

# **Evangelism**

**in**

# **Rural Ministry**

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Christian churches have always had a passion for reaching out with the gospel. How can they not? Jesus himself made it clear that we are his witnesses. He himself emphasized to his disciples then and to his disciples today, that each believer is a “light in the world,” and “the salt of the earth.” It is Jesus who commissioned his disciples to “make disciples of all nations.” Each believer and each congregation of believers which takes the gospel seriously will passionately want to share the gospel to every person possible. When we ourselves understand and appreciate the gospel, namely that we are right with God through faith in Christ Jesus, we will then be motivated to share that message.

Evangelism therefore is really not an option. It is an obligation of the child of God and of every congregation of believers. However, it is not an obligation in the sense of being a burden; it is an obligation in the sense of being a gospel motivated compulsion to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. It is compulsion motivated by love for the Lord which desires to share this needed message with the lost. It is compelled by love for lost souls, souls for whom the Lord Jesus laid down his life. It is the deep desire to proclaim Jesus, because he is the only way to be saved from sin and death. It is our deep desire that people come to know Jesus as their Savior so that they are delivered from the deserved punishment of eternal death in hell.

In Acts chapter thirteen we see that the congregation of believers in Antioch was no different. It was gospel compulsion that empowered this congregation to formally commission Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries. They sent these two men out on their behalf to proclaim the one saving message of the one Savior from sin and death. Paul and Barnabas went out and proclaimed Christ clearly to everyone they possibly could. As they went they had a strategy. Their technique was to share law and gospel with as many as they could, normally first for the Jew then for the Gentile. For the most part they went to urban centers. They traveled to cities that were often very large and prominent in the region. If the city had a Synagogue, which they usually did, they would go there first. There they would reason with the Jews each Sabbath day proving from Scripture that Jesus is the Christ. If the city did not have a Synagogue, they would go to the next best place where they could find people. Essentially their strategy was to go where the people were and proclaim clearly both the law and the gospel.

As we said earlier, when the apostles traveled throughout the Mediterranean world proclaiming the gospel, they often went to large cities. It only makes sense that if you are going to share the gospel with people you need to go where the people are. So much of their work was really not done in a rural setting. It was done in the gathering of the Synagogue (Acts 13:14, and many other areas). The gospel was proclaimed in the crowded square as people gathered because of a miracle (Acts 14:8ff.). Or the word was shared at a meeting area among the learned who delighted in discussing philosophy (Acts 17:22). Yet this is not to say that there is not a place for rural ministry. Wherever there are people, there is a need to share the word.

Jesus himself often conducted ministry in a rural setting. He taught the crowds on the hillside and ministered outside of town when he fed the 5000. He spoke with a Samaritan woman in a country setting by the well. She in turn went back into the town to tell others about Christ. The angels proclaimed Jesus’ birth to the shepherds outside of the village in the fields. They in turn went back to the people proclaiming and rejoicing. Philip in Acts chapter eight was called out of town to witness to one man in a very rural setting. The emphasis in sharing the gospel is not so much rural or urban, but rather reaching out to precious souls with the precious gospel.

Many of us are serving the Lord as shepherds of rural congregations. We look out our front window and see corn instead of a busy intersection. When we drive we watch out for deer more than crossing pedestrians. And we become more irritated with the combine slowing down the traffic flow, than the heavy traffic. There are historic reasons why many congregations of our Synod, and especially in our own Western Wisconsin District are nestled in what we would call a rural setting. But regardless of what those reasons are, the fact is that many of our congregations are in this setting. It is therefore imperative that we evaluate our ministries, the ministries of our churches, and seize the opportunities we have to carry out evangelism in these rural settings.

In this paper we will discuss evangelism in a rural setting. Essentially what we do is no different than what the apostles did in the book of Acts. We share the same message – law and gospel. We proclaim the same way of salvation, namely through faith in Jesus Christ. We desire to reach out to as many people as possible. May the Lord bless our prayerful consideration today that we might be refreshed by the gospel to proclaim the gospel. May we also pray fervently that the Lord would open up doors in our ministries to share Jesus with more people. May we also pray that when the Lord does open those doors of opportunity, that we would walk through them and make use of the chance he gives us to let the light of the gospel shine forth.

## I. DEFINING RURAL MINISTRY

“What is rural?” “What does it mean to be a *rural* church?” That is a question that was asked repeatedly by the members of the *Rural Ministry Task Force* (RMTuF). This committee was formed as an appointed committee by our Western Wisconsin District about five years ago (actually about 17 years ago). At its first several meetings this committee wrestled with the question, “What is a rural church?”. It is question that sounds simple enough, yet it was not simple to answer. It was tough to define *rural*. We all had in our minds what a rural church is, what it means to be rural; yet to define a standard to work with was a challenge.

The concept of rural can be very subjective. Ask that question, “What is rural?” to someone living in Chicago and you will receive a very different answer from someone living in Hustler, Wisconsin. I grew up in the thriving population center of Hillpoint, Wisconsin. The farmers who lived three miles out of Hillpoint would talk about heading into *town* to go to the Village Inn. If you have ever been to Hillpoint then you know that “town” is a rather loose term applied to this community consisting at that time of two bars, two Lutheran churches and about 90 people. The people in Hillpoint often talked about going to the city to shop or take care of business. By “city” they were talking about Reedsburg, which at that time had a population of about 5000 people. People living in Milwaukee, or Chicago would laugh at referring to a place of 5000 people as a good-sized city. Yet, that is the way it was viewed by many in that area. The concept of rural or urban is often based more on a person’s point of view than it is on reality.

The United States Federal Census describes “rural” as a non-metropolitan community with a population of 2500 or fewer. If we were to use this definition, that would mean that 20 of the 28 congregations in our Southwestern Conference of the Western Wisconsin District are rural congregations. And the ones we are not labeling rural are not exactly metropolitan giants. One could easily argue for example that West Salem or Viroqua are rural, or at least have a rural mindset, even though their respective

communities have a population greater than 2500 people. The reality is that there are many communities with a population greater than 2500, which view themselves as rural. Because *RMTuF* could not settle on a specific definition or guideline for “rural” we decided to leave it up to the congregations.

“Rural” seems to be more of a mindset or a culture than an actual size. A very small community close to a larger city may not view itself as rural simply because of its proximity. While a city with 10,000 people may consider itself rural because of the farming culture surrounding it, and the lack of a larger city nearby. It is for this reason that *RMTuF* let the congregations of our Western Wisconsin District decide for themselves whether or not they are rural. The committee organized “Rural Ministry Meetings” conducted at seven different locations. Sixty one different congregations were represented at these meetings. At these meetings we discussed the weaknesses and strengths of rural congregations. We also identified the unique opportunities that exist in rural ministry. We found that rural congregations do have real opportunities to carry out evangelism, real strengths to utilize and build on for that work, yet unique challenges that could stand in the way of carrying out the ministry of the gospel.

Being a rural church is also not synonymous with being small. It is true that many rural congregations are small, but so are many congregations in large urban areas. There are many congregations that fit the definition of rural which have well over 500 members. Many of these rural congregations also have Lutheran Elementary Schools. Large rural congregations may often not view themselves as being large, yet in reality they are large churches. Later in this paper we will discuss the characteristics of rural churches, and how these characteristics can impact evangelism work and attitude. One of these is the tendency to think of oneself as being small, and therefore “thinking small” when it comes to sharing the gospel.

As we use the term “rural” throughout the rest of this paper, we will be considering primarily a mindset or a culture. This mindset exists because of the area in which the people live where the congregation is located, and is also a result of the culture the congregation is in. By this we are referring to one that is usually a farming or agricultural lifestyle and attitude.

## **II. CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL CONGREGATIONS**

At the seven rural ministry meetings, we discussed in the light of God’s word the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges the members faced in their rural churches. As people talked, it became clear that there are several attributes common to rural congregations. Some of these qualities exist because they are rural, while some are due to the circumstances and historic background that many rural congregations have in common with one another. Another point of note is that many of the strengths listed can also be perceived as weaknesses. It really becomes a matter of perspective and attitude in the way members see the situation of their congregation.

We will take a few moments to list some of the highlights of these meetings. As we note the top strengths, weaknesses and opportunities cited by those in attendance, consider the role each of these play regarding evangelism. Also, keep in mind that these points were listed by people who are members of these congregations. Each of these congregations has its own unique situation, history, size and area. Yet, they do share this in common; their members view themselves as rural.

### **Top Five Strengths of Rural Congregations**

1. Friendly and welcoming.
2. Strong family and personal ties.
3. There is a “community closeness.”
4. The building. It is often beautiful and eye catching.
5. Some rural areas are prime for growth.

In considering these strengths my first reaction is to see what was not listed by the people. Notice that emphasis on Bible study and evangelism is not listed as a strength. It can also be noted, that none of the top strengths listed relates directly to the mission of the church, which is to preach the gospel. I believe that says something significant which we will address later in this study. Another point to consider is that these were listed by people who hold this perception. These were the leaders of their congregations, and they are revealing their perception of things. Not every member of a rural church would view their congregation as being friendly or welcoming, nor would every member see strong family ties as a strength for doing the Lord’s work. Maybe, the fact that the leaders of these congregations view these points as strengths, or see their congregation in this light, is pointing out to us as shepherds what we need to address as we encourage our rural congregations in the area of evangelism. We can draw our own conclusions.

### **Top Five Weaknesses of Rural Congregations**

1. Rural congregations often think small or perceive themselves as being small.
2. Do not focus on or understand the church’s mission.
3. Family ties can hinder the Lord’s work, especially church discipline.
4. Resist change.
5. The youth are leaving for the towns and cities.

There were many other weaknesses listed by the participants, but these were the top five. Some of these weaknesses are due to other factors, yet the fact remains that the rural congregations as a whole tend to see these weaknesses. Keep in mind that many of our rural congregations tend to be some of the oldest congregations in our district and synod. Many of these factors are due to that as much as anything else.

One of the first weaknesses listed at every meeting conducted, was that their congregation does not understand or appreciate why it exists. As we consider how these weaknesses impact evangelism, we need to remember that if we are going to encourage, equip, and assist our congregation and its people to share the gospel, we need to address this weakness.

Another interesting point that was listed as emphasis at every meeting was that they believe their congregation tends to see itself as being small, sometimes too small to do “effective” evangelism. Because of this some congregations tend to view themselves in a negative light, because they believe they cannot do as much as the bigger churches who can offer all kinds of “great things”. When they view themselves as small, they tend to take on a defeatist mentality which says that things won’t work well for them, or they just can’t do what they would like to do.

The reality is that many of our rural congregations are not small. Some are among the bigger churches in our district. All a person has to do is look briefly at national statistics on church size and attendance. Statistics in 2000 indicated that the median worship attendance of WELS congregations is 88, while the average weekly worship attendance of congregations in the United States of all denominations is closer to 80. If a congregation averages 200 people in worship each week, they are in the top 10% of church attendance in the United States. What this means is that many congregations who view themselves as being small, are in reality not that small. Some who view themselves as being small would even be considered large.

Of course, we all realize that perception *is* reality. If a congregation sees itself as small it will think small in terms of its work and mission. Some congregations as a result may be slow in doing outreach because they feel they are too small. It is then that information like this can be helpful to open eyes and work toward correcting perception.

### **Top Five Opportunities of Rural Congregations**

1. People moving into many rural areas.
2. Chances to share the gospel with the community.
3. Chances to share the gospel with inactive members.
4. Special ministry opportunities, i.e.: seniors, youth, etc.
5. Each member has his own personal “mission field”.

It would be a beneficial exercise for each pastor of each congregation along with its leadership to consider the various opportunities we have to share the gospel of Christ. Satan prompting our own sinful flesh is working to blind our spiritual vision so we fail to see the opportunities opened before us. By the power of Christ himself we need to fight the urge to hang our head and do nothing. As God’s people we will lift up our heads in confidence, see our Savior, and seek opportunities to share our Savior with others.

### **III. THE HEART OF EVANGELISM IN RURAL CONGREGATIONS**

By looking at the unique attributes of rural congregations and how they impact the people, we might easily get the impression that evangelism carried out by a rural church is significantly different from other settings. It isn’t. Essentially it is the same. The message is the same. The method is the same. The proclaimers are the same. The people who need to hear are the same.

The heart of evangelism is the gospel, and the heart of the gospel is Jesus. Peter proclaimed when he was filled with the Holy Spirit, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12). The apostle declared in Romans 10:17, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” Whether people are living in rural areas or highly concentrated urban centers the one truth that each person needs, is the message of the Savior who lived, died and rose to make all people right with God. Regardless of culture or residence all people need this because as Scripture clearly declares, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Ro 3:23). The solution to this dilemma of every person being lost in the guilt of his sin and headed toward eternal separation from God in hell is resolved only through the person of Jesus Christ. It is only

through faith in Jesus that a person is delivered from sin and death, as Jesus himself said in John chapter 14, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

People need to know and believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior if they are going to be personally justified (Eph 2:8,9). It is this conviction that drives us as messengers of the gospel to proclaim the gospel to each person. This message is true and unchanging regardless of the times or places people live in. The need for this message is unchanging regardless of race, culture or circumstances.

This is why the heart of the work of evangelism is proclaiming God’s double edged message – the Law and the Gospel. People need to see their need (the law) and then come to believe in Jesus who met that great need (the gospel). This is why we say that essentially evangelism is the same no matter where one lives or works.

Consider the comfort in that truth. We do not have the burden of developing a new message or even a new approach. The Lord works the miracle of bringing a person to saving faith through the simple sharing of his message. The burden is not on us to develop anything new as far as the means or message of evangelism. Our responsibility is to faithfully use the means God has given us to carry out evangelism. We will seek every opportunity and develop our own personal skills to share the gospel wherever and whenever we can. We will do this, because this is the only means God gives to deliver lost souls from eternal darkness and bring them into the light of eternal life.

We also take great comfort that the responsibility of converting lost souls is not on our shoulders. We are simply the ambassadors who share the Lord’s message (2 Co 5:20). As ambassadors we will strive to faithfully represent our Lord through faithful and energetic sharing of his message.

Yet, we do realize that we will want to take this unchanging message to each individual soul at each particular setting. Circumstances, cultures, languages, and people do vary from place to place. That will impact when and how we share the gospel with people. The apostle Paul himself serves as an excellent example of adapting to the particular people and culture where he was doing evangelism. On his mission trips he normally would first go the synagogue of each city, and there reason with the Jews each Sabbath that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 13:14). But, if there was no synagogue he would go to another area where he could find a gathering of Jewish believers and then witness to them (Acts 16:13). But there were other times when he witnessed to people with no religious background (Acts 16:31) and then proclaimed Christ as deliverance from the guilt-ridden conscience. Or, as he did in Athens when he held discussion with the philosophers and the well educated, he began with the common ground of the natural knowledge of God, and from that starting point proclaimed the life, death and resurrection of the Savior (Acts 17:16ff). His message was consistently the same. Paul and the apostles clearly proclaimed law and gospel. Yet, the starting point, the place of sharing, and the approach varied from place to place depending on the circumstances, people, and culture.

Rural congregations exist in their own particular culture. The people are sinners who need Christ. The congregations are made up of believers in Jesus who hold to the same message. The word and work is the same. Yet, the opportunities, the culture, and the setting are all unique. We will be willing to adapt to this unique culture in rural ministry so that we, like the apostles of old, will get God’s word to as many people as possible. Why? So that by all possible means we might save some (1 Co 9:22).

#### IV. METHODS FOR EVANGELISM IN RURAL CONGREGATIONS

There are some things about rural churches which make evangelism different from an urban setting. One might even say in some cases, more challenging. Because of this what works well in Milwaukee or Madison may not work quite as well in Cataract. This can be said even when one compares rural congregations with each other. What works well in Barre Mills may not be feasible in Ridgeville.

The first and probably most obvious point which makes evangelism in a rural setting different, is the number of people. In most rural areas it simply would not be wise to devote three hours each week to canvassing. The reason for that is simple; many rural areas do not have “neighborhoods” to canvass. We keep in mind that the method and purpose of evangelism is the same everywhere, yet the way to share the gospel will certainly vary from place to place. So, how do we do evangelism in a rural area where there are no cluster of homes where we can go door to door?

I believe the most powerful and wonderful way for a congregation to evangelize lost souls, is to do it the way that is most natural for believers. I am talking about one on one witnessing done by the members. This means that the Christians are seeing themselves as what God has made them; they are witnesses and lights in a sinful world. They view the world and the people around them as their own personal mission field. They share the gospel and invite people to hear the good news of Christ when the opportunity is there. This is the most natural, and effective way to carry out evangelism. It is really not even a method. It is simply Christians living their faith and letting their light shine.

There is certainly Biblical support for this type of personal witnessing. After the shepherds spent time with the baby Jesus they went out and spread the word concerning him (Lk 2:17). Andrew went and brought his brother Peter to meet Jesus (Jn 1:41). After her eyes were opened by her discussion with Jesus at the well, the Samaritan woman went back into the town and told the people about Christ (Jn 4:39). There are many other recorded events in Scripture of people whose hearts and lives were touched by Christ. Very often one of the first things they did was to enthusiastically tell others what they now knew. This good news is too good to keep treasured up in the heart. It needs to be shared. It needs to be proclaimed and announced. The forgiven child of God knows real peace and joy. When believers appreciate what they have in Christ they will want to share that joy, so others will realize it as well. This is a fruit of faith. It flows “naturally” from faith for the child of God.

This sounds great, doesn't it? Wouldn't it be wonderful and exciting if our congregations were filled with Samaritan women and a bunch of “Andrews.” They aren't. But they are filled with Christians. Our pews are warmed by redeemed children of God for whom the Lord Jesus lived and died. Our people have this forgiveness, peace, knowledge and even joy through faith in Christ. We need to be sharing it. It is up to us as pastors and leaders of these believers to encourage our people to do this. We ourselves need to demonstrate the joy that comes from the gospel. We need to inspire a desire to witness. We need to help provide opportunities for people to let the light of faith shine. We need to encourage, teach and equip our people so that they are witnesses in this sinful world.

Not only is this Biblical, it is the best way to share the gospel. The members of our church are more able to reach people than the pastor or member of the evangelism committee ever could. They can reach out to their family, the people at their work, their

close friends that they spend time with. Since they are trusted by these people, what they say will often be listened to. Plus, when a member proclaims the gospel it often packs a punch because it is perceived by people as not being their job, therefore they are sharing this willingly.

### **Promote a Mission Mindset**

Encouraging a mission mindset among the people of our congregation begins with us as called workers and leaders. We need to convey an enthusiastic attitude about sharing Christ. If our people see and sense that we are excited about Jesus and that we are confident about witnessing, that will have an impact on many of them.

The main way to encourage a mission mindset is to get our people into God's word. As they grow in the word they will grow in their appreciation for Jesus, and thus their desire to share Jesus with others will also grow. But how do we do that? We all realize this, we talk about this, we encourage Bible study, yet most congregations do not have nearly as many members in Bible study as they would like. There are ways to address this challenge. First of all, we need to provide Bible study opportunities, whether that be every Sunday or a regular time each week. If we are serving a dual parish however, this is not easy since a Sunday morning Bible study is next to impossible.

Why not try taking Bible study to the people? One method that has worked well is to once in a while have a 15-minute Bible study as part of the worship service in place of one of the Scripture readings. This Bible study could cover a variety of topics that we want people to grow in. One could study topics like: witnessing, stewardship, contentment, or the mission of the church. The possibilities are endless. Doesn't it often happen that we are at a meeting and we talk about how we need to get the people into the Bible to grow in these various subjects? But then we become frustrated by the fact that when we cover these topics few people attend the Bible study. These "in-service" Bible studies can be on a bulletin insert, led by the pastor in the middle of the service, and discussed using rhetorical questions. This could also be a perfect place for that power point presentation if that technology is available to you.

This sort of Bible study could specifically address critical topics like; how to witness. Or we could spend time helping your people identify people they know who do not believe in Christ or who have no church home. Our people need constant encouragement to see the opportunities they have to witness, because they can reach out to far more people than any pastor or evangelism committee is able to.

Another Bible study opportunity is to conduct a one-day workshop. This type of a workshop could be a one-day event on something like; "Witnessing Christ to the People you Know." I would suggest promoting it for two months, have a sign-up sheet, and get some committees involved in serving food or organizing some sort of fellowship event. A workshop like this could be the perfect event to work with a neighboring congregation. Why not really hype it up and have a fun time?

We need to continually help our people see the opportunities they have to share, and the importance of their witness. Many of our people would love to share their faith, but they do not feel qualified, or they do not think they have chances to witness. It is our responsibility to equip them, encourage them, and help them see the opportunities. Again, this works well as part of a worship service in a brief Bible study format. Our Synod's Evangelism commission provides a sheet entitled "Friends who Need Jesus." This works well to walk through with our people and asking them to write down each

person they know who does not believe in Christ, or who does not have a church home. After doing this they can pray for each person on their list, and look for chances to share the gospel, bring them to worship or introduce them to the pastor.

If you, your elders, or evangelism committee are able to visit the members of your congregation, this can be an excellent focus of discussion. We usually think of making evangelism visits with the unchurched. Maybe some of the best evangelism visits could be done with our own members, speaking with them one on one, and discussing specific people they know who do not belong to any church or who do not believe in Jesus. This can help provide names for us to contact, but even more than that it can help them see the opportunities they have to witness. We can encourage them to share their faith, discuss specific situations, and provide real encouragement for them to let their light shine.

Why not take time at each one of your regular committee, board, or fellowship meetings to discuss at least one aspect of evangelism? If we discuss this with them for a little while each month, it will help impress on our people the importance of their involvement in evangelism. We need to do all we can to dispel the mindset that evangelism is for the pastor and/or evangelism committee. We need to keep reminding our people that they too are evangelists.

### **Invite!**

As we said earlier, one of the challenges of evangelism in a rural setting is that families do not normally live in neighborhoods with houses neatly close together. There are exceptions, but this is often the case. This makes door to door canvassing and inviting virtually impossible. So how do we reach out to our vast community of people to invite them? Saturation mailings.

If your congregation has any event or special service that they would like to invite people to, one way to get the word out is to invite each family within a certain postal delivery route. We do this usually three times a year. Our congregation chooses three focus events; normally these are Christmas, Easter and something like Vacation Bible School or another event. We put together a postcard invitation with an area service. We then work through that mailing service and send these invitations out to every residence in three postal routes. This has worked well in getting the message out to the community. The total cost to send about 1500 postcard invitations, including postage, is a around \$600.00. This is a nice way to invite people when homes are scattered in a rural area. Plus, our own members receive the mailing, so it works to give that little reminder of certain upcoming events.

We also print extra postcards a few weeks before the event. We give these to our members and them to take the postcards home and use them to invite or bring someone they know. These invitations help our members in that they assist them in sharing their faith and provide them with something tangible to give to people they know.

It can also be helpful to our members to provide an avenue or event that they can work to invite the people they know to attend. One such special service might be a *Festival of Friendship*. This is a special service that encourages each member of the congregation to do the best thing a friend can do – bring someone to meet Jesus. The main focus of *Festival of Friendship* is not so much the service itself, but rather the leading up to the service. Several weeks in advance a Bible study can be done with the members on witnessing (this is a good place for an “in-service Bible study”). Then

encourage them to bring someone to this service, and then follow it up with a special dinner or fellowship time.

### **Newcomer Welcome and Invitations**

Some rural congregations exist in an area that is growing. People want to live in the country, but still be within easy driving distance to shopping and McDonald's. If your congregation is in this type of a setting, then working to welcome new families into the community can provide a great opportunity for evangelism. The main challenge with this evangelism approach is finding a way to find out who the new families are that have moved into the area within the past several months. There are many new comer services that provide this assistance, our congregation is currently using [www.newmovers.org](http://www.newmovers.org).

This company sends us a list of all the new homes and families who move into our community each month. We then take that list and set aside one Saturday and one weekday evening each month (when the days get longer). We have a gift bag with our church logo on it, and inside is a nice little gift. We give a coffee mug with a Christian message. Our goal is to give something that is not too extravagant or expensive but is nice enough that the people will not throw it away. In that gift bag there are also invitations, information about our church, school, child care and the community. Essentially whatever you think is nice or eye catching can be placed into this gift bag. We then go as couples to bring these gifts. It is a relaxed visit that consists of introducing ourselves and welcoming them to the community. We leave them our numbers, try to find out if they are a member of any church, and tell them we would love to see them again. If they seem open to more, we will take note of that. We also tell them that they will periodically receive invitations to upcoming events at our congregation.

### **Worship**

Once in while we will hear someone say that if we want to appeal to people and really do "effective" outreach, then we will need to change our style of worship. This opinion often sees liturgical worship as boring, lacking emotion, or a thoughtless process. Much has been written on this subject, and I really cannot tell you anything new about that. However, I do believe that if our worship is perceived in this negative light, it is not the fault of liturgical worship. Rather, many of these concerns can be alleviated by providing some variety, and enthusiastically leading our people in worship. Every four to six weeks at St. John's we have a "special" worship service that is in the service folder. The basic style is the same as the regular service in the hymnal. God's word and sacrament is the focus. We fix our eyes on Jesus! There are hymns and prayers just like in the hymnal. The only real difference is that it is in the bulletin, there are a few more hymns sung, and the wording of the confession and absolution is more specific to the theme of the day. The people have appreciated this. Some might see it as contemporary, but in reality, it is not much different from the services in the hymnal. It does however offer variety. I believe that our people appreciate variety once in a while because it helps them think about what is being said and done.

I think that often there is an unfair stereotype of worship in a rural setting. The stereotype is that rural churches are "locked into tradition, stagnant, lack variety, and lack

a fire” in worship. There may be some truth to these thoughts, but for the most part I think they are unfair. We all realize with joy that where God’s word and Sacraments are present, there is a fire and intensity that comes only from God. However, I do think that there is nothing wrong with considering how we are sharing that word, and how we are praising the Lord in worship. I am not advocating different styles of worship from Lutheran liturgical worship. What I am trying to say is that we can use what we have and use it in fresh ways to help enhance worship for people.

We will want to remember that evangelism is not the primary focus of worship, but it does have a place. When we invite people from the community and encourage our people to bring acquaintances with them to worship services, then the Sunday service may well be our first contact with that unchurched individual. When people see that we love to worship, that we enjoy proclaiming the gospel, and we like singing hymns, then that will have an impact and make an impression. It can help attract people to hear the gospel and pique their interest in what we have.

### **Bible Study**

Jesus said, “Preach the gospel to all creation.” People will “preach the gospel” when they are growing in the gospel. If our people are to be going out with the word of God, they themselves need to be nourished and empowered by it. This happens only when we are growing in the word. I realize that this is obvious. At least I hope it is obvious. But, I have frequently had brothers in the ministry lament that some of the leaders of their congregation are seldom, if ever, in Bible study.

At the risk of stating the obvious; the mission of the church is to preach the gospel. If that is going to be done, our members, especially our leaders, need to be growing in the gospel. We pastors need to set the example of exuding joy in growing in God’s word. We need to also provide ample opportunities for spiritual growth through Bible studies and Bible Information Classes. When we provide multiple opportunities for Bible study, we are taking away any excuse people might have to not be growing in God’s word. Schedules are busy and tight. But growing in the word of God must always be top priority.

Spiritual leadership means that people see the example we set. They know if we enjoy Bible study, and it helps to set a spiritual tone that focuses on the word of God. When the congregation is growing in the word of God it will focus more on its mission, and it will then be going out with the word of God.

It is my personal goal to have at least one Bible Information Class going year-round. This provides an opportunity for members to grow in faith, and Lord willing bring people they know to come and learn about their Savior.

### **Christian Education**

There are many established rural congregations that have been blessed with a long-standing foundation of Christian education. This might be in the form of a Lutheran Elementary School, Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. Reaching out to our children with God’s word is the strength and one of the main focuses of many of our rural churches. Why not consider how Christian education fits into the congregation’s mission

of reaching out to the lost with the gospel of Jesus Christ? Like worship, reaching out may not be the main purpose, but it is part of the overall mission. It might be beneficial for a congregation to discuss how their Christian education fits into mission work.

Many unchurched adults might not be too concerned about their relationship with Jesus or their own spiritual foundation, but they might be concerned about their children. Children often provide an opportunity to reach out to families because parents want what is best for their children. Parents might also be seeking ways for their children to learn and grow spiritually. We can meet this opportunity for the children and in the process develop a strategy to reach the whole family.

If our congregation does not have a Lutheran Elementary School, might we be able to reach children and families through an “Early Childhood Ministry”? Many resources are available on this subject. Assistance is also available through our own Synodical services to help us, and answer any questions we might have.

Christian education is a vital part of our church’s ministry, and the reality is that Christian education begins at home. Might there be ways for our church to assist parents in teaching their children God’s word, and raising them up as people of God? When our families are growing in the word of God they will be going with the word of God.

### **Reaching other Cultures**

Many rural congregations are also finding themselves in a setting where the culture is changing around them. It might no longer be the dairy farm culture they once knew. Not everyone speaks the same language and not everyone is of the same ethnic background. If this is the case in your rural area, your congregation may want to look into the opportunities presented to reach out to other races, cultures and even languages.

### **Reaching into another Area with the Gospel**

Some churches lament that everyone is moving out of the area and into the big cities. Others are concerned because so many young people are moving away to areas where there are more opportunities for personal advancement. If a rural congregation is experiencing this situation, might this be providing an opportunity? Is there a population center nearby where there is no WELS church? This could be a chance for a congregation to reach out to more people with the gospel, and possibly daughter a congregation, or relocate to an area with more people to minister to. This is a hard discussion to have, and an even more difficult decision to make. But we need to get away from the idea that the church is a building. We need to fight the urge to become internally focused so that we keep reaching out with Christ. I am not suggesting that a congregation should desert the people in their area. But I am suggesting that we need to keep looking for ways to reach out to as many as we can with the gospel while the Lord is giving us time to do that. This subject will be discussed more later as part of the multi-site ministry presentation. As leaders in our congregations we need to be constantly considering our ministry, and the best ways we can reach people with the gospel.

## **Follow Up – Visit – Make Contact**

When we invite people to our congregation, let's be prepared for the Lord to bless those efforts. When he does, let's remember to always follow up by visiting and contacting people. Let's strive to contact people as soon as we can to let them know that we appreciated their visit, and then invite to them learn more about their Savior. This is where it might be helpful to always have a Bible Information Class going, or one that will begin soon. We can work to encourage these people to be part of this Bible study.

## **The “Shotgun” Approach**

This is a name that I use to describe what I think is the overall best approach to evangelism. I have not heard this name used anywhere else, so if you don't like the name the only person to blame is me. I am talking about doing everything we can in evangelism, i.e.: friendship witnessing, canvassing, mailings, news and online publicity, special event promotion, education, Vacation Bible School, member evangelism training, and whatever else you can think of. I believe that when we do all we can, the Lord will bless those efforts, and as he promises, accomplish what he desires. I have found in my experience, both in an urban mission setting and in an established rural congregation, that the Lord has a way of bringing people in by avenues that we never expected or anticipated. As long as we keep proclaiming the gospel every and any way we can, people will hear, and the Holy Spirit will work.

## **V. OPPORTUNITIES**

Each rural setting for ministry is unique just as each urban setting is unique. It is not possible to offer a “cookie cutter” description that portrays a rural congregation. Each congregation is located where it is, in its own particular time in history, because that is where the Lord has it. Jesus is the Lord of the church.

Knowing this truth is what reminds each congregation of the need to appreciate where it is at, what its mission and purpose is, and look for opportunities to reach out with the gospel. When we take the gospel and its proclamation seriously we will work diligently to see how we can reach out to more people. We need leaders in our congregations who are constantly considering their ministry, and planning ways to reach out to more people.

With this being said; I believe that one of the challenges we face in rural ministry, is that we often do not think we have that many opportunities to reach out with the message of Jesus. We are tempted to think that because we are not in highly populated settings we just don't have many chances to witness for Christ.

Another mindset that I believe hinders gospel outreach is the idea that more people are going to church in the Midwest, in areas like Wisconsin and Illinois, therefore we are not living in a “mission” area. If we conclude that we are not in a mission area, then it stands to reason that we will not do ministry like we are in a mission setting.

I would submit that our rural congregations have many opportunities for outreach with the gospel. Our only challenge is to recognize them and respond by reaching out with the good news of Jesus. Some quick statistics help demonstrate this. The Pew

Research Center records the following general statistics that might be helpful for our consideration: *Attendance at religious services at least once a week categorized by state:*

Vermont - 21%  
New Hampshire & Maine – 22%  
Massachusetts – 23%  
Wisconsin – 27%  
Connecticut – 28%

I realize that we should not put a ton of stock in statistics. After all, statistics can often be manipulated and used to say and support almost anything. We also need to remember that worship attendance will even vary greatly among certain areas within each state. Some areas will have a far greater percentage of people in worship than other areas do. Another caution is that these statistics tend to lump all churches together, and that is certainly not accurate.

But there is something significant that we can take away from this information. The idea that *most* people in the Midwest are going to church each week and are dedicated Christians, is simply not true. That idea does not reflect what the studies show. Our own congregations reflect this fact by the numbers of people who are members, and yet are seldom in worship. We have many opportunities, including in our rural settings, to tell people about Jesus. We probably have more opportunities than we fully appreciate or realize. “Look at the fields, they are ripe for harvest,” as Jesus said.

Not only do rural congregations have opportunities for evangelism outreach, we might even have some advantages to reach out. What we lack in numbers when compared with an urban setting, we make up for in personal contact. When I served as a mission explorer in Portland, OR I could go for days without running into anyone I knew. Here in Barre Mills / La Crosse I can’t go out of the house for ten minutes without seeing someone I know. Or more accurately, knows me.

Doesn’t this say something to us about the setting of a rural congregation? Our members are constantly with people they know, running into familiar faces, interacting in the community, spending time with people who are familiar with our congregations. Each of these people is a personal mission opportunity where the time is right to talk about Jesus. We need to “always be prepared to give an answer” (1 Pt 3:15).

## VI. ENCOURAGEMENT

In the last few years the dairy farming families of our congregation have been hit hard by financial challenges. As a result, we have fewer active dairy farmers today than we did just ten years ago. Our rural “landscape” is changing. These are real challenges, and people are forced to adapt and change in many ways.

Isn’t it good to know that while the setting, and the life in rural ministry might change and fluctuate; what matters most remains constant. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (He 13:8). “The word of our God endures forever” (Is 40:8). Our opportunities and challenges may change and vary, but our mission to take the message of Jesus to as many people as possible remains the same. May we do all we can to carry out this essential work. It is our God given privilege and

responsibility to be faithful, to do what we can, and to go through the open-door God provides to reach the lost and the straying.

Finally, as we serve the Lord, let's remember the joy. We need to constantly be reminded from the word why we are sharing the message we are sharing. It is a message of pure joy. It is a message of perfect unconditional love. It is the message of free and complete forgiveness. We are sharing Christ. We are simply telling people how he lived and how he died for them. We are announcing to people who are lost, who have no hope; the one message of life and hope. Our Savior's work has no conditions, no uncertainties. We are sharing the message of reconciliation for lost sinners. It doesn't get any better than that!

It can be easy to become frustrated. It is easy to become tired and doubt our abilities. But when our eyes are on Jesus, when we grow in him, then the joy will be intact, the message will be proclaimed, and we will press on to God's glory. It is not about statistics and numbers; it is all about people. We are reaching out to lost souls who need their Savior Jesus. It is not about methods and ways to make the gospel of Christ more "effective." It is about faithfully proclaiming law and gospel and seeking every opportunity there is to share the word. When we are faithfully and tirelessly proclaiming the word every way we can, the Lord will bring his blessing.

In a world of big cities, where we hear about big booming churches and are told about the wonderful things going on elsewhere, it is powerful to hear the encouragement the Lord Jesus gave to the church of Philadelphia in Revelation chapter 3 - <sup>7</sup> *"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."* <sup>8</sup> *I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name...* <sup>11</sup> *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.* <sup>12</sup> *Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God.*

- *Soli Deo Gloria!* -



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