



Other Documents—For Information: **Plan for Rural Ministry Alliance**

Background

The 2001 Churchwide Assembly responded to a resolution from a voting member asking for an additional staff person of the Desk for Rural Ministry Resources and Networking. The request was referred to the Division for Outreach, in collaboration with the Division for Congregational Ministries and the Division for Church in Society. A subsequent planning meeting included representatives from the Division for Outreach, the Division for Congregational Ministries, the Division for Church in Society, the Office of the Presiding Bishop, and members of the Rural Ministry Advisory committee.

It was recommended by that committee that one, two, or three people would not be able to fill the need for small town and rural ministry; therefore, they were charged with creating a unique way to “do” ministry on a national level. A subcommittee was appointed to explore a variety of options. In December 2002, Jill Schumann, president of Lutheran Services in America, began her role as consultant to the subcommittee.

Subcommittee Members

Jill A. Schumann, consultant and president of Lutheran Services in America;
Pr. Richard J. Bruesehoff, Division for Ministry and member of the Rural Ministry Advisory Committee;
Bp. Duane C. Danielson, Western North Dakota Synod and member of the Rural Ministry Advisory Committee;
Dennis Gengenbach, producer from rural Nebraska and member of the Rural Ministry Advisory Committee;
Helen R. Harms, associate in ministry, Division for Outreach, Small Town and Rural Ministry Team, Mission Director for Region 8, and member of the Rural Ministry Advisory Committee;
Sandra Simonson-Thums, rural outreach expert and member of the Rural Ministry Advisory Committee; and
Staff: Sandra A. LaBlanc and Catherine Tippins, Rural Ministry staff.

Subcommittee Report

The Rural Ministry Alliance Subcommittee presented the following background report following its meeting on February 10, 2003.

In response to a growing concern within the ELCA for rural issues and a desire to coordinate and leverage the work of many parts of the church, the idea of a Rural Ministry Alliance was proposed. A gathering of potential partners was scheduled for February 19–20, 2003, and a subcommittee was formed to do preliminary work. To serve as a starting point for the February meeting, this

subcommittee was to draft working definitions, assumptions, mission, and hoped-for outcomes from a Rural Ministry Alliance. In addition, the subcommittee drafted four sample models for consideration and identified criteria that might be used to craft and select a model.

ELCA Rural Statistics

Within the ELCA, 55 percent of the congregations are in small town and rural settings. Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson refers to rural and small town churches as the backbone of the ELCA.

Approximately one-third of the members of the ELCA are located within rural and small town congregations.

ELCA seminaries receive 80 percent of their students from urban and suburban settings; 70 percent will serve in a rural or small town setting.

Vision or Dominant Objective

The ELCA through its three expressions (congregation, synod, and churchwide) assumes a leadership role in rural life.

Working Definitions and Assumptions

- Defining “rural and small town” may be looked at in terms of layers: distance from a metropolitan area, population density, economic base of an extraction industry (tourism, mining, forestry, fishing, timber, agriculture), and “state of being” or mindset.
- Determining the territory to be addressed would focus on the 65 synods of the ELCA, but build a structure flexible enough to include international questions and issues.
- Addressing the issues facing rural America would be done in a way that looks toward the future, rather than wishing to reclaim the past.
- Timing is critical: the next five to 10 years will bring major changes to all rural areas.
- The current rural ministry desk does not have the staff and budget to address the ministry needs as we had hoped.
- The ELCA needs a commonality of purpose: a plan, a unified effort for rural ministry. This effort needs to come out of the rural and small town community.
- Intersecting issues were recognized, since addressing rural issues comes from an organic rather than a linear mindset. Examples of issues include: congregations, leadership, advocacy, evangelism, hope, health, quality of life, and stewardship. The subcommittee believes that—by generating the will, support, creativity, and energy

of the ELCA—we can help mobilize forces for the revitalization of rural areas, and stimulate attention to the larger issues of the distribution of wealth, consumer behavior, and corporate and societal ethics.

- The subcommittee wants to ensure that activity be cross-pollinated; be facilitated by issues coming from the hearts of the people, as opposed to an anonymous structure; be shared throughout the expressions of the ELCA; and that rural congregations and rural people are active builders of the Alliance.
- As we work together as the ELCA, we welcome our ecumenical partners and seek to collaborate with them.
- We honor and recognize that our history and tradition provide a foundation for the future.

Criteria for a Good Draft Model

- Spend minimal time, energy, and dollars on infrastructure.
- Include a bias for action with a nimble and flexible structure.
- Provide for “buy in” from all partners. Divisions and synods are basic to the success of the Alliance.
- Provide for information sharing across all parts of the ELCA engaged in rural ministry.
- Allow for multiple projects and collaborative activities that include various combinations of partners.

About the Draft Models

- Recognizing that many possible models exist, the work group presents four models as a sampler to stimulate the thinking of the gathering.
- Several of the models have been explicated more than others, which reflect the working group’s sense of the types of models with the greatest viability.
- Parts of the various models can be interchanged to create new combinations.
- The subcommittee recognizes that each model has pros and cons. It will be important to prioritize what the Alliance is to accomplish and then choose the structure best suited to meet that outcome.

Proposals from the February 19–20, 2003, Meeting

At the February 19–20, 2003, meeting, participants celebrated the new, expanded vision for rural ministry. Four models were presented and discussed: the affinity model, the alliance model, the conference model, and the cooperative model. Of the four, the alliance model was selected.

Vision Statement for Rural Ministry in the ELCA

The ELCA—through its congregations, synods, and churchwide organization, and in its breadth of individuals,

groups, institutions, and agencies—assumes a leadership role in small town and rural life to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sharing God’s gift of hope and promises of justice and healing, this church will develop and mobilize its assets to:

- Work for economic justice and alleviate and prevent poverty.
- Embrace diversity, promote harmony, and challenge discrimination in all its forms (racism, sexism, classism, sexual orientation, and xenophobia).
- Care for the land and all of God’s creation.
- Create a forum for raising rural issues for moral deliberation and advocacy.
- Evangelize the unchurched and reach all with the good news of God’s love and care through Jesus Christ.
- Develop and nurture leadership for small town and rural churches and communities.
- Support and sustain small town and rural communities and congregations.

Small Town and Rural (STaR) Alliance

Structural Connection to the ELCA

- Housed in the Division for Outreach; report to the board of the Division for Outreach.
- Hosted by one division, but bringing together many other parties in collaboration.

The Alliance

- Individuals as individuals; individuals on behalf of congregations, synods, divisions, institutions, or organizations.
- Each would pay a small admission fee to the STaR Alliance in order to belong.
- Joining and paying a fee would enable them to choose from a menu of involvement in affinity groups.
- Individuals could then be empowered to start their own affinity groups or projects under the auspices of the STaR Alliance.
- The STaR Alliance is coordinated by a small committee comprised of affinity group chairs, Alliance staff, and a representative of the Conference of Bishops.

Affinity Groups

- Initially, a maximum of six affinity groups would be suggested, which might include leadership development, community development, program and resource materials development, advocacy, one geographically located group, and one group based on extraction (e.g., forestry, mining, agriculture). The hope is that new groups would be added regularly.
- Members of the STaR Alliance can join one or more affinity groups based upon their interests and front-burner issues.

- Affinity groups can be self-organizing, but a basic, customized approach would be outlined.
- Basic elements to an affinity group might include:
 1. elect a steering group and chair;
 2. establish a listserv;
 3. convene an annual “in person” meeting;
 4. inventory and share what is currently being done;
 5. provide information to share in a standard format that could be placed on the Web;
 6. inventory and identify hot issues and deliverables for members of the affinity group; and
 7. prioritize opportunities for collaboration based upon what brings energy and will to work on.
- Each affinity group might spawn several project tables of varying duration and involve various combinations of members.
- Each group would establish mechanisms by which members can bring initiatives to the affinity group in search of collaborative partners.
- Staff would provide some support and facilitation for the affinity groups.
- Additional affinity groups could be added based upon interest and staff support.

Annual Meeting for Planning and Cross-Pollination

- A STaR Alliance-wide meeting would be held annually, with costs borne by participants.
- Affinity groups would meet for planning in their own groups for one day of the meeting.
- The next day(s), a plenary educational session could be held, with time for each affinity group to report on the current year’s projects and plans for the next year.
- Poster sessions or time for “show and tell” for promising practices could be included.
- Grants to underwrite attendance by those who could not otherwise attend would be secured.

Staffing and Budget

- The rural desk in the Division for Outreach currently has two full-time staff members to support the work of the STaR Alliance.
- This model would need one additional affinity group facilitator with a penchant for stimulating collaboration toward results. This person should be in a rural community that has good access to an airport and should have a travel budget.
- If the STaR Alliance were able to get 500 members at a \$100 membership fee, plus some additional donors, it could generate the \$100,000 needed for support services to affinity groups.
- Affinity groups and project tables could decide on their own financing schemes, dues, project grants, and sweat equity.
- Individuals can contribute money and receive a tax deduction letter for charitable donations.

Implementation Team Members

Rural Ministry Advisory members: Richard J. Bruesehoff, Dory Campbell, Duane C. Danielson, Bob Drakeford, Jerry Erickson, Dennis Gengenbach, Helen A. Harms, Kent Kanten, Richard A. Magnus, Kathie Bender Schwich, Sandy Simonson-Thums, Marilyn M. Sorenson-Bush, Diane Wagner, and Gilson A. C. Waldkoenig.

Additional members: appointed Division for Church in Society representative; appointed Division for Church in Society representative; appointed state public policy person; appointed Lutheran Services in America representative; Mark L. Yackel-Juleen; and Mitchell Zais.

Action of the Division for Outreach Board

The board of the Division for Outreach accepted the report of the STaR Alliance meeting; approved the direction of development of the Alliance including being housed in the Division for Outreach; and reported this action to the ELCA Church Council in April 2003.