christ served His people, the emblem of public ministry. Shepherds smell like their sheep. Rural pastors need to smell like rural people.

Dress is important for becoming a successful rural pastor who is not aloof from their parishioners and community. The clergy collar is appropriate for official functions, worship, weddings, funerals, but not as everyday dress. When the professionals in the community, the doctors and attorneys, wear open collars and casual clothes, it is appropriate and necessary that the clergy wear open collars and casual dress. The laity of rural America wear jeans, cowboy boots, hats, and this is appropriate for the clergy when they become one of the community. I was told several times as District President when I traveled the western part of the Nebraska District, "Eldor, get rid of that tie; wear casual clothes. The people out here in the Sandhills and ranch country don't appreciate or accept people who wear ties and business suits." This assessment prevails throughout the rural Midwest.

Rural people are on a first name relationship. Clergy should permit people of the community and adult members of the congregation to address him by first name. If clergy desire to call people of the community and his members by their first name, he should grant them the same privilege.

Standard procedure is to place seminary graduates in rural and small town congregations, often for expediency. Placement committees of the seminaries have frequently told seminary graduates, "You will have a call because Nebraska, the Dakotas, and other rural districts will request a number of graduates for rural parishes." During the last few years this kind of placement has changed because many rural congregations were unhappy with the ministry of their seminary graduate. Many have lost confidence in the calling and placement process and are calling from the field. Other congregations desire to call second career graduates with maturity and vocational experience.

I believe it is past time to place seminary graduates in rural congregations just so they have a place to do ministry, without assuring a good match. Expedient placement should have stopped several years ago. The Synod doesn't place seminary graduates in foreign missions, black ministry, the inner city, or cross-cultural ministry areas so they merely have a "call". The Board for Mission Services and the other calling bodies for specialized ministry work with the seminaries and the placement committees of the Council of Presidents. Together these groups see to it that the seminary graduate will be a good match, by considering the candidates desire to be in a particular specialized ministry and his having a family who can accept and endure the stress and strain associated with specialized ministries. Psychological testing and appropriate interviews help to determine a candidate's suitability to the specialized ministries such as foreign, black, and cross-cultural. Also graduates who have been determined to be suitable for foreign mission work will attend a mission school for six months to a year before going to a mission field. Poor use of the Lord's mission dollars occurs when a graduate or pastor doesn't fit into a specialized ministry and stays only a brief time.

Since rural culture requires special ministry skills, it can be as stressful as any foreign mission field and/or cross cultural ministry. The seminaries and the Council of Presidents placement committee need to

realize that the graduate must be aware of the challenges of rural ministry, that his family has the ability to adapt to the rural culture, and that the match carries a promise of success for the graduate. A program (process) should be developed for graduates who are placed in rural parishes, similar to what we expect and require of graduates placed in foreign and other ethnic ministries.

Here follows a description of a pastor in a small congregation with 168 baptized and 109 communicant members-The congregation is located in a small village, with a population of 50 people. There are four sister Missouri Synod congregations within a 12 mile radius, three of which have large Christian Day Schools. He, a graduate, followed two graduates who were mismatches and called “losers” by many of the members and the community. He is a general practitioner pastor with special gifts for ministry, very good people relationship skills, a good shepherd, a caregiver, and a good preacher and worship leader. He is very approachable, exercises common sense, and has very excellent communication skills. He is able to admit to mistakes, has a good sense of humor, recognizes his weaknesses, and has a desire to improve himself. He sits with the family at the hospital during surgery of a loved one, even if the hospital is 150 miles from home. He makes frequent visits, often daily. He goes fishing with the members, goes out and works with farmers, puts on jeans or coveralls, and assists the farmers when the opportunity arises. He dresses casual at all times, seldom wears a clergy collar, but normally for funerals and for Sunday worship. He attends all farm auctions within a 50 mile radius; after all, many of his members will be there. He is known by his first name by members and non-members in the community and also in the neighboring towns and villages. He is recognized as the pastor to the village and often to the surrounding area. He calls on his people in their home annually, goes out to see them—members, inactives, and the unchurched—because they often won’t come in to see him. He does his visitation in a very compassionate manner. The people of the community and the outlying areas appreciate and enjoy seeing him in their villages. At the farm auctions, he visits with everyone and makes sure to get acquainted with a few new people. He loves his people and is loved by them. He enjoys the ministry and has a commitment to stay in small town and rural ministry. There is unity in this congregation, much joy and appreciation for ministry, and excitement because the congregation is growing spiritually and numerically. The members feel they have an ideal, well-matured pastor. Members of the congregation and the community verbally and in written form express their appreciation to the pastor and his wife. This small congregation pays a salary of above district suggested guidelines. What a difference a pastor can make!

A Committed and Involved Lay Leadership

A majority of rural congregations would appreciate a greater involvement of laity in leadership, especially younger people, as the majority of the elected leaders are older adults--55 and older—with very few young adults involved as elected leaders. A deliberate transition of leadership to younger generations is important for growth and future stability. Training programs are beneficial but should be simple and brief giving the people an opportunity to understand the congregation, its ministry, and anticipate involvement.

There are a number of rural congregations without woman’s suffrage and restrict the involvement of women in leadership participation. These congregations have some unhappy members who speak very negative about their church. An acceptance of women in leadership roles within the guidelines adopted by the Synod is important for growth as this involves a greater diversity of gifts for God’s people and the community.

The structure and formal organization of officers is important, but can become a form of bureaucracy, in which formal measures and procedures are the primary concern and ministry to members and community doesn’t take place. More important is getting people involved in giving leadership in ministry which directly relates to people, such as, sharing the Gospel, Bible study, serving youth and older adults, visitations, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, fellowship and Midweek education classes. Congregations are encouraged to promote leadership in people centered, hands on ministry.

Strategic Planning and Setting Goals

“Those who don’t plan, plan to fail.” A rather strong statement, but one which the material world frequently uses. The congregation which fails to plan will find it difficult to anticipate growth and excitement in

ministry. An annual strategic planning process should be in place in every congregation, even in a small parish. Strategic planning for a rural parish should not be elaborate or extensive, but simple and applicable to the small rural parish. Strategic planning assists the congregation in anticipating concerns, opportunities, and goals for growth and empowering the congregation to meet the challenges of a changing community, which always presents new and different needs. In the 47 congregations visited, less than 10 percent of them did strategic planning and set specific goals. Without exception, the people readily admitted, “without goals, nothing will happen and the congregation will be on the demise,” but are not motivated to begin a planning process.

Goals of ministry for the congregation are determined through a planning process in which a congregation takes vital ownership to keep itself vibrant, alive and growing spiritually and numerically. For implementation, goals need a strategy and plan of action. When goals are missing, the tendency is toward apathy, lack of involvement, and a low energy level expended for the congregational mission. A congregation without goals will be dormant, and eventually its ministry will decline. Declination is the condition of the majority of congregations in rural America.

The congregation should set goals for improvement of every area, with specific goals in the areas of worship and Bible class attendance, Sunday school, youth groups, and outreach to the unchurched and inactives. The congregation should formally adopt these goals and take the ownership of each one. Goals established by the congregation assist in maintaining present spiritual and numerically growth, thus becoming a stronger pillar of the community and the Ministry Service Area. The congregation should set long range goals for itself in every area of ministry, to be achieved by the year 2000. Congregations who have achieved goals will enter the next century, having grown in every area of ministry.

Entry Points

A growing congregation uses all areas and events of ministry as entry points into congregational ministry. A congregation which uses only a few areas of its ministry as entry points will find growth difficult. Rural congregations and their pastors fail to think about certain areas of ministry as entry points for new members and vital ministry to non-members.

Very few (10 percent) rural congregations make an intentional effort to make worship a special entry point of ministry for the unchurched and inactives. Traditional worship is often self-centered and speaks to the older members who are steeped in the traditions of the congregation and the national church body. Outsiders and prospects are not attracted to congregations which look inward and tend to be self centered. Worship in Lutheran congregations should focus on reaching the unchurched and inactives in the community and nurturing the members.

Adult Bible class, often poorly attended, is used as spiritual nurture for members, but seldom used as an entry point. Few rural congregations have a teenage Bible class and youth ministry programs, consequently, missing opportunities for excellent entry points. Furthermore, Vacation Bible School, Mid-week School, and Christian instruction is seldom used as an entry points of ministry. Failure to use all areas of ministry as entry points for the unchurched and inactives, is a void in rural congregations.

Mission and ministry Statement

Congregations should seriously consider adopting a mission statement to assist it in planning and living out its reason for being. This statement could be a brief paragraph of only several sentences, expressing the purpose of the congregation. Every member should take ownership of this mission statement and use it to assist them in living their individual and corporate ministry. Stated in the Sunday bulletin on frequent occasions, the mission statement reminds the congregation of its real purpose. A statement of ministry objectives also assists the congregation and the members in living out their Christian faith. It focuses on the Great Commission and indicates the congregation’s activity of service to community and world.

Facilities - Church, Parsonage, and Grounds

Physical facilities need to give a positive witness of the Ministry Service Center to the Ministry Service Area. The condition, maintenance, and care of buildings and grounds indicate to the Ministry Service Area that the Ministry Service Center is planning to stay in its present location. The church building needs to offer functional and pleasant space for congregational worship, with a nave that is warmly inviting. It should offer adequate room for growth. Older church buildings, even those nearing a centennial, are not a hindrance if they are well kept, in good repair, and meet the needs of today's ministry. Older church buildings have unique personalities that relate to the past, which members and guests appreciate.

The grounds should be well kept, trimmed, and communicate the congregation's pride in its Ministry Service Center location. Parking should be more than adequate with sufficient space for festival and anniversary occasions. Preferably, the parking lot should be hard surfaced so that women with high heels and the elderly can easily walk from the car to the church. Large gravel rock is a "no-no" since it makes for difficult walking. Hard surface parking lots keep mud and gravel from being tracked into the building. Several parking spaces near the entrance should be clearly designated as reserved for visitors and guests. Adequate parking for handicap and elderly is also essential. These need to be near the entrance of the church and clearly visible. Excellent parking space and surface also communicates to the community that the congregation has pride in their Ministry Service Center and location.

Owning a home in a small rural community carries a high level of financial risk which should not be placed on the pastor. It is advisable for rural and small town congregations to own a nice parsonage. The parsonage should be comfortable, well-kept, and attractive. Such a parsonage communicates appreciation for the pastor, his ministry, and his family. The facilities, church, parsonage and grounds, needs to look like an oasis in rural and small town communities, indicating a place where people find spiritual nurture, the water of life, peace, fellowship, and friends.

Structure

The organizational structure of a congregation is important, but should not be over-emphasized. Small rural congregations tend to be over-structured. Leadership for a congregation is often defined as being an elected leader, serving on official boards and committees. organizational structure should be evaluated regularly, once every three or four years, to determine if it is taking care of present and future ministry needs in the changing society of rural areas. However, structure should be minimal and not require excessive amounts of time and energy. Over-structure can become a type of bureaucracy in the congregation which consumes the energy of members who should really be putting energy into a person, people-centered ministry. Rural people are very flexible. Farmers may need to change their schedule many times during the year due to rain, drought, and frost. Likewise, the structure of small rural congregation needs to be flexible, able to bend and flex with the seasons, and allow for farmers to work as the seasons dictate. It is advisable for rural and small-town congregations not to schedule any meetings during the planting season, harvest season or, perhaps, even calving season. The congregation and its structure need to consider rural people, their needs and schedules.

Rural people, relaxed in their lifestyles, know how to work hard and know how to relax in off-seasons. They enjoy and respect each other; legalism and rigidity are not appreciated. They chafe under government farm regulations and they despise strict regulations by grain, herbicide, and fertilizer dealers. Similarly, rural people do not appreciate rules and regulations laid down by the National and District church leaders, particularly if they are not based on clear Scripture passages. Since rural ministry is a relaxed ministry, the congregational structure needs to allow for a relaxed attitude and for decisions by consensus. Boards and committees should be responsible for an area of ministry and, if necessary, adjust rigid scheduling. Communication to members is critical but avoid excessive reporting at voter's meetings.

User Friendly

The warm and friendly aspect of a congregation continues to carry a high level of importance. The material world continues to stress warmth and friendliness to entice customers and satisfy them. We appreciate

being treated with a special warmth and friendliness when we patronize stores or walk the streets. Rural congregations normally consider themselves friendly—“being friendly is associated with being rural.” However, the people of rural congregations normally admit that it is difficult for an outsider to be a part of the “inside group,” the traditional members of the congregation. It is easy and natural for members to be friendly and warm with fellow members and citizens whom they have known since childhood and see regularly several times a week at the grocery store, co-op station, and fertilizer plant. People feel awkward in rural communities to show warmth and friendly feelings toward a visitor who is a stranger to both the congregation and the community. Members of rural congregations recognize the difficulty of an “outsider” to becoming an “insider” in the congregation and the community. Normally, a few members marry into the congregation or, because of their strong need to be a member of LC-MS, join the congregation. Such people will be honest and share their impressions of the so called “user-friendly aspect” of the congregation. Some do say that they have never become a member of the inside group. Growth in warmth and friendliness, maintaining the traditional heritage of rural America, friendly behavior toward everyone, extending self to others—all bespeak striving to be “living epistles” among fellow human beings.

These eight special features have an individual importance and impact effective ministry. When these eight features are applied in a quality manner and relate to the real needs of rural communities, excitement, joy, and growth result from this God-pleasing service.

Parish Models and Pastoral Leadership

Several models for congregational ministry along with several models of pastoral leadership exist which can be applied to effective ministry in rural America. Each situation has unique features and certainly needs to be evaluated on its own merits. Congregational arrangements and types of pastoral leadership determine which qualities best meet the needs of both the members and the community.

Single-congregation Parish

A single-congregation parish with a full-time pastor is certainly the best model. Pastor and members of this single unit of ministry have a common focus which contributes to the unity of a congregation where the Ministry Service Center (church facilities) is the base of operations.

Membership size affects whether or not congregations can afford its own pastor and is directly proportional to the congregation’s commitment to having its own pastor. There are, of course, some congregations with around 100 communicants who have their own pastor. Some congregations discuss other arrangements when their membership reduces to 100 communicants; they are usually serious about their own pastor with 150 communicants. Spirituality and commitment condition attitudes toward having a pastor or not. I believe that a congregation of 90 communicants with a high level of spirituality, commitment, and desire can have their own pastor who would become a very special blessing to members and also to community.

When a single parish ministry is not possible, other options exist. It may choose to do nothing or take steps toward a good working model of parish ministry and pastoral leadership. To be sure, a thorough evaluation of ministry needs for both members and Ministry Service Area is important and necessary in determining the specific parish model for ministry.

Dual and Multiple Parish

A common parish model in rural ministry is the dual and multiple parish. A working document of agreement by the congregations involved is a necessity. This agreement, subject to annual review, states the process and procedure in determining working arrangements, salary, times of service, and the responsibilities of the pastor in dividing his time in giving leadership to the ministry. Congregations in the multiple parish normally desire and request separate identities. They want their own youth group, ladies’ and men’s groups, voter’s and other meetings. The base for ministry is more than one location, when two Ministry Service Areas are involved. Unity and focus of ministry are hard to maintain with multiple locations and service areas.

Pastors of multiple parishes need special gifts for ministry such as patience, self-discipline, dividing their time, and prioritizing ministry needs. They need a high level of commitment and desire to serve a multiple rural congregation parish. The complexity of the multiple parish can be a dangerous haven for a pastor who is a little lazy, because he can hide behind the many tasks in a multiple congregation and get by with doing very little. Very few members will question him if they believe he is at the other congregation making calls or attending meetings. Normally the ministry in this kind of situation is maintenance. There certainly are pastors who have served a dual parish successfully throughout their ministries and plan to continue such service.

Congregations enter into a multiple parish arrangement for several reasons, but the most frequent one is financial. Members feel they can't afford a full-time pastor only for themselves. Also, joining a multiple parish gives a promise of new vitality for a small congregation. Sometimes a small congregation feels trapped in rural America and has no other choice. The multiple congregation parish is a valid arrangement for ministry, but has a number of built-in features and limitations such as requiring additional lay involvement to avoid becoming a mere survivor. Normally a multiple congregation parish moves into a maintenance mode and can operate this way for years. Presently the usual arrangement is a dual parish; however, in the future three or more congregations will link together.

Several special challenges exist for multiple-congregation parishes. Quality full service ministry is essential, individually or jointly, in a combined Ministry Service Area. Quality ministry in all areas which enhances spiritual and numerical growth may require additional staff-a lay minister, director of Christian education, deaconess, parish nurse, a part-time retired clergy or lay person. What ever meets the needs of the Ministry Service Area should be explored.

Satellite

Satellite congregational ministry in rural America has not often been attempted although medical services have employed the concept. For example, a clinic or hospital may provide minimal medical services in small neighboring towns with a physician's assistant, registered nurse, or a one-day -a-week medical doctor. In this way, community needs are met by a sponsoring clinic or hospital in close proximity.

With its staff and resources, a primary congregation may provide minimal ministry services to several designated satellite congregations in the area. An assistant pastor, a lay minister, a Director of Christian Education, or dedicated lay people may readily serve satellite congregations. Worship opportunities could be provided by staff members or on video. Having all the members attend a worship service now and then at the base congregation, especially on festival occasions, gives a unity to the entire ministry. This concept, I believe, will be used more frequently in the future.

Disband

Another option for small congregations is to disband and encourage members to join another Christian congregation of their choice. Joining a sister congregation, if possible, is the best option.

There is a strong sentiment among some people that small rural congregations should close. To close a rural congregation is extremely difficult. Members feel an intense sense of ownership toward the congregation, often directly related to the founding families. Members of the family find it difficult to make the decision to pull the life support systems on a family member who is critically ill, an act which parallels closing a congregation. If a congregation is the body of Christ in the given location, the decision to close is a difficult and serious issue. Incidentally, congregations never appreciate District leaders who suggest closing the church they love.

To contemplate closing, a small congregation will want to study and evaluate itself by making a needs assessment of ministry to their members and Ministry service Area. A look at the available options may show that closing is the best one. The leadership will work with the members in a patient manner, leading them to accept graciously the closing of their congregation. The leadership should assist members in finding a new church home. The closing worship should be a service of joy, celebrating the years of ministry God has given.

Lay Ministers

Lay ministers serving small rural congregations have proved to be an effective model of pastoral leadership. Quite often small rural congregations are very isolated and long distances from a sister congregation. Lay ministers, especially if they have a rural background (and many do), relate very well to rural people and are highly effective because as a church member themselves, they identify with the community in a natural way.

Bi-vocational

Bi-vocational servants, formerly called worker-priests, haven't been frequently successful in our circles but, nevertheless, is an accepted model for a small rural parish. This model seems to develop a burn-out situation because the person finds himself working full time at minimum wages, besides keeping the congregation's ministry productive. Also, having two bosses inevitably affects the worker-priest's loyalty.

Merging of congregations

Congregations merging into one parish is an option which needs to be explored. This process is similar to that of consolidating school districts in the Midwest, still going on today. Like school districts, rural congregations could consolidate to provide a higher quality full service ministry over an expanded area. Mergers of small congregations will be more frequent toward the end of this decade and in the first decade of the 21st century.

Several areas contain two or more small congregations in a close proximity with overlapping Ministry Service Areas. Every rural congregation should evaluate its ministry and determine which model of parish ministry might best meet the needs of the members with quality service. A merger of several congregations into a single congregation parish may be the best model. Though a merger of several congregations is difficult, the people will have to place the needs of the Ministry Service Area and quality ministry ahead of their personal and traditional needs.

The District leadership will need to offer congregations personnel with expertise in assisting them in doing a needs of ministry assessment, establishing goals, and determine which parish model will serve the members and the ministry service area with quality full service ministry.

Special Recommendations

While the concerns of rural ministry cannot be solved by one congregation, rural congregations together can improve and revitalize ministry and become strong, full-service congregations. A cooperative, systematic plan can preserve rural congregations and cause them to flourish.

Declining rural population doesn't need to be the trend of our rural congregations. The unchurched and inactives are best reached with quality, full-service ministry, reversing the trend of declining membership. Any solution will take genuine commitment of energy and time from congregations, lay leaders, pastors, and District leadership.

The Process of Preservation and Growth for Rural Congregations

1. Every rural congregation should through self-study evaluate the effectiveness, performance, quality and productivity of its ministry. The congregations should authorize and request an evaluation of its ministry. All twelve areas of full service ministry need to be evaluated. The use of Exhibit 13 will assist congregations in determining weak and strong areas in their full-service ministry.
2. Evaluate effectiveness and performance of pastors, lay leaders, and members, assessing each of their roles in ministry. Exhibits 14, 15, 16, and 17 give leadership and members the opportunity to evaluate their ministry and determine needs in the leadership area. This evaluation should be done annually.

3. Do a needs assessment of the membership and Ministry Service Area. Using Exhibits 5 and 5a and the above exhibits will determine general and specific ministry needs of congregation and community. These ministry needs should be shared with the congregation as information and for additional input.

4. Develop and establish a strategic planning process for the congregation. The planning committee should be motivated people who have a vision for ministry and include representatives of the elected officers, official boards, committees, youth, Sunday School teachers, LWML, and auxiliary organizations. Planning gives direction, priorities, and procedure in meeting the established needs of ministry.

5. Establish challenging and achievable goals for every area of ministry. Short range goals, achievable in one or two years are important and give successes to celebrate on a regular basis. Progress on achieving goals need to be shared on a regular basis with congregation. Long range goals, three to six years, keep the congregation looking and moving forward. Challenging and achievable goals for the year 2000 is a special opportunity unique to this decade. Both the members and leaders need to take ownership in these goals. A time line needs to be established to achieve them.

Congregations which follow good strategic planning processes will become revitalized and begin to grow spiritually and numerically. With joy and excitement in the ministry, they will be a “pillar of strength” in the community and ministry service area. Such congregations are always instrumental in revitalizing a ministry service area.

Revitalization in rural areas needs to be contagious, spreading from congregation to congregation and becoming a movement of God’s people in rural America. Congregations should join forces with neighboring congregations in the circuit. Also by using the excellent circuit structure, they may preserve rural churches for growth.

1. Congregations in the revitalization process need to share ministry joys, challenges, and goals with each other. Circuit convocations provide a setting in which congregational members may know of and celebrate the ministry pursued by each congregation. This develops a cohesive relationship among the congregations in the circuit.
2. The circuit forum should direct a needs assessment for the Ministry Service Area of the circuit, shared with the congregations at a convocation. Revising several of the Exhibits in this report will assist this process. This makes a united front with common goals of ministry for the Ministry Service Area of the circuit.
3. The circuit forum should develop and direct a strategic planning process for ministry within the circuit Ministry Service Area. Congregations will want to make a commitment to the combined ministry of the circuit. The circuit forum should monitor the process of achieving these goals and report to the congregations.
4. Circuit goals for ministry need to be established by the forum. Congregations need to claim ownership of these goals by accepting them at their voter’s assembly meeting. A time line needs to be established by the circuit forum for achievement.
5. Check with the neighboring circuits and make sure that the ministry Service Areas are cooperative and supportive, covering all geographical areas. Some goals for ministry may include congregations in a neighboring circuit.

If rural congregations do nothing and permit present trends to become a way of ministry, our rural congregations will decline and become weaker. By the year 2000, a few congregations will close and many will be smaller; therefore we look for alternate ways to support ministry. By the year 2010, if nothing is done in an aggressive way, we will have vacated many rural areas of ministry even as we did in the inner cities during the 1940's.

We have the opportunity to assist our rural churches to be the church of the 1990's, meeting vital needs of members within ministry service areas. If we are the church of the 1990's, we will be able to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Preserving rural congregations for growth can revitalize them toward being the church of the Nineties, ready to enter the new century. Energy, time, and commitment must come from pastors and lay leaders who work together to build congregations, circuit by circuit.

Special Challenges

Rural congregations have faced many challenges throughout their existence. Founding families met the challenges of establishing congregations on the frontier and in the first decades of the 20th century. The unique challenges of each generation offer continuing opportunities for ministry.

1. Rural congregations tend to be conservative and traditional; hence, change comes hard and it is difficult for some people to accept. Rural communities have changed extensively during the last 100 years. Obviously change will continue for rural America, for farming, and for the Ministry Service Areas of rural congregations. Rural congregations have maintained a fundamental stance since their founding -- a constant in their ministry is preaching the Triune God and His Gospel. However, rural congregations need to be willing to adjust their style and form of ministry to meet the changing needs of their members and the people in the Ministry Service Area, always continuing to preach and teach the true Word of God.
2. The challenge will be that congregations have opportunities to maintain rural values as farms get larger, form corporations and NARP (non agricultural rural people) move into rural areas.
3. Rural congregations must evaluate their areas of ministry, exercise strategic planning, and set challenging goals in each area. There should be several short-range goals in certain areas. Regular and annual evaluations need to be a part of the process to determine progress toward achieving these goals.
4. Members of rural congregations are involved in ministry, but often only minimally. Important to realize is that spiritual and numerical growth doesn't merely happen but needs the continual effort, energy, and prayer of both pastor and members. Members of rural congregations must assume genuine responsibility for the ministry along with the pastor. He, himself, is active and involved in ministry and should at the same time equip the members for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12).
5. One of the great challenges of rural congregations is to become other-centered, develop an outward-look rather than an inward-look of self-centeredness. Often their ministry focus is narrow and needs to be broadened.
6. The Great Commission must be given primary focus and be emphasized by every area of ministry. Reaching the lost, unchurched, and inactives in the Ministry Service Area requires priority attention by each member, board, and organization of the congregation. Achieving this mission includes active Bible study groups, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, youth,

voter's assembly, auxiliaries, fellowship groups, etc. Such a large challenge will receive the Lord's guidance and His rich blessings; consequently, the congregation will grow spiritually and numerically.

7. Support for missions, both in the District and Synod, needs continued encouragement and emphasis. A strong global mission effort is an important part of the Great Commission, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Supporting district and national programs of the Synod requires committed people. A special challenge is to continue to grow in the financial support of ministries beyond the congregation. Special blessings, Christ assures the members and congregations: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35b).
8. Rural congregations have seldom thought in terms of satisfying members changing needs. Their response has normally been, "We've always done it that way." or "Why change, it was good enough for our parents and ought to be good enough for us and our children." Rural congregations often neglect to think about making a needs assessment of the congregation and their Ministry Service Area.
9. The Ministry Service Center, energized by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, will certainly discover and productively meet the needs of members and others in their service area, by ministering to human and spiritual needs with the love of God in Christ Jesus. This yields joy in ministry, manifested spiritual and numerical growth. Members, inactives, and unchurched in the Ministry Service Area expect their needs to be satisfied through quality service based on God's Word.
10. A key word of the 1990's is "satisfaction," used by business, society, marketers, and organizations. The satisfied customer is a key to success in a material society. We will continue to experience a heavy emphasis on this word during this present decade and into the 21st century. Wal-Mart's easy exchange of merchandise policy is indicative of this approach. WalMart's policy and goal of satisfying customers has enticed many people not to buy from locally-owned family businesses, causing many to close. When Sam Walton was charged with destroying Main Street America, he was defensive and said, "If I hadn't moved in to serve the customer better, someone else would have." The Wal-Mart enterprise gives visible evidence to the importance of service and satisfied customers. Sam Walton's reply is appropriate analogous to the rural church. If rural congregations fail to meet the ministry needs of people in the Ministry Service Area with quality service, someone else will—and it may not be a Christian group.
11. Congregational members, expect to be satisfied customers when they purchase goods and services of whatever nature. Members and visitors at worship services, recipients of ministry, desire to be satisfied people, a right they expect. One of the biggest reasons people become inactive is that they feel their needs have not been met and that nobody cares about them.
12. Quality ministry in rural congregations is clouded by a strong traditionalism. Even though they want quality in farming, they seldom apply it to ministry. We do live in a "quality" oriented society. As people want and expect quality in all of their purchases, the unchurched, inactives, the youth, and young adults expect quality ministry. Rural congregations which offer a ministry of good quality and full service will do more than merely survive; they will thrive and grow both spiritually and numerically.

13. While we live in a service-oriented society, rural congregations are not thoroughly acclimated to service. They routinely do the same important things as worship, Sunday School, VBS and L.W.M.L. In the future, rural congregations (Ministry Service Centers) which offer a genuine full-service ministry will attract inactives, unchurched, and new people to the community. Struggling small town rural churches will not survive when congregations fail to meet needs with quality service. Christ said of Himself in Matthew 20:28, “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” The rural congregation, must follow Christ’s example. The members should not ask, “What can the church do for me?,” but rather ask, “What can I do for my Lord through my church?” (reminiscent of JFK).
14. Denominational loyalty has diminished and isn’t as important to the younger generation as it was and still is to people over 60 years of age. Non-church people normally do not care about the denomination but are interested in having their needs met. Attractive churches are those which address people’s real physical and spiritual needs. Fast-growing non-denominational churches evidence people’s indifference to denominational labels.
15. We live in a time when cost often determines what gets done. “Nothing in life is free”. We pay for everything and cost continues to climb. We have seen that people are willing to pay for financial needs of ministry when it offers quality service which meets expectation and need.

Today rural congregational culture is important to our Synod and Districts because there exists excellent, aggressive and strong Christians in rural communities, consequently the Synod and District still receive a high level of financial and other support from the rural congregations. Rural congregations continue to be a precious blessing to the Synod, District, and to Ministry Service Areas. The lesson is that we dare not vacate rural areas as we have vacated the inner city.

Congregations must make the decisions and recognize where the solution lies. We have found the enemy and it is us. We can’t blame someone or something else. Take the risk and do ministry as the needs are determined. The District and Synod don’t have the answers, nor the resources. Congregations must do what needs to be done and take responsibility over that which they have authority.

Conclusion

Why are some rural congregations growing and others are not? Congregations offering a full-service quality ministry to members and the Ministry Service Area are using the gifts God has given the church, enabling it to grow spiritually and numerically.

Fault for lack of growth does not reside within the Holy Spirit’s working through God’s Word. Rather, a mini-service ministry is not meeting on-going needs of members and the community, denying ingredients for spiritual and numerical growth. Hence, the fault lies with the members and the pastor.

Rural congregations are at a crossroads, a critical time in its life and ministry. Congregation must improve the weak areas. While the Ministry Service Area will be relatively stable, a slight population decline notwithstanding during this decade, increase numbers can come from the many unchurched in the service area. Remember, a full-service, quality ministry will attract the unchurched and others who are seeking a church home, a vital and joyful challenge for Rural Congregations.

The number of farms with farm families will show a slight decline, as older farmers retire and neighbors with larger operations absorb them. The rural mission field will continue to enlarge, furnishing people in need of spiritual nurture.

Christ promises special blessings to those who are other-centered, for He states, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35b). Being a Christian is to be “other-centered”. As rural congregations attend to their Ministry Service Area, they are making the Great Commission a vital part of every area of their ministry, increasing their support of district and national programs of the Synod and growing spiritually and numerically.

The ministry of rural congregations is valid and important, with opportunities both today and in the years ahead. Members, active and inactive, and the Ministry Service Area which includes several small villages and beyond offer striking challenges with growth potential. Sharing of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation and cornerstone of God-pleasing ministry. Importance and validity are measured by ministry to the people of God, the unchurched, and the community.

“Urgency” is the key word when we share the Gospel in rural America. Farmers feel an urgency toward harvest because the weather, rain, frost, freezing temperature and delays can erode the yield and take away the profit. They work from dawn to dusk, even around the clock, to gather in the harvest, the reward for a year of work. Similarly, an even greater urgency exists when harvesting lost souls in rural America. The unchurched, the inactives, and ethnic groups need to be reached with the Gospel. As long as there are unchurched and inactives in rural America, the urgency is infinitely greater than the urgency of a grain harvest.

Farmers have another opportunity for a grain harvest next year, if God wills it. But the people who are lost, who die without knowing Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, will spend eternity in Hell. The harvest of souls has an eternal significance which makes it more urgent than any other harvest could ever be. The urgency enacted and energy expended by the farmers in their grain harvest exemplify Christ’s disciples working in the harvest of souls for eternal salvation. Just think what would happen if Christian disciples spent the same kind of energy, effort, and time in reaching the lost, the spiritual harvest of souls, as a farmer spends in harvesting grain. The future of rural ministry is bright. Challenging opportunities for spiritual and numerical growth prevail among rural and small town congregations. Unchurched and inactives are always in need of hearing the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. True in rural areas of America today is what Christ Jesus said in Matthew 9:37-38, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers in to His harvest field.” Again we say, “The laborers are few.”

“We are, therefore, Christ’s Ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us (11 Corinthians 5:20).” The joy in rural ministry is sharing the message of reconciliation with people in rural and small town congregations and communities. We are charged to live and do ministry in anticipation of the Lord’s presence and His blessings on rural congregations and their Ministry Service Area.

“Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever (Eph. 3:20,21)!”

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Appendix (Exhibits)

Exhibit 1 Part I

The attitude of the pastor, the leadership and the congregation is very important. Successes and failures in life and ministry are often influenced and determined by attitude. Circle the number which best describes the overall attitude of the congregation in the following areas:

1. Cautious	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Aggressive
2. Self Centered	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Other Centered
3. Traditional	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Contemporary
4. Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Positive
5. Program Oriented	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	People oriented
6. Self-Serving	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Serving others
7. Apathy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Involvement
8. Detail - Maintenance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Spiritual

Exhibit 2 Part II

The Church Council (elected leaders) are elected by the congregation to give leadership for ministry and make decisions on behalf of the congregation for ministry. Please circle the word after each statement which best describes their ministry in each stated area.

1. The elected leaders involvement in ministry is:

Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Excellent
---------	----------	------	-----------	-----------

2. The trust level of the congregation toward the elected leaders is:

Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Excellent
---------	----------	------	-----------	-----------

3. The elected leaders commitment to community outreach is:

Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Excellent
---------	----------	------	-----------	-----------

4. Their commitment to and involvement in personal spiritual growth is:

Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Excellent
---------	----------	------	-----------	-----------

5. Their involvement in community activities is:

Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Excellent
---------	----------	------	-----------	-----------

6. The elected leaders vision (picture, goal) for ministry

Minimal

Adequate Good

Very GoodExcellent

Exhibit 3 Part III

The congregation provides ministry in many areas of member and community life. Circle the word which best describes the ministry of your church in the areas as indicated.

1. Members reaching out to the unchurched is:
poor fair good very good excellent
2. The overall ministry of the congregation is:
poor fair good very good excellent
3. The spiritual climate of the congregation is:
poor fair good very good excellent
4. The worship services of the congregation are:
poor fair good very good excellent
5. The spiritual growth over the last five years is:
poor fair good very good excellent
6. Member involvement in Bible study is:
poor fair good very good excellent
7. The ministry to youth and teenagers is:
poor fair good very good excellent
8. Support of missions, both District and Synod, is:
poor fair good very good excellent
9. The congregation sees their future in this decade as:
poor fair good very good excellent
10. The congregation's involvement in community needs is:
poor fair good very good excellent
11. The congregation's caring involvement for others:
poor fair good very good excellent
12. The length of time a pastor stays in congregation is:
not important helpful significant important very important
13. The "user friendly" aspect of the congregation is:
not important helpful significant important very important

Exhibit 4 Part IV

Your pastor plays a very important role in the ministry of your congregation. Please circle the word after each statement which best describes your pastor's ministry in each of the listed areas.

1. As a worship leader, your pastor is:	Limited	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Excellent
2. As a preacher, your pastor is:	Boring	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Inspiring
3. The Servant role and aspect of your pastor is:	Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Exemplary
4. As a minister to the sick, dying, and bereaved, he is:	Insensitive	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Strong
5. His support and involvement in Christian education is:	Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Strong
6. His support and involvement in youth ministry is:	Limited	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Excellent
7. His pastoral visibility in the community is:	Limited	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Excellent
8. Your pastor's personal and family life is:	Questionable	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Exemplary
9. His support and involvement in community outreach is:	Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Strong
10. His support for mission, District and National Synod is:	Minimal	Adequate	Good	Very Good	Strong
11. The pastor's caring involvement for others is:	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent

Exhibit 5 Part V Congregation "Think Tank"

1. The reasons people join this congregation are:
2. The reasons people leave this congregation are:
3. The strengths of this congregation are:
4. The weaknesses of this congregation are:
5. The short-term (3-5 year) vision (goals) of this congregation are:
6. The long-term (year 2000) vision (goals) of this congregation are:
7. The strengths of this community are:
8. The weaknesses of this community are:
9. Major factors which can assist this congregation to grow in this decade and beyond are:
10. Major factors which can assist this community to grow in this decade and beyond are:
11. How can the congregation and the community assist one another for growth and meet the needs of the people of this community?
12. At the present trend, what will this congregation be like in the year 2000?.
13. At the present trend, what will this community be like in the year 2000?

14. What special challenges does this congregation have as a small-town and rural congregation for this decade and beyond?
15. Toward what special area of spiritual need is this congregation directing special time and energy?
16. What areas of ministry are working well?
17. What areas of ministry are not working well (need improvement)?
18. How does the congregation feel about itself (self-esteem)?
19. What makes this congregation unique and special?
20. What is the purpose of this congregation?
21. Does the congregation have a formal budget and a “pledge” system? Yes No
22. Is there something special about the value system of the community?
23. Is this congregation considered “user-friendly” by visitors and the community? Yes No
To some and not to others?
24. What percent of this community is unchurched?
25. Describe this area as it pertains to neighboring congregations and neighboring communities and as it pertains to opportunities for ministry in this decade and beyond 2000?

Exhibit 6 Evaluation Summary Part I

The attitude of the pastor, the leadership and the congregation is very important. Successes and failures in life and ministry are often influenced and determined by attitude. This is the congregation’s assessment of their overall attitude.

- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Cautious | Aggressive |
| 2. Self Centered | Other Centered |
| 3. Traditional | Contemporary |
| 4. Negative | Positive |
| 5. Program Oriented | People oriented |
| 6. Self-Serving | Serving Others |
| 7. Apathy | Involvement |
| 8. Detail - Maintenance | Spiritual |

Evaluation Summary Part II

The Church Council (elected leaders) is elected by the congregation to give leadership for ministry and make decisions on behalf of the congregation for ministry. This is the evaluation of the elected leadership.

1. The elected leaders involvement in ministry is:
2. The trust level of the congregation toward the elected leaders is:
3. The elected leaders commitment to community outreach is:
4. Their commitment to and involvement in personal spiritual growth is:
5. Their involvement in community activities is:
6. The elected leaders vision (picture, goal) for ministry

Evaluation Summary Part III

The congregation provides ministry for members and the ministry service area. The congregation’s evaluation is as follows:

1. Members reaching out to the unchurched is:

2. The overall ministry of the congregation is:
3. The spiritual climate of the congregation is:
4. The worship services of the congregation are:
5. The spiritual growth over the last five years is:
6. Member involvement in Bible study is:
7. The ministry to youth and teenagers is:
8. Support of missions, both District and Synod, is:
9. The congregation sees their future in this decade as
10. The congregation's involvement in community needs is:
11. The congregation's caring involvement for others is:
12. The "user friendly" aspect of the congregation is:
13. The commitment to outreach of the congregation is:
14. The fellowship activities of the congregation are:
15. The length of time a pastor stays in congregation is:

Evaluation Summary Part IV

The pastor plays a very important role in the ministry of your congregation. The congregation gives the following evaluation of his ministry.

1. As a worship leader, your pastor is:
2. As a preacher, your pastor is:
3. The Servant role and aspect of your pastor is:
4. As a minister to the sick, dying, and bereaved, he is:
5. His support and involvement in Christian education is:
6. His support and involvement in youth ministry is:
7. His pastoral visibility in community is:
8. Your pastor's personal and family life is:

9. His support and involvement in community outreach is:

10. His support for mission, District and National Synod is:

11. The pastor's caring involvement for others is:

Exhibit 10 Age Profile

Name of Congregation
Place

Number of Males

Number of Females

80 + Over

75 - 79

70 - 74

65 - 69

60 - 64

55 - 59

50 - 54

45 - 49

40 - 44

35 - 39

30,- 34

25 - 29

20 - 24

15 - 19

10 - 14

5 - 9

0 - 4

Average age

Median age

Exhibit 13 The Congregation's Full Service Ministry

Each area of "full service ministry" plays a very important role and needs to be evaluated. Evaluate each area of ministry for its effectiveness, performance, and quality. Circle one number. Number 1 is very poor, 2-4 is fair, 5-6 is good, 7-9 is very good and 10 is excellent.

WORSHIP	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
MUSIC MINISTRY	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
BIBLE STUDY - ADULTS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
BIBLE STUDY - TEENAGERS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
SUNDAY SCHOOL	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
MID-WEEK SCHOOL	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
YOUTH MINISTRY	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
ELDERLY-OLDER ADULT MINISTRY	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
OUTREACH - INACTIVES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
CARING - FELLOWSHIP	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
STEWARDSHIP	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Exhibit 14 Congregational Attitude

The attitude of the pastor, the leadership and the congregation is very important. Successes and failures in life and ministry are often influenced and determined by attitude. Circle the number which best describes the overall attitude of the congregation in the following areas:

- | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|-------------------------|
| 1. | Cautious | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Aggressive |
| 2. | Self Centered | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Other Centered |
| 3. | Traditional | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Contemporary |
| 4. | Negative | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Positive |
| 5. | Program Oriented | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | People Oriented |
| 6. | Self-Serving | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Serving others |
| 7. | Apathy | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Involvement |
| 8. | Detail - Maintenance | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Spiritual |
| 9. | Pessimistic about future | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Optimistic about future |

Exhibit 15 The Congregation in Ministry

The congregation is responsible for the ministry. The member involvement in ministry determines the performance. Rate the congregation in its involvement, quality and performance of ministry. Circle one number. Number 1 is very poor, 2-4 is fair, 5-6 is good, 7-9 is very good, and 10 is excellent.

- | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1. | Members reaching out to the unchurched is: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 2. | The overall ministry of the congregation is: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 3. | The spiritual climate of the congregation is: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 4. | The spiritual growth over the last five years is: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |

5. Member involvement in Bible study is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
6. The ministry to youth and teenagers is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
7. Support of missions, both District and Synod, is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
8. The congregation sees their future in this decade as:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
9. The congregation's involvement in community needs is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
10. The congregation's caring involvement for others:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
11. The numerical growth over the last five years is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
12. The "user friendly" aspect of the congregation is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Exhibit 16 The Congregation's

The pastor plays an important role in the ministry of the congregation. Please evaluate his performance, quality, and effectiveness in ministry. Circle one number. Number 1 is very poor, 2-4 is fair, 5-6 is good, 7-9 is very good and 10 is excellent.

1. As a worship leader, your pastor is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. As a preacher, your pastor is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. The Servant role and aspect of your pastor is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
4. As a minister to the sick, dying, and bereaved, he is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
5. His support and involvement in Christian education is:
 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. His support and involvement in youth ministry is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. His pastoral visibility in the community is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. Your pastor's personal and family life is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. His support and involvement in community outreach is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. His support for mission, District and National Synod is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11. The pastor's caring involvement for others is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Exhibit 17 Congregation's Lay Leadership

The involvement of lay leadership in ministry is essential for spiritual and numerical growth of a congregation. Rate the lay leadership in their performance, quality and effectiveness in ministry. circle one number. Number 1 is very poor, 2-4 is fair, 5-6 is good, 7-9 is very good and 10 is excellent.

1. The elected leaders involvement in ministry is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. The trust level of the congregation toward the elected leaders is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. The elected leaders commitment to community outreach is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. Their commitment to and involvement in personal spiritual growth is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. Their involvement in community activities is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6. The elected leaders vision (picture, goal) for ministry is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

7. Their involvement in activating the inactives is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

8. Members involved giving leadership in Bible study is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

9. Members involved as leaders of volunteer for congregation ministry is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

10. Members giving leadership in services to the community is:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10