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THE PRESENCE OF GOD

by Todd Kollbaum

Despite rural and small-town struggles, these outposts are still on the receiving end of Christ's work through His word.

IN HIS “THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT FOR MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY,” President Matthew Harrison states, “Where the Holy Trinity is present via the Gospel and received in faith, there cannot but be *Witness (martyria)*, *Mercy (diakonia)*, *Life Together (koinonia)*. These three reflect God’s very being as Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, and they encompass His holy and gracious will for all in Christ Jesus — namely that all come to believe in and bear witness to Christ, reflect divine compassion and live together in forgiveness, love and joy in the Church (AC I).”¹

Demographic studies show that there are millions of people living in and around rural areas and small towns who need to hear this good news.

This statement is certainly encouraging to the church, reminding us that the onus of the work of the church doesn’t lie in the wisdom or cunning of man but in the very presence of God, working through His word. However, to varying degrees, the church still struggles with getting in its own way of doing the work it is called to do. This is especially acute within those congregations that are called to “be the church” in rural and small-town places. Because of a host of factors that are enumerated below, these congregations often lose sight of the call to be salt and light within this darkened world.

There are currently in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) over 3,200 congregations that

are located in what are considered rural and small-town areas. These congregations are found in areas throughout the entire synod. These areas are designated as having a population of 15,000 or less and account for over half of the total congregations in the LCMS. Interestingly, these congregations are also made up of over half of the members of the LCMS.

Demographic studies have shown that the LCMS has been experiencing a long period of membership decline. Losses amount to nearly 20% of total membership over the last forty years. Much of this decline is seen affecting

rural and small-town congregations. These congregations also face the added stress of shrinking budgets, aging populations, and economic instability, as well as a severe shortage of resources. They find that they are not only economically challenged, but also physically challenged due to a lack of community services, available workforce, and manpower to carry out ministry objectives. Couple these factors with a decreasing retention rate of confirmed youth and these congregations find themselves in a crisis level of need, making it a challenge to keep them viable. Many have been forced to shift into survival mode, simply trying to keep their doors open for the saints who remain as members.

Given these factors, a grave missiological concern is at play in these congregations. Because they have moved

¹ Matthew C. Harrison, “A Theological Statement for Mission in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Lutheran Mission* 1, no. 1 (March 2014): 60.

into survival mode, many of these congregations have lost sight of what it means for them to be The Church. Therefore, they need to be reminded, encouraged, and instructed in such a way that they can see clearly the biblical model necessary to carry out the work they have been called to accomplish, that work which focuses upon proclaiming Christ throughout the world.

LCMS Rural & Small Town Mission (RSTM) is seeking to do just that — to support and encourage rural and small town congregations to pick up their mantle and forge ahead to do the work they are called to do. Through educational offerings such as our Engaging Your Community events, these congregations are trained and encouraged to use their First Article gifts of reason and planning to consider ways in which they might reach out to their respective communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

While this missiological picture might look bleak, the fact is that these congregations still have very important and vital kingdom work to be accomplished. Demographic studies show that there are millions of people living in and around rural areas and small towns who need to hear this good news. Indeed, these congregations are uniquely poised to care for their Jerusalem. Smaller communities offer an opportunity for fellowship and relationship building that is not always available in a larger setting. Herein, congregations can take advantage of their visibility in the community to engage it in real and meaningful ways.

These activities are further bolstered through ongoing training with LCMS RSTM monthly webinars, articles, and theme-specific training events offered through the districts for hands-on application. Therefore, in living out their vocations, the members of these vital mission outposts are equipped to share the love of Christ and His message of hope. Certainly, there is no solution that works for every congregation, but LCMS RSTM seeks to assist congregations to tailor their planning to best suit their scenario while building upon common factors found in most rural and small town congregations.

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The Rev. Todd Kollbaum is director of LCMS Rural & Small Town Mission.