



# Report on Rural Ministry

Exciting changes have occurred in rural and small-town ministry during the past two years, and we continue to respond with increased resources and networking. Everything that is done through the rural ministry office has a three-pronged perspective of advocacy, education, and spirituality.

Synods continue to request help and information for better ways to reach out and serve their rural and small-town churches. According to the most recent parochial report, 48 percent of ELCA congregations are located in small-town and rural settings. Some synods are more rural than others and access our services more often.

The rural ministry office is a resource available to all churchwide staff members. We are, therefore, contacted and work collegially with many of the people within the churchwide organization seeking rural ministry information.

In addition, the director serves on an inter-unit team, the Alliance on Poverty and Wealth. This alliance has been functioning for almost one and one-half years researching the issues of poverty and wealth. It is rewarding to watch how each person brings different gifts to these complex issues. The director also serves on a newly formed leadership team that will work with pilot synods on congregation-based organizing. The first meeting was in May 2007, so this team still is in the formative stages.

Due to downsizing within other denominational staffs, the ELCA rural ministry office receives more requests for consultation and advice from other denominations. The director continues to be a member of the Rural Church Network, North America, which is a networking and educational opportunity for the staff of denominations, nonprofit rural organizations, seminaries, and continuing educational sites.

Rural life and rural ministry continues to expand beyond the United States borders. Globalization has affected almost everything. Therefore, the director serves on the executive committee of Agricultural Missions, Inc. This organization works with low-resource people in Africa, Asia, India, South America, Central America and Mexico. They use the accompaniment model and especially work to empower women in rural settings globally.

The rural ministry office continues to build the Small Town and Rural Ministry Alliance (STaR) which is an umbrella organization for the affinity groups that includes grassroots participants from around the United States. The STaR Ministry Alliance holds an annual gathering each year with the mission of providing concrete models of hope for those worshipping in or serving small-town and rural congregations. The 2006 Celebrating Rural Life Gathering was hosted by the Upper Susquehanna Synod and held at Susquehanna University. The 2007 Celebrating Rural Life Gathering will be held in June, co-hosted by the Southwestern and Southeastern Synods of Minnesota and will be held at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota. The keynote speakers and workshop presenters all reflect the concrete models of hope in mission.

One of the most exciting efforts of the rural ministry office has been the formation of affinity groups. The “Weaver” is the person who organizes these groups and churchwide staff relate to each one of the groups. This is such an unusual and effective method of reaching out to the grassroots that the majority of this report will focus on this effort.

The “alliance model” was chosen in 2003 by the Rural Ministry Advisory Board to strengthen the voice of the rural church, in accord with a 2001 Churchwide Assembly action that called for more resources for the Rural Ministry Desk.

This organizational model has at its core the formation and operation of affinity groups, which are defined as: groups of clergy and lay brought together around themes of common interest, such as leadership, economic development, cooperative ministry, stewardship, education, advocacy, etc. These themes are defined more precisely by the groups that come together, usually taking the form of specific goals, objectives, or intent.

Churchwide staff members are assigned to each affinity group as liaisons, lending advice and guidance to the group on an ongoing basis, as well as identifying other resources and helping promote and achieve the group’s goals and objectives. The groups themselves are, for the most part, autonomous, egalitarian, and self-governing. They are encouraged to be creative, inter-dependent, and assertive. Actions which arise from the operation of these groups are documented with minutes and reports. Funds to support the alliance and its affinity groups have come primarily from churchwide grants funded by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans and a grant from the Office of the Presiding Bishop as well as memberships to the ELCA STaR Ministry Alliance and gifts from individuals.

## Formation of Affinity Groups

The key to the formation of affinity groups has been the presence of an organizer, called “the Weaver,” who identifies individuals by interest area, and convenes the group(s) for an initial teleconference. The initial teleconference establishes the ground rules and governance of the group (including the election of a convener and secretary), reporting requirements, and invites dialogue on a possible focus for the group. At the end of this call, a date and time for the next call is identified.

The second meeting is conducted by the convener. Making decisions by consensus undergirds the movement and focus of the affinity group. If a focus is identified, a churchwide liaison is identified and recruited by the director for rural ministry; if not, discussion continues until consensus is reached. If consensus is not reached, the option exists to form another group (with like minds) in the same interest area. When the group’s focus is identified, dialogue ensues to identify specific goals and objectives until the direction of the group is clearly known. The group is continuously monitored by both the churchwide liaison and “the Weaver.” This monitoring does not imply any previously

developed agendas or expectations for the group; it is only to ensure that the group is not losing focus on its self-identified goals.

### **Characteristics of affinity groups**

Participants in affinity groups have self-identified with the interest area, suggesting a strong interest and passion for the topic. The groups tend to average about six to eight individuals, with some as few as four and as many as 12. Group dynamics and facilitation are enhanced with 12 or fewer participants, giving ample opportunity for even the most timid to express feelings, ideas, and thoughts on the subject. Individual input fosters ownership of goals and development of community. Often, a strong “virtual community” develops among participants who have never met. These communities of interest are marked by a clear sense of interdependence, which generates energy in the group and accountability to one another. Success and failure are shared equally (ownership of outcomes). It cannot be emphasized too strongly that lasting bonds of friendship are often created.

Strong devotional discipline is a hallmark of STaR affinity groups, with reflections and prayer assigned on a rotating basis to members. A clear outcome of these groups has been the enormous creativity unleashed by the coming together of people who identify with and have passion for the topic, and feel safe in their “community.” It is critical to capture not only the area to be focused on, but also those ideas that are generated but set aside for a future time. Certain affinity groups have well defined life spans, such as event planning groups which dissolve after their task is complete. Many groups, however, will move on to other goals with the expectation of long life spans.

The role of the “Weaver” in groups functioning well is minimal, freeing that person to move on to other tasks. Groups that are not functioning well require more attention to nurture them to an acceptable level of activity. Affinity groups rarely meet face-to-face, using instead the inexpensive teleconferencing method. The exception to this are the affinity group meetings at the Annual “Celebrating Rural Life” Gathering, held in the summer at various church-related colleges and universities.

### **Successes**

While many more groups remain to be formed (including the first groups involving Latinos and Asians), several groups have achieved noteworthy activities and accomplishments:

- The Cooperative Ministries Affinity Group has worked on the idea of developing a database of parishes doing ministry in cooperation with other parishes, on a formal or informal basis. With the agreement and assistance of the Office of the Secretary and the Research and Evaluation section, Form C in 2006 (Congregational Report Form) solicited a response from parishes doing cooperative ministry. These responses have triggered a more detailed survey that will allow study of this ministry model and wider dissemination of information to parishes via Web page posting.
- The Discovering Hope Affinity Group developed and raised funds for a follow-up video for use by parishes considering the “Discovering Hope” curriculum. They have also been promoting the curriculum through speaking engagements and regional meetings.

- The Theological Education Affinity Group initiated an online course for “Discovering Hope” in conjunction with Wartburg Seminary.
- The Stewardship (“Beyond the Offering Plate”) Affinity Group is looking at ways to make resources for grant writing more available to local parishes and judicatories.
- The Health Care Affinity Group is preparing a strategy to advocate for the establishment of Parish Healthcare Advocates throughout this church to assist those who need assistance in dealing with the healthcare “system,” be it Medicare, Medicaid, or other.
- An affinity group was formed with African American and African Descent pastors who are serving in rural areas with white congregations. This group is using the process of appreciative inquiry as well as developing a strong support network. Out of this group is coming another one for mission developers who are from one of the ethnic communities, again as an opportunity for community, networking, and exchange of ideas.

### **The Future**

The STaR Ministry Alliance and its affinity groups will continue to grow, given the availability of monetary resources and staff support. It is clear that we must be inclusive in this initiative, and invite and nurture all cultures and groups in the ELCA to be co-creators with us.

It is certainly possible and necessary to popularize the technique of affinity groups within other areas of this church. The alliance model is equally applicable to urban and suburban settings, as well as specific groups within this church such as camping and retreat ministries, schools and colleges, advocacy groups, etc. This “multiplication” will likely be achieved through the training of new “Weavers” to work in their respective areas.

The activities of the alliance and its groups should be harnessed as an asset in achieving the ELCA strategic goal of becoming a public church. Activities of the grass-roots, if known, are powerful models to be used as “examples of hope” within and outside the church. To that end, it is imperative that the STaR Ministry Alliance maintain strong contacts among all collegial partners whether in formal ecumenical partnership or not.

### **Conclusions**

The STaR Ministry Alliance and its affinity groups have proven that this technique is a powerful organizational model for:

- Community-building
- Networking
- Individual empowerment
- Grass-roots feedback
- Action for change
- Efficient resource identification and utilization
- Multiplication of effort
- Creativity: “thinking outside the box”
- Evangelism: excitement for the Gospel!
- Impetus for hope

It is to be stressed above all else that the Holy Spirit is clearly at work in the alliance and its affinity groups. God is blessing this initiative and guiding our thoughts and efforts at every moment.

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