

GROWING *Together*

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FINDING LIFE IN ECUMENICAL COOPERATION: THE STATE OF THE RURAL CHURCH ON THE PRAIRIES

“We no longer see any light at the end of the tunnel,” George confides. “We are caught on farms that no one wants to buy and on which we can’t make a living anymore. Even our sources of off-farm income are drying up. Our school has closed and so have the hospital, post office and nursing home. Too many things have conspired against us.”

A way of life is coming to an end on the Canadian prairies. When rural folk meet, they continue to encourage each other, planning new strategies for living well in difficult times. George and Sue Anderson, born and raised in rural Saskatchewan, became farmers themselves, raising a family in the intimacy of the rural church and community.



Sue and George are two of some 20 farmers meeting in their church basement to talk with a group of city folk about the farm crisis. “Our young people are gone,” Sue remarks, “and so are our oldest members. The elderly have to move away to get the kind of medical care they need.” The unrelenting stress is evident, as the rate of suicide has climbed. The crisis facing rural prairie communities is undeniable!

“There are only a few of us left to keep our church open,” laments Geraldine, a recently widowed grandmother who lives in the same yard as her oldest son and his family, “But we have to keep trying because the community depends on us!”

Despite the daunting agricultural challenges they face, these farmers still have hope for new life and more specifically, new life in the church. Rural churches are caught between the realities of dwindling membership and an increasing opportunity to bind struggling communities together.

Churches that survive in the midst of the extreme re-ordering of agricultural life are the ones that risk new relationships. Scarcity of money and resources calls for bold and creative partnerships. “We are willing to break tradition in order to become more adaptable to our circumstances these days,” says Sue. Dividing walls are coming down between denominations.

While some congregations have disbanded, others have combined to become the single resource for funerals, weddings and fellowship gatherings in their community. Vacation Bible School, Christmas and Easter services, times for prayer and choir events have become interdenominational projects.

In many communities they make quilts, raise money and contribute food to the Food Grains Bank for victims of natural disasters around the world. When a family loses a home to fire or refugees are in need, rural folk respond regardless of their differences in liturgy or baptism.

Yes, rural churches remain very much alive in the Spirit of God! “Sometimes we feel sorry for those big city churches where the majority just warm a pew,” blurts Harold Simons, partner of the local pastor. “Here we have to get involved in worship, take turns cleaning the church and work on committees. There are no alternatives!”

City and country Christians have a lot to learn from each other. We can share stories and ministry that strengthen the whole body of Christ. Making the effort to visit churches in both urban and rural settings is an eye-opening experience. As friends, we pray together in the joyful discovery that God has given us each other as delightful gift.

GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ's faithful.

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