

**MN 399 W: MINISTRY IN GOWRIE, IOWA**  
**Instructors: Prof. Dr. S. Jung and Rev. J. Davis**  
**J-Term 2005 – Reflection paper**  
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A. The Countryside Cooperative Ministry in Gowrie, Iowa

1. Introduction

In January, we – two students from Germany – spent three weeks in Gowrie, Western Iowa. We learned about life in “rural America” and especially about the concept of a cooperative congregation. Countryside Cooperative Ministry consists of six congregations in the south and south-west of Fort Dodge in an area of approximately 1750 square miles. Four of these congregations belong to the ELCA, one is a Presbyterian Church USA congregation and one is a United Church of Christ congregation. The biggest congregation is Zion Lutheran Church in Gowrie with about 600 members.<sup>1</sup> This is also the “headquarter” of the cooperative. In 2000, two ELCA congregations started the cooperative; in 2001 and 2002 the other four congregations entered. As it is a fairly new organization, the different congregations are still adjusting to the situation.<sup>2</sup>

The traditional concept of ministry is that each congregation had its own Pastor. He or she would be present in the congregation all the time, celebrate all the services, and make all the visitations. This understanding is still present, especially among the older members, who lived in the area for their entire life and form the majority in the congregations. It is a challenge for the cooperative to introduce its new concepts of ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> V. *Countryside Cooperative Ministry*, <http://www.countrysidecoop.org/about.asp>, revised Feb. 12, 2004, accessed on Jan. 27, 2005 (appendix 1, p. 1)

<sup>2</sup> V. <http://www.countrysidecoop.org/about.asp> (appendix 1, p. 1f)

The people in Western Iowa are still very connected with the agriculture despite major changes in this area. As the communities are quiet small, people know each other and care for each other. Therefore, building relationships and developing an atmosphere of trust is a major task for ministry in this rural area. Furthermore, the European backgrounds are still remembered although the different nationalities now get intermixed more and more. When bringing different congregations together it has to be recognized that they come from different traditions.

## 2. Changes in Rural Areas

As already mentioned, the situation in the rural area has changed a lot during the past decades. The population is declining as more and more people move to bigger cities for better job opportunities. Large food companies press small family farms in producing larger numbers for less money. In Webster County, only 60 % of the farmers still own the land they work on. Also businesses in the towns are under pressure as fewer people are present as customers. This leads to unemployment and increasing poverty, and – connected with this – problems like alcoholism, drug abuse and even suicide. These changes challenge the communities as well as the congregations. Membership declines, the age average increases, and less money is available. Beside these problems, it becomes harder to find pastors who are willing to serve in rural congregations as for them this means most of the time more work for less money.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These problems we encountered during our stay in Gowrie are the same as the general congregational problems mentioned in G.A.C. Waldkoenig and W.O.Avery, *Cooperating Congregations. Portraits of Mission Strategies* (Alban Institute, 1999) 1.

### 3. The Development and Structure of the Cooperative

What finally lead to the development of Countryside Cooperative Ministry were financial problems and a necessity of changing staff. Already in the 1990s, several congregations in the area thought about opportunities to share ministry. After the retirement of the pastor at Zion Lutheran Church, conversations about developing a cooperative ministry started. The guiding question was: “How can we most effectively accomplish our mission in light of the changes we are experiencing in rural America?”<sup>4</sup> The participating congregations realized that despite their different identities and traditions, they share a common mission, which later was formulated as “to proclaim the good news of God’s love in word and deed as individual congregations and as a Cooperative Ministry.”<sup>5</sup> Now six congregations form a cooperative that is lead by a cooperative council which equally represents each of them. Nevertheless, the congregations are independent and have additionally their own council. The cooperative council only decides about issues for the cooperative, not for single congregations, and communicates problems, questions, and decisions to the congregations.<sup>6</sup> After the cooperative was formed, two of four pastors retired in 2002. This brought up the problem of adequate staffing. With about 400 people in worship each Sunday, the cooperative would need four fulltime program staff. Now it has only the administrative pastor and the associate minister. Therefore, in 2003 the cooperative moved to a concept of lay-based ministry.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.countrysidecoop.org/about.asp> (appendix 1, p. 2)

<sup>5</sup> *The Cooperative Ministry Agreement*, <http://www.countrysidecoop.org/pdf/coopagreement.pdf>, accessed on Jan. 27. 2005 (appendix 2, p. 1)

<sup>6</sup> For additional information about the structure of the cooperative see the Cooperative Ministry Agreement (appendix 2).

<sup>7</sup> V. <http://www.countrysidecoop.org/about.asp> (appendix 1, p. 3)

#### 4. The Work of the Cooperative

Today, the Cooperative offers several opportunities for ministry in its congregations that could not be provided by single congregations. A rotation system for the staff members and increased engagement of lay-people in preaching and administering sacraments offers each congregation the ability to celebrate worship every Sunday. Especially the smaller congregations value this opportunity and learned to appreciate the different styles of the different worship leaders. The larger congregations still have to adjust to this situation as they were used to have “their” pastor for worship every Sunday.

Furthermore, the cooperative offers “Fusion”, a contemporary worship especially for young people. This worship happens each Wednesday evening in a building at Market Street, downtown. On average, 75 people come together for hearing God’s word, listening to the witness of members of the Christian community, prayer, singing and praise, and celebrating communion. A crucial part of the attending youth is not connected with the church. According to Rev. Davis, it is important that this worship does not happen in the church building. One reason is that using multi media would not be possible there. Another reason is that the threshold for “un-churched” people to enter a church is very high. Here, the cooperative is successfully reaching out into the whole community, providing a worship opportunity for the youth that could hardly be provided by single congregations in a rural area. But it is a task for the future that this gathering does not become a single program for youth but stays connected with the church and its mission. Beside Fusion, “Connections” a contemporary worship especially for adults. As the name already expresses, the aim is to connect a broader group of people with the church.

Finally, the Stephen Ministry program educates lay-people in providing pastoral care. While the staff members have to spend most of their time for organization and administration, pastoral care can be provided by a fairly large number of lay-people, who can reach more people than the two pastors could. This commitment to lay-based ministry offers a tremendous opportunity for effective ministry in this rural area and for reaching out in the community. But as it differs from the traditional concept of clerical ministry, people have resentments against this new concept. Nevertheless, we had the impression that the Stephen Ministers in the cooperative are really enthusiastic about their work and the opportunity this ministry offers for them to live their faith. Furthermore, the care receivers appreciate the constant relationship and support by their ministers that could not be provided by the two pastors to this extent.

## 5. The Future

Especially the smaller congregations appreciate the Cooperative as an opportunity for ongoing ministry. Some of them probably would have to close without the Cooperative. Nevertheless, for those congregations with the smallest worship attendance (PCUSA and UCC) it will probably become necessary in the future to join with one of the Lutheran congregations for weekly worship. Offering such opportunities was one of the goals for Tri-County Ministry in North Dakota, the example after which Countryside Cooperative Ministry was formed. Even if single congregations have to close, the staying people have a place to go because fellowship has been established.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> V. *Cooperating Congregations*, 24

Furthermore, it was mentioned to us that financial problems might be a continuing problem – compared to the past and according to the changes in rural areas – the members are less wealthy. On the other hand, growing appreciation for the ministry provided by the Cooperative might encourage members to give more money and invite new people to the congregations. Additionally, more congregations in the area might be interested in joining the cooperative and sharing the ministry as well as the financial load. This, of course, would make the creation of another staff position necessary. It also might create two centers or even split the cooperative into two areas for geographical reasons.

## 6. Assessment

According to several conversations with members of all of the six congregations in the cooperative and according to some annual meeting we could attend, a majority appreciates the concept of Countryside Cooperative Ministry and is willing to adjust to new ways of doing ministry. But it is my impression that this is more a result of acknowledging the necessity than of a real commitment to vision and mission of the Cooperative. The congregations made a decision to focus on mission instead of maintenance but it is an on-going challenge to make the shift from staff-based to lay-based ministry.<sup>9</sup> “Successful cooperative parishes are driven more by a passion for Christian mission than by a struggle for survival.”<sup>10</sup> This change still has to be made. Therefore, the congregations have to engage in an on-going conversation about their vision and mission for their churches and their communities. Nevertheless, in my eyes this concept enables these congregations to carry on their ministry in difficult situations and to be present in the area.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. <http://www.countrysidecoop.org/about.asp> (appendix 1, p. 3)

<sup>10</sup> *Cooperating Congregations*, ix

## B. Ordained Ministry and Lay Ministry

### 1. Confessional Basics

As already mentioned, to realize its mission Countryside Cooperative Ministry made a shift to lay-based ministry. Lay-people take care for things which traditionally were functions of the ordained pastor, like visitations, leading worship, and also preaching and administering sacraments. According to Luther's concept of the common priesthood of all believers, all members of the Christian church share the ministry of proclaiming God's word and administering the sacraments. CA V shows the importance of this ministry as it provides the means through which God gives the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, CA VII explains that pure teaching of the gospel and right administration of the sacraments are the crucial elements of the church. Where those two things happen church becomes visible and a single congregation becomes part of the one *ecclesia catholica*.<sup>11</sup> Although CA VIII explains that the validity of the sacraments is not dependent on the faith of the minister, there is a need for good order so that the church may become visible to outsiders, too. Therefore, CA XIV emphasizes "that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called."<sup>12</sup> A by the church as a whole ordained minister represents for the congregation this whole church and is responsible to preserve this unity. To fulfill this function, the ordained ministers needs to be able to be faithful to the gospel but there is no indication that a special theological education is necessary. Furthermore, it is in accordance with the Reformation "that in situations in which

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<sup>11</sup> In worship the associated Christians appear "as the church of Christ." (W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998) 371

<sup>12</sup> CA XIV, quoted from: *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. by R. Kolb and T.J. Wengert (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2000) 47

for any reason the normal order of institution to office is not functioning, all baptized Christians have not merely the right but the duty of seeing to it that the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered because the church cannot exist without the maintaining of this ministry.”<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Lay-Ministry in Gowrie

Countryside Cooperative Ministry now faces a situation in which not enough ordained ministers are available to provide the ministry of Word and sacraments to all its congregations on a regular basis. Rev. Davis explained: “Either lay-people do preaching and communion or there won’t be preaching and communion.” As those are the crucial elements of the church, it is important to maintain the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. So far, the practice is that the bishop gives permission for certain lay-people for special dates and places. According to Rev. Davis, these people are doing their job very faithful to the gospel. This concept of lay-based ministry allows these rural churches to carry on the ministry. It encourages people to take serious the general call to ministry and it brings those who have gifts in positions of leadership. But ordained ministry stays important as there is a need to connect these small single congregations with the whole church. Furthermore, it makes clear that these people do not act on their own but as representatives of the church and of Christ.<sup>14</sup> This can be an overwhelming task; on the other hand, a regular call based on the gifts of these people can ensure them of their work and function.

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<sup>13</sup> *Systematic Theology*, 377

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Systematic Theology*, 389.391

### 3. A New Understanding of Ordained Ministry

Maybe our churches have to think about offering to people with gifts in leading worship some further education in order to “ordain” them for the public ministry of the word.<sup>15</sup> I think it is important not just to allow lay-people to lead worship but to ordain them so that they may act as representatives of the whole church and of Christ, especially in rural communities “out at nowhere”. This, of course, would influence, but not dissolve, the role and function of the pastor. He or she would be an ordained minister among others, but with a special education that enables him or her to organize faithful ministry in a wider area and to perform oversight over the ministry.

#### C. Conclusion

Looking at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria (ELKiB), two aspects of Countryside Cooperative Ministry seem to me to be especially worth to consider: the lay-based ministry and the orientation to mission instead of maintenance. As structures in ELKiB and ELCA as well as culture and mentality in Germany and the USA are different, such concepts cannot be transferred one by one the way I experienced it in Gowrie. Furthermore, such changes have to be introduced slowly. It will be a continuing question for me how this could happen in my home church.

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<sup>15</sup> So offers the Stephen Ministry Program some education for doing pastoral care. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria (south-east Germany) offers the opportunity for lay-people with some kind of theological education (mostly religion-teachers) to take further education. Then they are called (not ordained) as Prädikanten to do ministry in a special place.