



Mercy Notes

Volume VII Issue 1 Feb. 2010

In this issue:

Struggle in the Heartland . p. 1

From the Hill p. 4

Brief Notes p. 5



Mercy forever.

All programs of LCMS World Relief and Human Care are funded by donations from caring people like you. No dollars come from the Missouri Synod's unrestricted budget. Your generous gift to LCMS World Relief and Human Care will make a tremendous difference and help to uphold the message of Christ's mercy to all in body and soul.



Struggle in the Heartland

People who live in the city or suburbs may have romantic notions of rural life, envisioning family farms as Norman Rockwell paintings. But farm life today is less idyllic. Farmers and rural dwellers are facing hardships just like city folk, and small rural towns are dying.

Shortly after World War II, about 23 million Americans lived on farms. Today, one-fifth of Americans (about 60 million) reside in rural areas. Only about three million – or one percent of the national population – live on farms.

The list of challenges to living the farm life is long: falling profits, rising costs, competition from large corporate farms, young people leaving for the city, losing the family farm to foreclosure, few work opportunities, poverty, and fewer doctors. Running a farm is work enough, but today about 80 percent of farm families' income comes from outside employment.

Sales of some farm products are falling faster than the costs of feed and energy, though not all farmers are in trouble. Some dairy farmers have been forced to slaughter their animals or go out of business. Others are barely hanging on to farms their families have owned for generations. For some, the emotional toll of losing land passed down from their ancestors is too heavy, driving them to suicide.

Rising Depression and Suicide

Agricultural and mental health experts disagree on whether rural Americans face a higher rate of mental health problems than their urban counterparts. Some research indicates higher rates of depression in rural areas, while other research shows a lower rate. But the experts do agree that rural men, particularly farmers and ranchers, are twice as likely to commit suicide as urban men. And that rate is rising.

According to the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota, farm suicides rise dramatically during drops in the farming economy, such as those of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the 1980s' farm crisis. The current recession is seen as triggering a similar rise in suicides.

Though there is a documented link between economic conditions and suicide, mental health literature reveals a high rate of rural depression, even before our current economic woes. In 2005, the National Center for Health Statistics reported the suicide rate for all ages in North Dakota was 30 percent higher than the U.S. average. Jacques Gray, assistant professor at the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota medical school, said almost half of America's 65 million farmers were clinically depressed. Most of them never received help.

The Midwestern states responded by implementing crisis hotlines. Sowing the Seeds of Hope, an Iowa-based crisis hotline for agricultural residents, handles call lines in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, the Dakotas, and other states. The agency reported an increase of 2,000 crisis calls from May 2008 to May 2009. Dairy and hog farmers accounted for 40 percent of that surge. Read more about this agency's programs at www.agriwellness.org/SSoH.htm.

The effects of adult stress and depression can ripple through entire families, resulting in marital conflict, poor parenting, and abuse. Some children rise to the challenge and try to become more responsible and helpful. Others struggle with peer problems, poor school achievement, depression, and substance abuse.

Struggles of Rural Women

According to the federally-funded Rural Assistance Center, rural women struggle more than urban women with poverty, teen pregnancies, lack of obstetric and other doctors, chronic diseases, poor education, lack of mental health services, geographic isolation, and lack of child care resources. Read further at www.rac.online.org/info_guides/public_health/womenshealthfaq.php#impact. According to a study of rural women with disabilities, rural women suffer twice the rate of depression as urban women. Those with disabilities – about 26 percent of rural women – are at higher risk of depression and suicide. Read further here <http://rtc.ruralinstitute.umn.edu/health/Depression.htm>.

Domestic violence is especially problematic for rural women. Geographic isolation from others (including any witnesses to abuse), lack of transportation, lack of shelters, and financial dependence on the perpetrator makes victims unlikely to seek help. In addition to these barriers, abusers in small towns and rural communities are often either friends with or related to other members of the community. Seeking help is even less likely and more dangerous for victims of abuse.

Struggles of Rural Youth

Studies of rural youth show they have a higher rate of drug and alcohol abuse than their urban peers. One study found rural youth twice as likely as urban youth to abuse alcohol by age 13. A study in 2000 by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found rural eighth graders 83 percent more likely to use crack cocaine and 104 percent more likely to use amphetamines.

Nurse and LCMS member Renee Frauendienst, Public Health Division Director of Stearns County in St. Cloud, Minnesota, says alcohol is increasingly the “drug of choice” among their youth, especially in rural areas. But young folks are not alone in their drinking. “Alcohol abuse is the top problem in Stearns County across all ages,” said Frauendienst. Chemical dependency is also on the rise. In the past, young males had a higher rate of substance abuse. But girls are catching up to boys in substance abuse and binge drinking.

A 2001 Minnesota Student Survey for Stearns County found an alarming level of alcohol use and binge drinking by 9th and 12th grade students. Forty percent of 12th graders reported binge drinking and driving. The Public Health Division of Stearns County Human Services and a Youth Risk Behavior Task Force responded by creating a research team consisting of parents and teens. The team conducted focus group interviews of other teens and parents throughout Stearns County.

Among other comments, youth said parents are the most important influence in their lives. What a hopeful mes-

sage for parents, the church, community groups, and law enforcement as they join together to help young people grow toward healthy adulthood. Find the results of the study, “Underage Alcohol and Tobacco Use in Stearns County” here www.lcms.org/?16512.

The Challenge of Getting Help in Rural Areas

Rural residents have significant problems accessing health care services for various reasons, including having to travel a long distance to providers, financial problems, lack of health care coverage, and the stigma typical of rural areas about seeking counseling. There are few primary care doctors in rural areas, and even fewer qualified mental health professionals.

Some of the mental health professionals who are available are hoping the Internet will stretch their outreach. Learn how a group of rural women suffering severe depression in nine states reduced their isolation and depression through an Internet support group moderated by a health care professional www.iowa.independent.com/18120/technology-helps-bridge-rural-mental-health-care-gap-but-challenges-persist.



photo courtesy Zanetta Hardy

Challenges for the Church and the Community

Rural churches are not immune to their communities' problems. Many are losing members, shrinking, and facing closure.

Rev. James Meichsner, Chairman of the Minnesota North Rural/Small Town Ministry Task Force, sees rural mental health challenges as part of a larger picture of malaise and decline that compounds rural stresses. Some small towns have been hit hard by the economy, losing businesses, schools, and churches. Adding to the church's challenge is an increase in single parent families, increasing isolation and depression, growing multilingual populations, and rising methamphetamine and cocaine abuse.

Meichsner notes that 60 percent of LCMS congregations are in rural and small town settings. They are not only losing members – they are losing their places at the heart of their communities. As more young people move away, rural congregations are seeing more deaths than births. The church is increasingly considered a place for old folks, though in some areas even the old folks are fleeing to the city.

A survey of LCMS circuits revealed that up to 50 percent of rural Americans have no church home. The unchurched are wary of local congregations. They are also reluctant to commit to the responsibilities of a church community, resulting in poor Bible study attendance and declining offerings. Rural pastors also face increasing financial hardship. Churches struggling to survive are hard pressed to provide the support needed by rural folks suffering increasing mental health problems.

A Look at One District

Rev. Tim Renstrom, a member of the Minnesota North District Task Force, saw three families within his area devastated by suicide within six weeks. Farmers struggled in 2009 with too little rain, too little heat and, more recently, too much rain.

Renstrom said one need of the church is for pastors who can ably serve in rural settings. He believes pastors who do not understand rural culture will not build the credibility needed to partner with individuals needing help. Without that credibility, people struggling with mental health problems are unlikely to heed a pastor's advice. It is also important that medical and mental health professionals understand how to work with rural people. Renstrom does not believe stress management workshops would be helpful other than providing a good chuckle

behind the barn – even for farmers who desperately need them.

Rev. Meichsner noted the Synod and districts are not able to address all of the mental health issues of parishes, but he offered several suggestions for improving the church's efforts:

- Districts might survey pastors about mental health issues in their parishes through district mental health committees. Surveys could ask about the mental health problems pastors see, which problems are most prevalent, how pastors handle these problems,

Further reading:

- Crisis hotlines reduce isolation in some states, but rural mental health services are few and declining. www.iowaindependent.com/16472/farmer-suicides-spotlight-lack-of-mental-health-care-in-rural-america
- Signs that indicate a rural friend, acquaintance, or his family may be in trouble and how to respond. www.cvmbs.colostate.edu/ilm/proinfo/wdn/2009/April%20WDN.pdf.
- Eight pages of safety tips and information on stress and depression for farmers. <http://safety.cfans.umn.edu/farmalarm/farmalarm.pdf>

LCMS resources:

- Lutheran Services in America, an alliance of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, can help you locate services in your area through their Web site at http://applications.lutheranservices.org/lspublic/search_providers.aspx.

LCMS World Relief and Human Care offers the following resources:

- *I Trust When Dark My Road: A Lutheran View of Depression* by Todd A. Peperkorn. Follow one LCMS pastor's personal journey through depression and his reliance upon God's grace, and find suggestions to help a loved one battling depression. www.lcms.org/ca/worldrelief/onlinestore/proddetail.asp?prod=booklets015
- *You are Not Alone*. Designed and co-sponsored by National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) and LCMS with funding from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. This CD-ROM includes a video and resources for a church to sponsor an educational seminar that will provide accurate, responsible information for members and their families affected by mental illness. To order a complimentary copy, call 1-800-248-1930, ext. 1380, or e-mail lcms.worldrelief@lcms.org.
- The LCMS Disability Ministries Task Force provides information about mental illness at www.lcms.org/ca/worldrelief/ministries/disability/resources/MentalIllness.pdf. Find other disability resources at www.lcms.org/disability.

and what resources and/or agencies are available for referrals.

- District and/or regional resource information centers could be established based on the mental health surveys. Resource centers could be housed either within district offices or within the offices of district mental health committee members.
- Resource centers could identify Christian counselors and mental health agencies for referrals.

Rural Ministry Proposal

Rev. Ronald Mahnke, LCMS pastor emeritus and certified counselor in the Minnesota North District, has developed a comprehensive program to address the needs of rural pastors and residents.

Mahnke says rural pastors are often the sole contact on the front line for individuals and families seeking help for substance abuse, depression, suicide, violence, and other serious mental health problems. Rural pastors say they need more training as they address these issues. They also stress a strong need for more support – both professionally and

personally – to help maintain the emotional wellbeing of themselves and their families.

Rev. Mahnke designed the “American Rural Ministry Model” (ARMM) to provide training and support in counseling and pastoral care, continuing education, direct pastoral care and counseling to individuals and families on a sliding fee scale, and other services to support pastors. Mahnke says his program will assist as government and private sector social service agencies continue to cut services in areas that already suffer a lack of resources. ARMM is designed to be utilized in any rural area of the country and will launch in central Minnesota as funding needs are met.

Sources: Bloomberg.com, California Dairy Quality Assurance Program, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension, Congressional Quarterly, Dairy Herd Management, *Grand Forks Herald*, *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, Rural Assistance Center, Rural Institute at the University of Montana, *The Behavioral Health Care Needs of Rural Women*, *The Denver Post*, *The Iowa Independent*, *The Wall Street Journal*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, University of Minnesota Extension Service, Western Dairy News

From the Hill

New Bill Threatens Christian Adoption Work

The **Every Child Deserves a Family Act (H.R. 3827)** was introduced by Pete Stark (D-Calif.) on Oct. 15. This bill would mandate that a federally subsidized organization involved in adoption or foster care placements cannot discriminate against prospective parents solely on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or marital status. **H.R. 3827** has 13 co-sponsors (Dem.). Learn more about the bill at www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/h3827.

Barbara Below, director of Social Ministry Organizations for LCMS World Relief and Human Care, said this bill will negatively impact many Recog-

nized Service Organizations (RSOs) she works with that receive government funding to provide these services. Below said **H.R. 3827** violates the First Amendment and challenges one of our most precious freedoms, as well as the right of our church to be autonomous and distinct from the rest of society. She said, “Children must be taken care of, but without compromising our beliefs or bringing children into situations that distinctly go against what we believe as a church that Scripture teaches. A policy of placing adoptive or foster children into the homosexual context stands in opposition to the official doctrinal position of the LCMS.”

In May 2006, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations

Learn More

Log onto <http://thomas.loc.gov> for the complete text of bills and for further information, including the current status of any bill and the names of sponsoring representatives.

To find out how your representatives voted on recent legislation, log onto www.vote-smart.org.

Contact Your Elected Officials

For the name of your U.S. representative or senator, contact your local elections officer or call the **Federal Citizen Information National Contact Center at 800-333-4636**.

For the most recent information about elected national officials, log on to these Web sites or call the following Capitol switchboard numbers:

Senators

202-224-3121

www.senate.gov

Representatives

202-225-3121

www.house.gov

To contact the White House

Comments 202-456-1111

Switchboard 202-456-1414

Fax 202-456-2461

TTY/TDD phone numbers for hearing impaired only:

Comments 202-456-6213

Visitor’s office 202-456-2121

President Barack Obama

president@whitehouse.gov

Vice President Joe Biden

vice.president@whitehouse.gov

www.whitehouse.gov

(CTCR) issued a comment regarding the demand for Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod RSOs to place foster and adoptive children into homosexual settings. The CTCR stated that “while Scripture does not specifically address social and political questions concerning the adoption (or foster care) of children, the Bible does clearly teach ... that ‘homophile behavior is intrinsically sinful ... and that’ same-sex unions are, according to the Scriptures, contrary to the will of the Creator and sin against the commandments of God ...” Read the CTCR comment here www.lcms.org/?10096.

H.R. 3827 has 13 cosponsors (Dem.).

- The **Measuring American Poverty Act of 2009 (H.R. 2909)** was introduced June 17 by Jim McDermott (D-Wash.). H.R. 2909 would set new poverty guidelines. Read the press release here www.house.gov/mcdermott/pr090617.shtml. **H.R. 2909** has 15 cosponsors (Dem.). **S. 1625**, the Senate companion bill introduced by Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.) on Aug. 6, has 1 cosponsor (Dem.).

- **H.R. 268** was introduced by Walter B. Jones (R-N.C.) on Jan. 7. It would protect the right of military chaplains to lead prayer outside of religious services according to their conscience. The bill has 28 cosponsors (1 Dem., 27 Rep), including LCMS member Erik Paulsen (R-Minn.).

- The **Retirement Savings Access Act of 2009 (H.R. 3612)** was introduced by Paul Broun (R-Ga.) on Sept. 22. This bill would allow certain unemployed individuals who have received state or federal unemployment compensation for 26 consecutive weeks to receive penalty-free distributions from tax exempt retirement plans. There are 27 cosponsors (1 Dem., 26 Rep.), including LCMS member Erik Paulsen (R-Minn.).

- **H.R. 4048** was introduced by Shelley Moore Capito (R-W.Va.) on Nov. 6. **H.R. 4048** would direct the secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a pilot program to provide traumatic brain injury care in rural areas. This bill has 7 cosponsors (5 Dem., 2 Rep.).

Brief Notes

- A recent study by Child Trends reveals how important parent-child relationships are in the decisions of adolescents and teens. Read “Parents Matter: The Role of Parents in Teens’ Decisions about Sex” <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs008/1101701160827/archive/1102823626962.html>.

- Graphic depictions of violence against women and girls have dramatically escalated in television shows in recent years. According to an October Parents Television Council report, “incidents of violence against women increased 120%” from 2004 to 2009. Much of the violence can be viewed in prime time shows. Find the report here www.parentstv.org/PTC/news/release/2009/1028.asp.

- The National Conference of State Legislatures compiled a list of bills introduced in 2009 to promote adoption and increase support for foster care youth through age 21. Find out if your state has introduced legislation; locate the text of bills, as well as their current status at www.ncsl.org/?tabid=16326.

Sources: Child Trends, *City Limits*, Congressional Quarterly, govtrack.us, house.gov/McDermott, lcms.org, Lutheran Services in America, National Conference of State Legislatures, parentstv.org, The Brookings Institution, *TIME*

How to Subscribe

To subscribe to *Mercy Notes*, register online at www.lcms.org/enews. Select *Mercy Notes* from among the “LCMS World Relief and Human Care” newsletters.

Mercy Notes is published by:
LCMS World Relief
and Human Care
1333 S. Kirkwood Road
St. Louis, MO 63122
800-248-1930
www.lcms.org/worldrelief

Mercy Notes may be reprinted with acknowledgment given to LCMS World Relief and Human Care

- Executive Director:
Rev. Matthew Harrison
- Managing Editor:
Dolliene Raabe, MSW, LCSW
- Graphic Designer:
Chrissy Thomas
- Copyeditor:
Sarah Schafer
- Director of Communication Services:
Al Dowbnia



Mercy forever.