



REACHING RURAL AMERICA for CHRIST

RURAL AND SMALL TOWN MISSION

OUR "LIFE TOGETHER"

- To follow the core beliefs of the LCMS
- To equip rural professional and lay leaders
- To support congregations in community engagement

Remember RSTM is eligible for Thrivent Choice Dollars!

PLEASE PRAY FOR THESE IMPORTANT DATES!

May 24

Ministry to Inactives Webinar: Rev. Dr. Lee Hagan, RSTM Interim Director, 1–2 p.m.

June 21

Understanding Rural Culture Webinar: Dr. Eugene Bunkowske, Hoffman Institute, Concordia University, St. Paul, Minn., 1–2:30 p.m.

July 14

Engaging Rural Communities Event: Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Onalaska, Wis., 8 a.m.–3 p.m.

If you have an idea or story for Rural Outreach, contact Amy at the RSTM office: 888-463-5127

Engaging Rural Communities Events

We're excited to tell you about the great response to our Engaging Rural Communities events (ERC) so far this year. As we write this, more than 60 congregations and nine districts have been involved and more events are scheduled. We hope you'll look at the list of upcoming ERC events to see if there is a regional event near you! (Some locations to be announced soon.)

These events are geared for single and multi-point parishes in rural and small-town settings. Ideally, a pastor and three or four lay leaders will attend each event and examine their communities to consider ways in which they can serve the unique needs of their particular communities.

Events are intended

to help congregations identify assets they have in place and to make plans for using their resources to engage their respective communities. One of the important event themes is building and strengthening partnerships as multi-point parishes or individual congregations explore ways to work together for the needs of their communities.

We have scheduled events throughout 2012. If you would like to know more about the Engaging Rural Communities Events, or how to register for an event, please contact Amy at 888-463-5127.

Upcoming Events: 8 a.m.-3 p.m.

- **Saturday, May 12**
St. John's Lutheran Church (Bingen) Decatur, Ind., presented with the Indiana

District

- **Saturday, July 14**
Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Onalaska, Wis., presented with the South Wisconsin District, North Wisconsin District and Minnesota South District
- **Saturday, Aug. 11**
Presented with the Michigan District
- **Saturday, Aug. 25**
Grace Lutheran Church, Fairbury, Neb., presented with the Nebraska District
- **Saturday, Sept. 15**
Presented with the Oklahoma District
- **Saturday, Sept. 29**
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Minn., presented with the Minnesota North District
- **Saturday, Oct. 6**
St. Luke Lutheran Church, San Jose, Ill., presented with the Central Illinois District

Church and Community

by Rev. Carlos Hernandez, Director, Strategic Development, LCMS Office of National Mission

Let's face it — some of our LCMS congregations have been more inclined to have the community "engage the church" rather than the church "engage the community." The prevailing sentiment was, "they know where we are. Let them come to us!" We have mistakenly felt that we do not "need" to "engage the community," to go into the neighborhoods surrounding

the church to interact with residents, perhaps asking how we could best serve spiritual and material needs. We overlook the Lord's Commission to "...make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19), to interact mercifully with all people. Jesus' ministry and training of His disciples is a model for congregational ministry. Our Master came to serve and not to be served (Matt.

20:28). Church and community engagement might look a lot like Jesus' ministry of compassionate mercy. It looks intriguing! New people! New friends! New opportunities to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ!



The Ends of the Earth

It's springtime in Nebraska. The farmers are getting antsy to plant seeds in the ground and prepare for the harvest in the fall. This has been going on in rural Nebraska for many years, but there is a new harvest field. The new field is people from the ends of the earth that are moving to rural Nebraska. The immigrants are coming from Asia, Africa and Central and South America. Most of them are coming to rural Nebraska because of our packing houses, but a few also have come for higher education.

Lexington is a community of more than 10,000 people. Half of its population is Hispanic and there are also some Somalian families that have moved in the past few years. Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Spirit is served by Pastor Joel Hormachea. This congregation reaches out to Hispanics in Lexington and North Platte. They worship at Trinity Lutheran Church, Lexington, and Our Redeemer Lutheran Church and School, North Platte.

A few years ago, Luis Valverde from Costa Rica was losing his eyesight. He had lived in the United States for eight years. Complications from diabetes led to bleeding in his eyes. His dwindling eyesight meant he had to leave his job at Olson Farms, where he had worked for the past six years. Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, North Platte, and La Trinidad (Trinity) Lutheran Church, Lexington,



The Rev. John Deang conducts a baptism at the Sudanese Evangelical Lutheran Church in Nebraska.

joined together to raise the funds needed to help restore Luis' sight.

La Trinidad held a garage sale, and Our Redeemer held a picnic fundraiser that 195 people attended. Businesses donated food for the event, and Our Redeemer had no overhead costs at all because of donations. Between the two, enough money was raised to pay for Luis' surgery, hospital bills and his outstanding medical bills.

"I can see," Luis said. "I can see to read my Bible, no problem. God has always been here. I don't need eyes to see God. North Platte is a beautiful place," Luis said. "My life is very special and God is very good to me."

This is just one story of the seed of faith being planted in rural Nebraska among recent immigrants. There are so many stories that could be told about Chinese, Sudanese and Hispanics that have been baptized into the kingdom of God and became members of Lutheran churches in their area.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and

in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The ends of the earth are moving to Nebraska and we give thanks to God for our rural churches that are His witness to their new neighbors.

Contributed by Rev. Richard Boring, Executive for Mission and Outreach, Nebraska District.



Garage sale at Trinity Lutheran Church, Lexington, Neb.



Picnic fundraiser at Our Redeemer, North Platte, Neb.

RSTM National Conference

Excitement is building as more details fall in place for the National Rural and Small Town Mission Conference, Nov. 1-3, 2012, at King's Pointe Resort in Storm Lake, Iowa. We hope you've saved the dates and plan on joining us!

Building on the theme, *In Christ for Church and World: Witness, Mercy, Life Together*, the conference will feature LCMS President Rev. Dr. Matthew Harrison; Luther Snow, rural development expert and author; Rev. Bart Day, executive director of the Office of National Mission; and Rev. Dr. Lee Hagan, RSTM interim director; as plenary speakers.

President Harrison will be presenting on his emphasis of WITNESS, MERCY, LIFE TOGETHER, and speaking at our Friday evening banquet. Reminding us about the benefits and strengths of small churches and communities, Rev. Dr. Lee Hagan will be leading *It's Okay to Be Small: In Christ for Rural America*. Rev. Bart Day will be presenting on *In Christ for Church*.

If you are looking for new ways to strengthen your congregation for ministry and lift your own spirits at the same time, Luther Snow's first plenary session, *Asset Mapping: Energizing Congregations for Ministries that Matter*, is just what the doctor ordered. This presentation will assist congregations in identifying physical, institutional, individual and community assets that are already in place. Come away with tools and skills you can use right away to energize your faith community. Luther created Asset Mapping, the in-person method for positive group collaboration that has gone "viral."

Because of his engaging style and practical wisdom, Luther has been hired by LCMS congregations, Lutheran Foundations, Lutheran Services in America, and Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Services to apply his approach in specific contexts in our church. He's also a nationally recognized speaker in the rural development field across the countryside.

Luther's second plenary session is *Country Strong: Tapping Hidden Strengths for Rural Congregational Development*. What works for congregations in rural areas and small towns? Usually, models of congregational development are devised in urban areas and then applied, with limited success, to the countryside. But there are unique advantages and opportunities in rural life that are often overlooked or underappreciated. Snow will show us how to recognize our unique local strengths and tap them for appropriate and powerful impact in our own communities.

Finally, if you choose to go to Luther's breakout session, *Congregational Partnerships*, you will build on what we learned in the Asset Mapping process, and look at how congregations can use our individual strengths to collaborate with potential partners and engage the community in new ways. There is great potential for congregations to work together for the purpose of serving communities and reaching the lost. Our own assets are made more valuable by connecting them with the assets of others. Depending on our local contexts, what forms of collaboration will strengthen our efforts and extend our ministry?

Participants will also be able to choose from breakout topics including youth/family ministry, funding/stewardship, rural resources, demographics, and many other topics affecting our rural and small town congregations. Breakout speakers will include Rev. Ray Smith, assistant to the mission executive of Iowa District West; Carole White, Lutheran Church Extension Fund vice president for Iowa East and West; Terry Gerdts, senior vice president, LCMS Foundation; Rev. Gene Ernst, pastor emeritus; Rev. Dan Vogel, missionary to Hispanics for Iowa District West; Rev. Dr. Mark Larsen, Lutheran Hour Ministries; Rev. Al Tormoehlen, director, The 72® – Partners on the Road; and Rev. Mark Gerken, executive assistant, Missions/Human Care, Iowa District West.



King's Pointe Resort, Storm Lake, Iowa

The National Conference is geared toward congregational leaders from all rural and small town settings. While there is no "one size fits all" solution, you will be encouraged as you see new opportunities for engaging your communities and are filled with hope for the future. Fellowship and discussion with others who have also been placed in this unique mission field will be invaluable too!

Registration is \$200/person and is available online through our website. Whether you watch our webinars, support our work with your gifts or have ever attended one of our events, we hope that you will be able to attend the National Conference Nov. 1-3, 2012 at King's Pointe Resort in Storm Lake, Iowa.

To keep up to date with developments, go to www.lcms.org/rstm for more information, or contact us at the office by email at amy.gerdts@lcms.org or by calling 888-463-5127.

LCMS Rural & Small Town Mission supports and encourages rural and small-town congregations in engaging their communities and growing together in Christ through Word and Sacrament.



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Let us go to the
small towns . . .
Mark 1:38

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE:

Planting Seeds for Eternal Harvest

It is planting time where I live. In between the rain showers, the farmers are going about their important work of "sowing."

In the collection of essays and sermons from the early presidents of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, "At Home in the House of My Fathers," edited by LCMS President Matthew Harrison, there is a short essay by President Friedrich Pfothenauer, titled, "How Did We Grow?"

In this essay, President Pfothenauer writes, "To be sure, if the kingdom of God is to grow among us, we must spread the seed of God's Word. If this does not happen, or if man's word is preached instead of God's Word, then we wait in vain for the kingdom of God to grow, even as a farmer waits in vain for the harvest if he plants



Rev. Dr. Lee Hagan

no seed, or instead of wheat plants weeds."

The work of Rural and Small Town Mission is to help support congregations, pastors, called workers and lay leaders in their work of sowing Gospel seeds. We assist congregations in looking for new "fields" in which the seed can be sown. We are never

the ones who cause the growth, but as President Pfothenauer reminds us, there can be no growth if the Word is not spread. Our Engaging Rural Communities Events, featured on page one, are one of the ways that we help congregations in this work.

I also want to encourage you to consider financially supporting the work of Rural and Small Town Mission. Our ongoing work would not be possible without the direct gifts received from supporters like you. Remember that Thrivent Choice dollars can be directed for Rural and Small Town Mission, as well as gifts sent for our work through the LCMS International Center or Mission Central. Thanks for your support of planting season.

Rev. Dr. Lee Hagan
Interim Director