

# MAKING A *Difference*

NORTHEASTERN IOWA SYNOD, EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

## Rural Churches Band Together in Ministry

By: Marcia Hahn

Geographical parishes strengthen rural churches and communities

St. Luke, Nora Springs, has always had the finances to support its own called pastor, so why would the church consider joining a partnership with two churches located some 20 miles away? The answer, according to St. Luke Pastor Jenny Edinger, lies in mission.

“At this point, financially, we’re doing okay, but a ministry partnership is an important way for us to do mission with other congregations who can’t afford a pastor,” she explains.

Mission, modernization and survival are among the reasons that rural churches pursue cooperative ministries, known as geographical parishes. According to Pastor Darrel Gerriettes, assistant to the bishop, entering into a geographical parish – in which churches share any combination of pastoral staff, contractual agreements, or government – is a



St. Luke, Nora Springs

way that rural churches can modernize and transform, something that he says is needed if churches are going to continue to meet the religious and Christian education needs, fellowship needs, historical family roots, and community needs of their congregations.

"The model of the '60s when each church had its own pastor is gone," Gerrietts says. "Everything has changed with the current culture that is emptying the rural landscape of population. Churches need to be willing to look at creative ways to change."

Gerrietts has helped more than 30 rural churches in the Northeastern Iowa Synod explore and establish partnership agreements over the last 14 years. He also consults with ELCA churches across the country and presents at national and regional conferences about geographical parishes. Through his work, Gerrietts says he consistently sees two key factors that can indicate if a church's viability is at risk: budget and membership.

"If half of the budget is paying for staffing and related expenses, the church needs to be looking at other options. A budget of \$60,000 a year means the church is in trouble."

Gerrietts recommends that congregations take an honest look at their membership rolls and their pastor's workload. A full-time pastor who is trying to serve 450 baptized members shouldn't be asked to do jobs that a secretary, lay leader or youth director could do instead.

"If the pastor is too busy to be at the bedside of members who are in the hospital or nursing home, people will start to drift away and find something else to meet their needs," Gerrietts says. "When that happens, the church can no longer grow. If you want the church to grow, you have to over staff."



Pastor Darrel Gerrietts

## Shared ministries can bring new opportunities for mission and service

Rural geographical parishes can creatively use their resources to be as active and modern as urban churches. Gerrietts cites the mission and service work done by the One in Christ Lutheran Parish located in the Lake Mills area.

Since the One in Christ parish formed in 2003, members have made seven mission trips to Guatemala, and this year the parish is hosting a Guatemalan youth for the school year. More recently, the parish started a Stephen Ministry with some 20 lay members trained to make one-to-one visits with people who are facing critical life challenges. Instead of five different congregations doing vacation Bible school with eight to 10 students at each, the parish was part of eight congregations hosting Bible school together with 150 kids and 75 volunteers.

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Pastor Randy Baldwin, one of two pastors serving the parish's five congregations, says he is excited by the strength in numbers he sees when the congregations work together on projects or share worship services. "Our special joint worship services help people get to know each other and be in each others' sanctuaries. It's a thrill to see a church completely full again."

## Parishes evolve and retool to stay vibrant

Juggling worship times and locations among four to five churches and building parish-wide programs can be an ongoing challenge. Paul Fohs, co-pastor of the One in Faith Lutheran Parish near Strawberry Point, says that some shared programs have worked well for his parish, while some others, such as the youth program and Bible study, haven't grown parish-wide. "Initially there was a lot of energy and enthusiasm, but now the parish has slipped into a maintenance mode," Fohs says.

Special joint services, a parish newsletter and a parish-wide choir have helped to bring continuity to the four churches. Plans are underway for a parish-wide outdoor worship service and car cruise this summer, and a parish pictorial directory for the fall. A wall hanging created at last year's parish-wide progressive worship service now travels from church to church. Fabric strips of different colors are woven into the hanging to represent each congregation.

"The colorful strips tell the stories of God's creation and the creation of the parish," says co-pastor Lin Reichstadter.

The initial sharing agreement that forms a geographical parish is not intended to be permanent, says Gerrietts. "A geo parish has to continually look at what needs to be tinkered with for change and success, and retool itself every three years."



Each congregation of the One in Faith Lutheran Parish is represented in this woven wall hanging that travels among the parish's four churches.

## Mission Unity Parish seeks to regroup with a new partner

Faith, Mitchell, and St. John, Osage, have shared ministries in some form since 1990 – through shared seminary interns, a yoked agreement for a called pastor, and most recently, as part of the Mission Unity Lutheran Parish. Now they hope to revitalize the parish through partnership with St. Luke, Nora Springs.

"St. John and Faith are committed to the ministries they're doing, but they are small enough that they can't do it independently," Edinger says. "Last fall they asked if we would be interested in forming a geo parish and partnering with them to do ministry."

Edinger says that the St. Luke Council was already looking at new ways to use its financial resources most responsibly, realizing that a shortage of pastors could affect its own future. Since September 2009, the three churches have been building a relationship and supporting each other with scheduled times for Edinger to preach and lead communion at Faith and St. John, while a lay member from one of those churches preaches at St. Luke.



Pastor Jenny Edinger

A writing team, made up of two members from each church, has begun reviewing congregational feedback, budgeting needs, staffing needs, and other issues to construct a first proposal for partnered ministry. With guidance from Pastor Gerrietts, the team will likely go through several rewrites as congregational focus groups reflect on the agreement. Edinger sees the 20-mile distance between Nora Springs and the other two churches as one of the biggest hurdles to



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overcome. Those kinds of concerns will be discussed as part of the ongoing two-way communication between the congregations and the writing team.

“Sharing a pastor is old hat for St. John and Faith, but that’s not the case for St. Luke,” Edinger says. “It can be doable, but there is an emotional adjustment that the congregation will face, and that’s new for us.”

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To help ease any anxiety and to keep the conversation open, St. Luke’s council president has been sharing information and progress at worship services and meetings, and through the church newsletter. St. Luke will also have a “support group” to serve as a sounding board for the church’s two writers.

No one knows what type of agreement the three churches may finally choose, but Edinger says that early conversations have already identified a couple areas of agreement – a desire for Sunday worship services to continue at each location and a need for more staff to make that happen.

The agreement process can take a year or two of monthly meetings and goal setting, according to Gerrietts. He suggests that teams follow a three-step process in which the churches look at what has worked in the past, how the government can be set up, and how the churches will be transformed and modernized.

## Stewardship motivates the Unity of the Cross Parish

After 115 years as a congregation, St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran in Lamont is closing its doors. That’s not surprising considering the declining population of the community and the number of active church members, which had dwindled to fewer than 10 people.

What is remarkable, however, is that the church didn’t close nine years earlier when it was struggling to attract a called pastor. Instead, St. Peter – along with its partner church, St. John, Dundee – joined a new geographical parish partnership with two other rural churches to continue its ministry. Gerrietts views those extra years of church life as a victory worth rejoicing.



Lay members Darwin Tabbert, Bob Wrage, Dennis Rachut and Jeff Gordon are part of the writing team that is working on a partnered ministry between the Mission Unity Parish (Faith, Mitchell and St. John, Osage) and St. Luke, Nora Springs.

“Let the church close when the members can look God in the eyes and say, ‘This vital, important ministry is done. We’ve done all we can, and we were good stewards because we had a geo parish,’” Gerrietts says.

A self-evaluation at Peace Lutheran in Ryan found that the congregation no longer needed a full-time pastor, even though they could afford one. With forward thinking, the council decided it would be good stewardship to pursue some kind of partnership with neighboring churches that were struggling and unable to attract a called pastor. So Peace reached out to the Lamont and Dundee churches, and Immanuel, Earlville, to form the Unity of the Cross Lutheran Parish in 2001.

According to Pastor Roger McKinstry, who has served the parish since its inception, the biggest challenges serving the four churches have been communication and geography. The Unity of the Cross parish is spread across nearly 30 miles, and McKinstry's visits to parishioners in their homes, nursing homes and hospitals take him to six different counties. McKinstry estimates that he has often traveled more than 2,000 miles a month, or the equivalent of about one week a month on the road.

“I keep my eye on that clock,” he says. “There are no long-winded sermons.”

Communication among the four churches improved with a new parish newsletter and pastor interns who led worship services, coordinated programs and passed on news about parishioners. When interns were no longer available, McKinstry relied on creative scheduling and alternating worship and meeting locations to ensure a weekly pastoral presence at each church.



Pastor Roger McKinstry

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*“The more things the churches can do together, the better.”*

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As circumstances have changed – including Immanuel's closing in 2008 – the Unity of the Cross parish has retooled itself with the support of its members, who McKinstry calls very caring, generous people. Members have pitched in to visit shut-ins from outside their own communities, attend joint services and educational programs at other parish churches, and lead joint youth programs. Five years ago the parish held a special joint worship service to support victims of the 2004 tsunami, and they raised more than \$11,000.

“The more things the churches can do together, the better,” McKinstry says.



Quilts created for Lutheran World Relief drape the pews at St. Peter, Lamont, during its final worship service.



Sharing resources and forming partnerships have become more important as rural communities and congregations continue to shrink. At the Ryan church, McKinstry says that he has done only three or four baptisms in the past nine years, mostly for parents who returned to their home church to have their babies baptized. During that same time period, the church had 28 funerals, and only a handful of new members joined.

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After 26 years in ministry – with nearly 18 of those years serving in geographical parishes – McKinstry will retire this summer. He says that one of the best pluses of serving in a small rural geographical parish is how the members learn to share and care for each other.

“The people feel a commitment to their congregations that perhaps they don’t feel in bigger churches where it’s easier to get lost in the woodwork,” he says. “In these smaller churches you can’t hide, and that’s a good thing.”

Big or small, good things are happening in geo parishes, Gerrietts stresses. “At a time when half of Iowa is not worshiping on any given Sunday, rural geo parishes can serve as a tool for mission outpost, making it possible for more people to hook into a religious life.”

## KEY QUESTIONS

### WILL A GEOGRAPHIC ARRANGEMENT WORK?

It helps if congregations already share:

- **Acquaintance** – know each other; families interact
- **Communication** – same phone districts, newspapers, radio and television stations
- **Geography** – go from one congregation to another quickly, easily
- **Health Care** – same hospital, retirement homes
- **Cohesion** – same county, synod conference, perhaps same town
- **School** – same district
- **Social atmosphere** – participate in the same events

### WHAT ARRANGEMENTS ARE POSSIBLE?

**Yoked call** (share pastors)

Congregations call and support one pastoral staff.

**Parish contract** (share pastors, programs)

Congregations agree to the same pastoral staff job description, but issue calls as individual congregations.

**Parish council** (share pastors, programs, government)

Congregations agree to an additional level of church government to call and finance pastoral and cooperative ministry. All use the parish name and contribute representatives and money to the parish council, but for property and local needs, churches keep their own names and councils.

### WHAT’S IN A CONTRACT?

- Purpose (vision)
- Type and style of call for rostered staff
- Call procedures
- Pastoral staff needs, functions
- Staff relationships, titles
- Pastoral staff time management
- Methods and dates to evaluate ministry
- Worship, holiday schedules
- Joint budgeting
- Pastoral staff salaries, support items
- Office expenses, supplies
- Agreement renewal



## GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL CONGREGATIONS

1. Congregations are motivated to change for survival.
2. Rural people understand change and progress.
3. Transformation starts with the current situation.
4. Local control and involvement is crucial.
5. Congregations need to restructure for outreach.
6. Each ministry is unique for its own geographical area.
7. Cooperation and neighborliness are the norm in rural life.
8. Local ownership is the only guarantee of continuity.
9. Shared knowledge builds trust.
10. Leadership must love the land or the people who love the land.
11. More than 50 percent of ELCA churches share pastoral staff.
12. More than half of ELCA churches worship with fewer than 100 people.
13. Realistic goals look to the future, not past glories.

### For more information about geographical parishes

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