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Leadership: Small Congregations in a Rural Context (4 books)

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Relations; Anglican Consultative Council Resolutions on Anglican-Lutheran Relations, and Lutheran World Federation Resolutions on Anglican-Lutheran Relations.

This is a helpful commentary on the *Waterloo Declaration*. However, we would ask two questions: Do the essays assume too much knowledge of Lutherans by Anglicans, and vice-versa? Moreover, would more Canadian content, especially from the Lutherans, have been helpful?

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Dynamics of Small Town Ministry

Lawrence W. Farris
Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2000
89 pages, \$22.95 Softcover

Can Our Church Live?: Redeveloping Congregations in Decline

Alice Mann
Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999
167 pages, \$31.50 Softcover

Letting Go: Transforming Congregations for Ministry

Roy D. Phillips
Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999
153 pages, \$23.00 Softcover

Cooperating Congregations

Gilson A.C. Waldekoenig and William O. Avery
Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 1999
210 pages, \$32.95 Softcover

From January through August 2000, I undertook a particular sabbatical study with the Eastern Synod - Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada - Georgian Bay Conference ELCIC pastors and congregations. This sabbatical study was designed to focus on learning from and with

clergy and laity what it is like today being in small congregational ministry in a rural context, what they identify as their particular mission in context, and what suggestions they might have to strengthen seminary course offerings in training for leadership in a small rural congregation. The sabbatical study resulted in important learnings relative to each goal and in the formation of a seminary course on “Leadership: Small Congregations in a Rural Context.” Within the two years that I have taught the course (2000 and 2001), the model of education used has been a collaborative one involving pastors, laity, students, and faculty in dialogues within and beyond the classroom. At the end of the course in each year, a number of pastors and laity — as well as some students — suggested that key texts used in the course should be reviewed collectively in an issue of *Consensus*. This review on a set of selected texts is my response to that challenge.

The purpose of a book review, in my view, is threefold: 1) to review, appraise, and critique texts worthy of reading, study, and reflection; 2) to explore the value of a particular text, or a set of texts, in strengthening contextual ministry, enhancing scholarship inclusive of theological reflection, and contributing to the shaping, reshaping, and/or interpreting of reality; 3) to point to, explore, and suggest practical and transformative possibilities from insights gained in reflection on what a specific text or set of texts might contribute to the formation of ministry.

With these purposes in mind, I will first of all review and critically appraise each of the selected texts. Secondly, I will explore their combined contributions relative to certain themes but especially within and for ministry within small congregations in a rural context.

Norma Cook Everist from the faculty of Wartburg Lutheran Seminary writes accurately in the Foreword to *Dynamics of Small Town Ministry*:

This book is no caricature. Lawrence Farris leads us into real places, into an understanding and appreciation that are neither romantic nor cynical. He provides both principles and practices for small-town ministry, where life is complex yet comprehensible. Often ministers enter small towns as outsiders. Farris helps us see how that vantage point need not hinder but can help provide perspective for leadership, if one takes the time to respect the people and to gain their trust....More than

demographics, we shall learn about self-image and a sense of worth....Farris invites us to bring ourselves and our backgrounds to small towns and to be prepared to learn, to grow, and to engage in sustainable ministry with people who faithfully live there.

Pastors and laity from small rural congregations, and students, who have participated in the small-congregation seminary course heartily agree with this overall appraisal. Farris helpfully divides the book into two sections, namely, “Discovering the Small Town” and “Ministering in the Small Town.” In Part I, he appropriately underscores how necessary it is for a newcomer to pay attention to geography, history, culture, and values. In Part II, he explores how the ministerial role, pastoral care, and congregational ministry get lived out in small congregations that are largely “communities of memory” (67). Several responses from course participants included comments: “Right on target! This is true where I am! A must read for anyone serving in a small rural congregation.”

“Can waning and dying congregations actually live again?” This is a central question pursued by Alice Mann in *Can Our Church Live Again?* Anthony G. Pappas, author of *Entering The World of the Small Church* (2000) — with much experience in pastoring in a small church — notes in the Foreword that Mann appropriately “paints us a picture of cautious but energizing optimism.” Mann summarizes many of the factors contributing to the loss of vitality in congregations, but she takes the reader into much more than that. She believes that at the heart of revitalizing congregational ministry is “congregational spirituality.” Says Pappas:

Mann sets us a table full of options — “A Spectrum of Choices” is what Mann calls them (62) — for congregations seeking to develop a new and more faithful future. She does this both in theoretical terms and also by means of mini-case studies. Every reader will have her mind expanded and his soul lifted. Truly God has given us many possibilities. And new ones will be discerned as we dig up the talents that we have buried and learn to use them in response to the Spirit’s direction.

Mann reflects:

If congregations are born from a spark of creative interaction between faith and context, can leaders rekindle such a spark later in a church's life? My answer is, "Yes, sometimes they can," because I have seen it happen. But it certainly isn't an easy process, especially after a long period of decline (37).

Then she boldly, and I believe rightly declares: "Unless a congregation reconnects faith with context in a fresh and powerful way, no strategy, structure, or program will make much difference in its long-term vitality" (62) A particular strength of this book is that each chapter includes questions for further reflection. Course participants have appraised this text as being "right on" as well!

Many congregations in these changing times are in transition — sometimes from one size to another, sometimes in terms of how they interact with their surrounding environment, sometimes in membership, sometimes in leadership. "Every transition begins with an ending," says Phillips in *Letting Go*.

As life goes on and we encounter anything that changes — and everything does — we are faced with yet another ending that requires us once again to let go. New things come only after we let go of former things. But letting go of what is familiar is not most people's favorite thing. Letting go requires a sense deep down that there is that which can be trusted. That sense does not come to most of us once and for all. It needs to be remembered and recovered again and again in every new phase of our life (2).

Phillips worries about the spiritual vitality of today's established congregations. He believes that something new is trying to emerge in congregational life. But as long as leaders in the church, both clerical and laity, refuse to let go of "how we've always done it," the new will have trouble emerging. In this text, he suggests that there are four interrelated fronts in which it is necessary to practice "letting go" and "making a new beginning." As summarized by Michael A. Cowan in the Foreword, these are: "*from membership*, in which congregants

understand themselves as recipients of spiritual care from professional providers, *to ministry*, in which they carefully discern their gifts and the responsibilities to which these gifts correspond; *from entitlement*, in which congregants remain members because they are given standing influence over some piece of the congregation's life, *to mission*, in which they become mindful of calls to service both inside and outside the congregation; *from education*, in which congregants are consumers of a curriculum designed and delivered by others, *to spiritual development*, in which they interrupt the frenetic 'doing' of contemporary life in order to attend to the movement of the spirit in their lives and the response the spirit asks of them; *from toleration*, in which congregants politely allow otherness but keep it at arms length, *to engagement*, in which they embrace diversity as a source of ongoing spiritual transformation." Among the areas of ministry, Phillips suggests "letting go" are: "Letting go of numbers as proof of success," "Letting go of solo pastoring," "Letting go of 'For Adults Only' religion," "Letting go of unilateral power," and "Letting go into non-anxious leadership." The text includes personal exercises to help us let go!

In the Introduction of *Cooperating Congregations*, Waldekoenig and Avery share these significant and pertinent data and reflections:

...small congregations make up the majority of Protestant churches in the United States and Canada. Half of U.S. Protestant congregations have an average weekly worship attendance of fewer than 75, and approximately three-fifths have fewer than 100. In this study we will examine cooperatives in the Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran and Presbyterian traditions. All of these denominations have been losing members since the 1960s. Small congregations and declining membership mean not only reduced financial resources but also financial crises. An observer of the Episcopal Church could be writing for all the traditional mainline churches: 'It is no longer possible to assume that a significant majority of congregations have the resources to employ a full-time seminary trained priest as well as [to] support building facilities, program and outside giving.' The increasing age of members is another factor in mainline denominations. In the Evangelical Lutheran

Church in America (ELCA), for example, the average age is 54, while the average age in the general U.S. population is 32. Given this information on age and decline, some experts predict that the year 2025, two-thirds of the Protestant churches in this country will be unable to support their own pastor” (1-2).

What are cooperative parishes? “Cooperative parishes are clusters of congregations that have joined together to engage in common mission and to share resources, without surrendering individual congregational identity or consolidating in the usual sense of the term” (2).

Portraits, descriptions, strategies, and reflections are provided for a number of cooperative parishes (within the US) [I shall cite the five that are presented.]: Tri-County Ministry, North Dakota - eight congregations in total - seven Lutheran and one Presbyterian; North Central Cluster, West Virginia - four Episcopal congregations; Upper Sand Mountain Parish, Northern Alabama - 11 small-membership Methodist rural congregations; Milwaukee, Wisconsin - 25 Evangelical Lutheran Church in American city churches, joined by two congregations just outside the city limits of Milwaukee and two campus ministries and three newly created specialized “outreach” ministries - partnership ministries; MATE - Mission at the Eastward, Maine - nine Presbyterian small rural congregations. Each of these cooperatives is not without its tensions, but everyone works. The authors offer data and reflections as to why they work. The detailed descriptions are most helpful to the reader in grasping realities of cooperative ministry within context.

“The cooperative parish is a lively alternative to other popular but ultimately unproductive strategies for providing pastoral services to small congregations.” Say the authors:

In well-populated areas, it is easy for judicatories and congregations to recycle retired pastors in small congregations. Such arrangements often favor the status quo and deny small congregations the fresh energy of new leadership. On the other hand, many small congregations are treated as stepping-stones for pastors fresh from seminary. Congregational members then experience rapid pastoral turnover, and the lack of stability in pastoral leadership thwarts community

Although cooperative parishes are not for everyone nor for every situation, “cooperative parishes” say the authors, “are adaptive responses to changing circumstances. They prepare congregations for a wider array of possibilities than they would have had otherwise” (191). They are a viable model for the future and will need to be given serious consideration.

Collectively, these texts affirm that ministry does not take place in a vacuum. Each congregation, regardless of its size, needs to interact and connect with its surrounding environment — otherwise, it has no reason for existence nor a relevance nor a viable future. Materials presented here also underscore how each context is unique. While there are some commonalities between and among congregations, each parish holds a unique identity, a special history, and a particular mission within its own community.

What will ministry look like in five, ten, fifteen, or twenty years from now? While no one has a crystal ball to make predictions, this literature suggests that there will need to be serious consideration given to alternative models — alternatives to the one-pastor-one-congregation model. Within those alternative models, there needs to be intentional focus on affirmation and empowerment of laity — acknowledging that the baptized are all called into ministry within and beyond the congregation. Amidst a world given to growth and ever-increasing bigness, there also needs to be a firm acknowledgment that it’s OK to be small, provided that we see within and through that smallness opportunities for living out God’s Gospel ministry day by day wherever we are!

These are four texts which I regard as required reading for all seminarians, whether they receive a call to a small rural congregation upon ordination or not. I also believe that every pastor serving in a small rural congregation needs to read and reflect on what each and all of these texts are saying. Colleagues in ministry — whether within judicatory administrative ministries, congregations, or seminary faculties — should all familiarize themselves with the contents of these books.

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