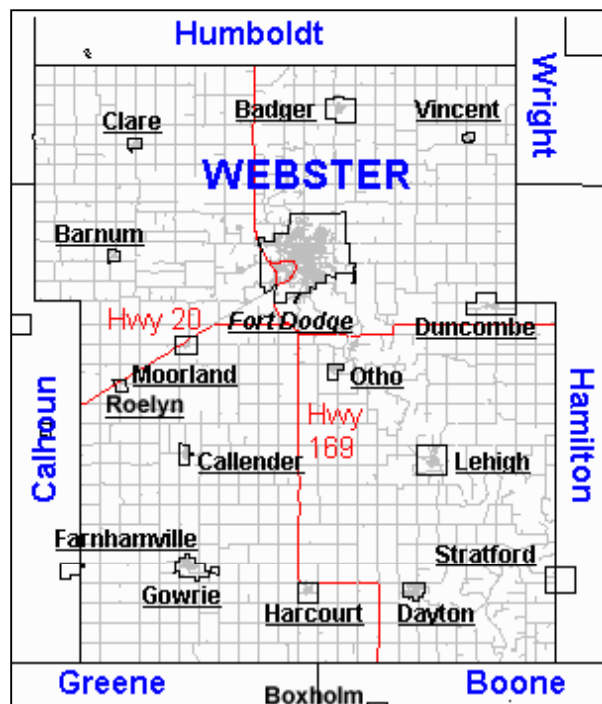


**Pastoral Practicum**  
**Countryside Cooperative Ministry in Webster, Iowa**  
**January 3<sup>rd</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> 2005**



Handed in by Nicole Landmann  
February 4<sup>th</sup> 2005

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

”You should say: ’I got much to digest, theologically as well as gastronomically”’, recommended Jim, when I was asked for a pithy statement at the end of the so called “Rural Learning Lab” by Sue, journalist for the local gazette “The Gowrie News”. Jim Davis is the administrative minister of the Countryside Cooperative. He and lay minister Gene Thoma were our mentors during what they call “rural learning lab” and set us up with many people. In the end we really gained a good understanding of what was going on in this area and why.

## 2. Context

’Dick’ Philips, mayor of Gowrie gave us the “Tour of the Town”. “Webster County never really recovered from the agricultural crisis in the 80ies”, he said. Statistics verify Dick’s impression. Since 1970, Webster lost 20% of its population, most of them between in the 80ies.<sup>2</sup> And it is basically the younger people, who leave the county to look for jobs outside Iowa.<sup>3</sup> “When they reach retirement age, most of them come back to Webster County,” said Diane Pantry, leader of the Gowrie Care Centre in Gowrie. Again

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<sup>1</sup> I basically follow the structure suggested in: Gilson A.C. Waldenkoenig, William O. Avery, *Cooperating Congregations* (Herndon: Alban Institute Publication, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. fig. 1 - 3 (attached):

<http://www.indicators.nwaf.org/ShowOneRegion.asp?IndicatorID=1&FIPS=19187>.

Also cf. table 1 (attached):

<http://www.silo.lib.ia.us/specialized-services/datacenter/datatables/CountyAll/copoppercent18502000.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> In Iowa, well known for its education, the percentage of younger people is only slightly below or even higher than US percentage. The percentage of people between 25 and 44, though, is way below it: 25.5% vs. 30.2%. Cf. <http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/popInfo.php?locIndex=7734>.

statistics confirm: 17,4% of Webster's residents are older than 65, compared to 14,9% in Iowa and 12,5% in the US.<sup>4</sup>

Depending on farm employment, Webster got hit badly by the agricultural crisis. "Between 1981 and 1986, prices for land dropped from 3,000\$ to 1,000\$. Now it's back up to 3,500\$. So you really don't want to start a farming business in our days", said Brian Larson, farm manager in Fort Dodge. Farming changed a lot in the last decades. The size of an average farm has grown tremendously – as well as the expenses for the equipment. As a result, Webster lost almost a fourth of its farms between 1990 and 2000, farms, which mostly belonged to a family for a century or more. Total farm employment dropped to 4,4% – below the 10,1% in the Mid-Iowa-Regions, and even below the Iowa percentage of 5,6%.<sup>5</sup> Many farmers had to specialize into mass production. About 40% of the farmers in Webster don't farm (only) their land anymore – they also farm for others. Farm managers like Brian mediate between the parties.

Most of the people we met were farmers or at least (partially) grew up on a farm. To understand who they are, I think, it is vital to keep this development and situation in mind, and also to consider their pace when doing rural ministry.

### **3. Development**

What brings congregations together is in the beginning most of the times a pretty disdainful mundane reason: Money.<sup>6</sup> After the pastor from Zion (Gowrie) resigned, the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. <http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/popInfo.php?locIndex=7734>.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.dodgenet.com/~midas/redi.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Along with the changes in demographics the membership of the church dropped, too, which results in financial struggle especially for the smaller congregations.

congregation wanted to focus more on youth ministry. When Jim Davis was called by Zion, he made clear that one pastor isn't enough for a congregation with an average church attendance of 165 – let alone developing a program to reach out to the youth. Following up the connections built in the 90ies, the first cooperative was established in November 2000 between Zion and Faith (Harcourt),<sup>7</sup> and it was possible to hire a second pastor, Ron Meyer.

Since the summer of 2001 formal conversations were held with five more congregations. They were guided by the question, “How can we most effectively accomplish our mission in light of the changes we are experiencing in rural America”? By February 2002, four of the five congregations entered the cooperative: Trinity ELCA (Boxholm), Calvary PCUSA (Barnum), Fulton ELCA (Roelyn), and UCC/Congregational (Moorland).<sup>8</sup> The “Countryside Cooperative Ministry” was founded. At that time, two of the congregations still had their own pastor, Pastor Frerking and Pastor Snyder. When both of them resigned, the cooperation realized that, in order to fill the needs of the congregation, they would have to put more emphasis on lay based ministry.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Ministries**

Supporting gift based ministry created many new opportunities within the Countryside Cooperative. For example: In April 2003 the Countryside Cooperative hired

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<sup>7</sup> Who historically belonged together anyway: 1888 a delegation from Zion in Gowrie moved to Harcourt to plant a new congregation: Faith.

<sup>8</sup> Also part of the conversation was the Lutheran congregation of Callender. But old rivalries couldn't be overcome.

<sup>9</sup> Or as I think would be the better expression: gift based ministry. Cf. Eph 4,11ff.

a coordinator for Steven Ministry, Cindy Youngquist, and two coordinators for Youth Ministry, Nick and Lindy Lehman.

#### **4.1 Fusion and other Youth Ministries**

The Heart of the Youth Ministry is an alternative worship experience, supervised by Nick and Lindy, which takes place on Wednesday nights in a storefront on Main Street in Gowrie: Fusion. Named after the physical process where elements merge to release as energy into their environment. The average attendance is about 80 people – some of them with no other church affiliation at all. The storefront was decorated by the kids themselves! It is furnished with a bar and couches, and is provided with a modern sound system. The atmosphere is extremely laid back, allowing people to come and participate in their daily clothes and to eat and drink. This atmosphere invites – but doesn't force – people to share their gifts and witness, and to worship God, even if they are not used to it.

In its more active and sensual approach to worshipping God – Fusion includes many visual signs combined with upbeat music – it speaks the language of Youth and therefore makes the Gospel more accessible to them.<sup>10</sup> The kids feel the power of being connected and understand that this power wants to ray out in their world. Involving them, speaking their language, and letting them design this place, shows the kids how much they are loved, appreciated, and taken serious. It is amazing, how this worship gets through to kids, who otherwise probably would have never been reached by the word and love of God.

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<sup>10</sup> A very common practice in the early church: cf. 1Co 9:19-23. Also the main reason why Martin Luther translated the Bible into German.

#### **4.2 Steven Ministries**

Steven Ministry bases upon the conviction that, by carrying each other's burdens, we will fulfill the law of Christ.<sup>11</sup> In 50 hours of training, Steven Ministry equips people, who are willing to commit themselves for at least two years, to provide confidential one-on-one Christian care. After the first class in February 2004, twenty-four Stephen Ministers were commissioned for service in the Cooperative congregations. They serve the communities of the Countryside Cooperative as well as surrounding communities. The service is explicitly not restricted to members of a church. Steven Ministers attained a community outreach that is perceived as significant and necessary even beyond the neighborhood. They also work closely together with the Gowrie Care Centre and will intensify their cooperation in the near future as part of a restructuring process that Diane developed for the Care Centre. To meet the demands a second class will graduate this February. They have a great number of participants from outside the Cooperative – and even one from Fort Dodge.

Stephen Ministry takes a lot of work from Jim – a work he enjoyed very much. Of course it is still possible to see a pastor, if desired. But most of the care receivers appreciate and value 'their' Stephen Minister, who spends much more time with them, knows them much better, and therefore can be much more compassionate than the pastor could.

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<sup>11</sup> Gal 6:2. They also refer to Eph 4:11ff.; Act 6:5; Lam 3:21-23; 1Thess 5:11.

## 5. Vision

You could read the old Mission Statement of Zion Lutheran Church in Gowrie when you were leaving the Sunday service:

“Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church seeks to be a Christ centered, mission minded congregation continually renewed through word and sacrament, so that empowered as Christ’s faithful servants we can witness by word and deed locally and throughout the world.”

Nobody was actually able to memorize this mission statement – let alone translating it into their life. The new mission statement is much more memorable and realizable: “Caring for all God’s people – one by one”. This summarizes their vision of mission and ministry as well as of their church-being. On their way out, the gate greets them with a little dictum above it: “Servant’s Entrance”. When they leave church, they enter a world in which they are needed, and in which everybody is called to care for the other one – not only the Stephen Ministers, or even only the pastor. And my impression was that they really do care – at least for themselves and their neighborhood.<sup>12</sup>

## 6. Tensions

Tensions we could face when visiting the Countryside Cooperative were basically between the two fractions of traditionalists and progressives. Moving on to gift based ministry wasn’t easy for some of the members in the beginning. Seeing un-ordained people do what only the pastor used to do, didn’t seem appropriate to some of them. It took a while to encourage an understanding for gift based ministry. It isn’t something invented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but actually plain reality in the early church. Also Lutheran

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<sup>12</sup> They cut the benevolence to 10% – so caring for the whole wide world hasn’t top priority. But oh well – doesn’t the mission statement say: one by one? You got to start somewhere...!

traditions are not opposed to gift based ministry in principle.<sup>13</sup> Finally, seeing what good comes out of the gift based ministry, and realizing how God works through every one of us to build God's kingdom made the traditionalists look more favorably upon the gift based ministry of each member of the church. Still, tensions will remain between those two groups, which is good, because they make sure that there is a balance in the Cooperative and that chances will take place thoughtfully.

## **7. Why it works**

At this time, the Countryside Cooperative works basically because of Jim, who keeps things together and moving forward.<sup>14</sup> The connections between the single congregations and the identification with the Cooperative are still too weak to work by themselves. Events and ministries like Fusion, Connection, Stephen Ministry and the annual Cooperative worship service reach out among congregations and beyond into the community. Even though each congregation realizes and appreciates that these things would not be possible without the Cooperative, I think, that there is still need for more unifying memories to strengthen the understanding of oneness, which is, with all the things going on already, probably just a question of time in the first place.

## **8. Future**

What started out as a makeshift is growing into a mission oriented cooperative of congregations. It rays out into the community and attracts other struggling congregations who want to become part of it as well. It will be interesting to follow the changes that are

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. CA V. And especially, when ministry is delegated: cf. CA 14.

<sup>14</sup> ... and because there simply is no other option. Without the cooperative, most of the congregations would probably die within a few years.

going on. How much more and under which circumstances can the Cooperative take in more congregations? Will the Cooperative develop the strength to last despite the financial and demographic crisis in rural America?

“The question is: Do we want to be a church of maintenance or mission? If we just want to have Sunday services and bury and marry people, the one-pastor-one-church-model will still work!” challenges Jim. Working effectively in church and mission – especially in rural America – is possible only if we step back from the traditional model of taking responsibilities from the members of the church. Everybody must be encouraged to evaluate, develop, and use their gifts to serve the body of Christ. It was exciting to experience in this rural setting what God can work through them, if you actually let them!

## **9. Compared to the situation in Brandenburg**

Being part of the “Landeskirche”, congregations in Germany don’t have the freedom to form cooperatives of their own. Being part of the “Landeskirche”, they don’t have to pay the pastor. Salaries as well as ongoing expenses are covered by the “Landeskirche”. This cuts back in autonomy and spontaneity – but it gives more security and also makes the pastor less dependent on the congregation or parish.

Still, congregations in rural Germany face similar struggles like Webster County. The population drops – especially in rural areas. The church-membership is falling, particularly in East Germany. As a result, the Evangelical Church in Berlin, Brandenburg and schlesische Oberlausitz (EKBO) has to deal with an increasing financial crisis –

impaired by a recent fiscal reform.<sup>15</sup> To solve the financial struggle, churches are yoked together. Some pastors serve more than six congregations, like in Buchholz, where I did my “Gemeindepraktikum”.

Like the church in America, the church in Germany has to face the decision, whether it wants to engage in maintenance or mission. The bishop gave a clearly mission oriented statement. But will the congregations all follow? Comparing both systems, I think that a revised, fairer financial model for the pastors’ salaries like in Germany would help the situation in rural America a lot. At the same time, the German church could learn a lot from the model of cooperating congregations and allow their congregations and parishes more autonomy.

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<sup>15</sup> There are three nationwide church institutions in Germany: Catholic Church, EKD, and Zentralrat der Juden. Therefore it is possible to sign on your tax form to which of the three churches you belong. From the income tax then a certain percentage of church tax is retained which goes directly to the church. Thus: decreasing income tax includes decreasing church tax. Nonetheless, independent from attending services or being involved in a particular congregation – just being a member at least financially supports the church.

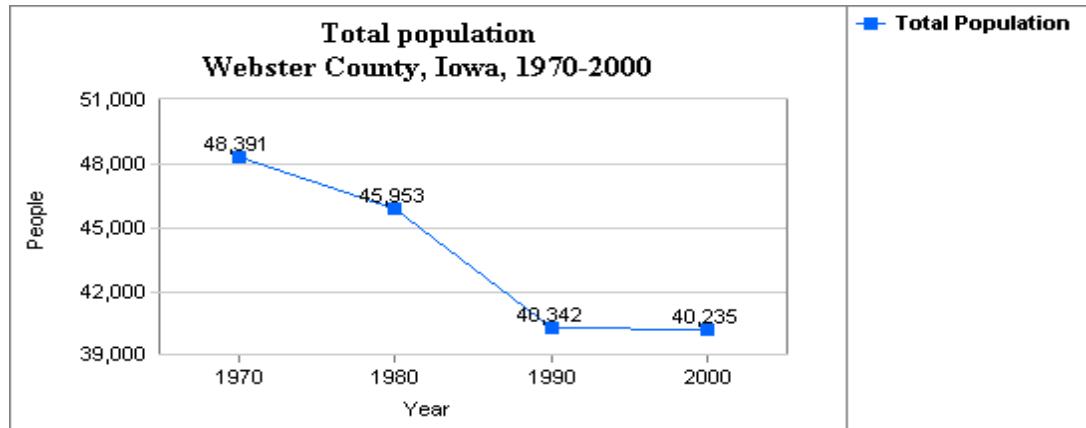


fig. 1

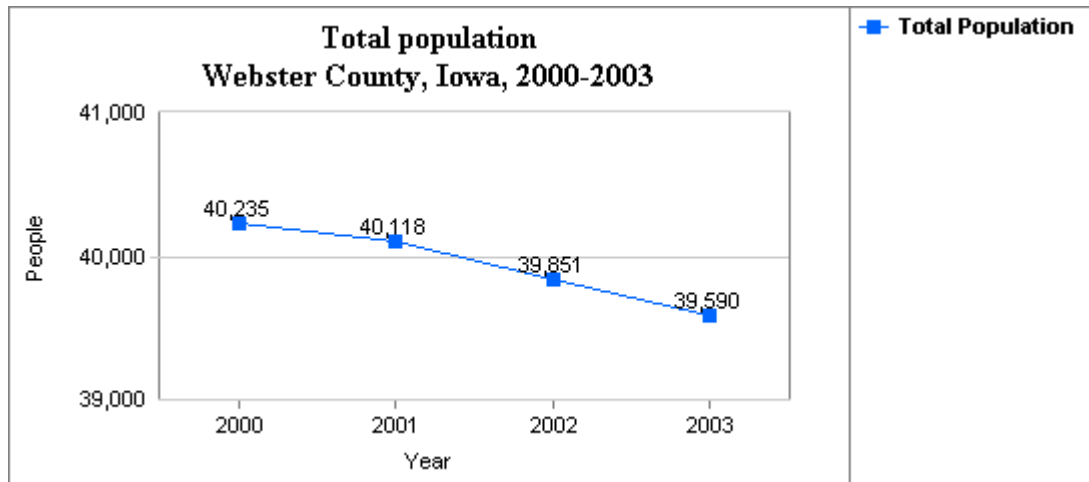


fig. 2

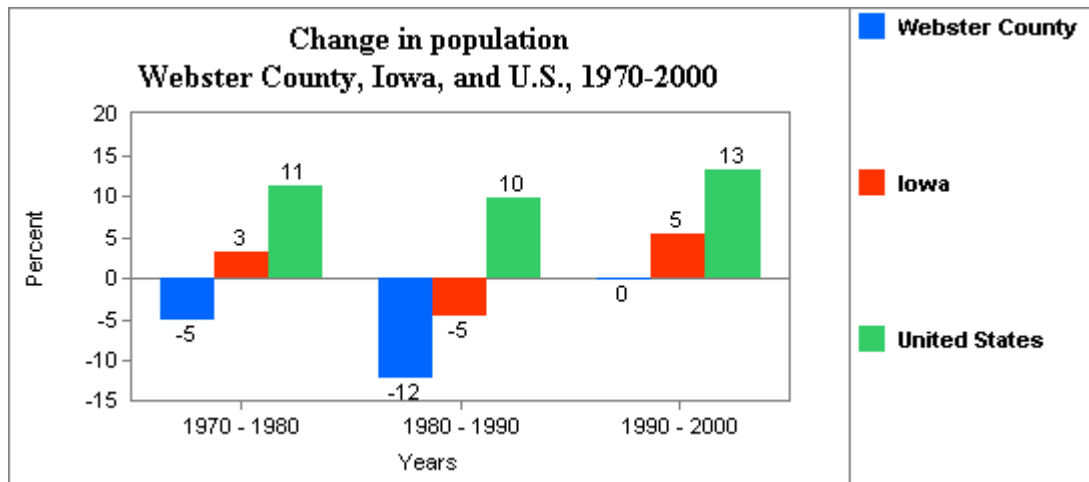


fig. 3