

Rural Life Sunday

April 26, 2009



Small Church and Community Ministry Office
Presbyterian Church (USA)
www.pcusa.org/smallchurch



RURAL LIFE SUNDAY
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Dear Friends,

Today we turn our thoughts to the congregations that are proclaiming the Good News in rural communities throughout the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), our nation, and world. Today's lectionary readings call us to radically change our life: to repent—to turn our life around; to proclaim the Good News; to do what is right. We are assured that we are not alone in carrying out these mandates—God is with us! Each of us is a child of God! And, as we celebrated two weeks ago, Jesus Christ has risen!

We continue to be impressed by the radical changes smaller membership congregations are making in order that they can continue to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. The message contained in this resource is illustrated with the stories of congregations that have chosen new paths of pastoral leadership. They have affirmed their belief that God is calling them to be a vital presence in their community and have trod these new creative paths to maximize their resources for ministry and mission.

Whether you are a rural, suburban, or urban congregation, we encourage you to observe this Sunday. Today's scriptures also remind us that we are God's children and blessed by God's love. We are all related, no matter where we live and move and have our being! We need to get to know one another, to listen to each other's joys and concerns, and to support one another as we engage in ministry and mission.

As staff of the General Assembly's Small Church and Community Ministry office, we want to hear from you and learn about your congregation. Know that we are eager to serve you. We encourage you to visit our website and contact us so that we may learn of your ministry and discover ways in which we may be helpful to you.

Grace and Peace to you all,

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**SERVICE FOR THE LORD'S DAY
OBSERVANCE OF RURAL LIFE SUNDAY**

April 26, 2009

ASSEMBLE IN GOD'S NAME

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Leader: We call on you, O God, as we gather today.

All: God's spirit is with us

Leader: Let the light of God's countenance shine on us

All: God's light shows us the way

Leader: May God's peace protect us all our days

All: God's peace assures us

Leader: Let us worship our holy God.

HYMN OF PRAISE

(See listing of suggested hymns on page 7)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION AND ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Call to Confession:

Leader: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In humility and faith, let us confess our sins to God.

Prayer of Confession (offered in unison)

God of redeeming grace, have mercy upon us as we confess our sin. Charged to travel light, we overburden ourselves. Commissioned to preach repentance, we ourselves do not change. Cautioned to avoid violence, we confront others. Called to be reconcilers, we create divisions. As Christ sends us forth and equips us to serve him, cleanse us of abusing his trust and his name.

Assurance of Pardon:

One: Now, who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is right? Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.

All: For Christ died for sins once and for all, that he might bring us to God.

THE PEACE

Leader: Since God has forgiven us in Christ, let us forgive one another. The peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

(Depending on your congregation's tradition, you may/may not exchange signs of Christ's peace with one another.)

PROCLAIM GOD'S WORD

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

(May be recited or sung in unison. Hymn 324, The Presbyterian Hymnal.)

All: Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth Thou sendest clear; and while the wave notes fall on my ear, everything false will disappear. Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, Thy will to see; open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine.

SCRIPTURE READINGS from the Lectionary for Sunday, April 26, 2009:

Psalm 4

Luke 24: 36b-48

Acts 3:12-19

1 John 3:1-7

MESSAGE

[The following message reflects on today's scripture readings. You are encouraged to weave into this message particular examples of rural connections experienced in your community, region, or presbytery.]

Today's scripture readings have a "punch" to them. Each of the speakers challenges their listeners. They do not leave much to the imagination. In spite of this, let's allow our imagination to take us back to these particular events:

- The psalmist prays for deliverance from enemies. Yet, he is assured that God will hear his prayer and keep him safe.

- Peter and John reach out to the man with disabilities who sits each day at the temple asking for alms. Peter doesn't respond to that request. Rather he reaches out and summons the man to stand up and walk. What an amazing feat! The man's whole existence is changed. But Peter doesn't stop there! He turns to the people that have run to the scene. Imagine how amazed they are to see what has happened—after all they've seen this man sitting near the temple for a long, long time. But Peter doesn't stop there, either! He seizes the occasion to preach to them. He accuses the people of not recognizing who Jesus was. He accuses them of calling for Jesus' execution—although he gives them some credit for acting out of ignorance and finally acknowledges that Jesus' death fulfilled the message of the prophets. But Peter doesn't stop there either. He calls them to repent of their sins. Just as he reached out to the man who had been sitting at the temple and radically changed his life, Peter reaches out to those gathered and admonishes them to radically change their lives.
- Jesus, himself, appears to the bewildered disciples in a room in Jerusalem. Imagine that! He greets them with the familiar expression, "Peace be with you." He disproves their first thought, that he might be a ghost, by eating something. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He reminds them that recent events are the fulfillment of scripture. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He commissions those gathered to proclaim the promise of repentance and forgiveness in his name and assures them that they will be "clothed with power from on high."
- John, in his letter, reminds members of the early church that they are God's children, through God's love. But John doesn't stop there. The letter also reminds them that God's children are expected to do what is right!

Are we able to absorb the power of these four events? The psalmist crying for God's help. Jesus proving that, indeed, he is risen, and now expecting his disciples to witness and proclaim the Good News. Peter challenging people to radically change their life. John imploring people to do what's right. What are we to do with all this? But wait, perhaps we've missed a few things. Did we hear the psalmist expressing his belief that God will hear his prayer and protect him? Did we hear Jesus' greeting, "Peace be with you"? Did we hear his assurance that we'd "be clothed with power from on high"? Did we hear the reminder that we are God's children? We may wonder if people who lived many, many years ago were able to comprehend all this, but for us the real question is: are we able to comprehend the power of the mandates and the power of God's assuring love? Are we able to comprehend that we are all God's children, joined together as brothers and sisters? Do we realize that we are family!

Today we remember and give thanks especially for our brothers and sisters who serve rural communities. In the stressful times in which we live, many rural communities are experiencing loss of population and basic services. Leaders in these communities must be creative and trod new paths. This same demand for creativity and risk-taking also challenges smaller membership rural congregations. They are listening for God's call and realizing that proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ is requiring them to

stand up and walk down new paths of ministry. They believe in their heart, mind, and soul that they are empowered by the Holy Spirit and led by the Risen Christ. They believe that the human community is connected one to another. Through this belief, they can see today's challenges as new opportunities for ministry and mission and step out in faith to take risks so that their congregation is not simply surviving but thriving.

Smaller membership congregations are finding creative ways in which to thrive and serve the Risen Christ. For many, discovering creative forms of pastoral leadership often are contributing factors to transforming their congregation.

Several years ago, the North Turner Union Presbyterian Church, a congregation in Androscoggin County, Maine, that has been serving its community since 1878, was faced with the possibility of closing. The "faithful remnant" of six members could not bear this thought. Rather than getting stuck in their displeasure, they marshaled their energy and resources with the determination their church would live, knowing that they would be required to choose new paths. This congregation is a member of a cooperative parish, Mission at the Eastward, and the other churches of the parish were committed to standing with them. North Turner members discerned God's word for them, identified what needed to be done, and acted as faithful disciples. They were "clothed with power from on high." They were able to face the challenge of pastoral leadership. They knew they could no longer support a full-time Minister of the Word and Sacrament. Continuing discernment led them to consider the possibility of calling a Commissioned Lay Pastor—a different approach to pastoral leadership than they had known.

At the same time, an Elder in one of the MATE churches, had completed the required Commissioned Lay Pastor training. After prayerful consideration, she recognized that the Spirit was calling her to lead the North Turner Church.

With the leading of the Spirit, the congregation is transforming from one that is simply surviving to one that is thriving in ministry and mission. The members experienced the inter-relatedness of churches, friends, and presbytery. Now members are eager to tell others about their congregation, welcoming them to their church.

In Allerton, Iowa, a town of 600 people, the United Presbyterian Church has been serving the community since 1874. They, too, recognized that they could no longer support a full-time pastor but also recognized their desire and commitment to continue to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and to be a vital presence in their community. What new paths were open to this congregation? First, they called a Commissioned Lay Pastor, who had earned a seminary degree. Subsequently, that same person sought ordination to Ministry of the Word and Sacrament. Responding to God's call to seek ordination did not mean that he would set aside his other vocation, that of family farming. This pastor was called to minister in two places: one in the church and the other in a secular vocation. Such pastors are known as "tentmakers," following the steps of the Apostle Paul who preached, taught, and made tents.

What other things faced this rural congregation when it realized that it needed to choose new paths of pastoral leadership? The members were required to vigorously assume their responsibilities. They increased their leadership in worship, led Bible study groups for women and men; participated enthusiastically in community events. And they respected this new approach to pastoral leadership because they were assured that their pastor would be there when emergencies or special events occurred.

Close to 75 people are active participants in this congregation—affirmation that they are a vital presence in their community of 600.

Shortly, during our time of prayer, we will listen to the entry for today in *The Mission Yearbook of Prayer and Study*. We'll learn about First Presbyterian Church in Sisseton, South Dakota, and their transforming spirit as they minister with their tentmaking pastor who also serves as a family physician.

God is calling smaller, rural churches to stand up and walk down new paths so that they might continue to witness to the Good News. Congregations are discerning this call from God, standing up, and walking down these new paths of ministry and mission. With joy they are declaring in word and deed that Jesus Christ has risen; he has risen indeed!

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

(The ecumenical version of The Apostles' Creed, to be proclaimed in unison)

**I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.**

HYMN

(See listing of suggested hymns on page 7)

MINUTE FOR MISSION

From the *Mission Yearbook of Prayer and Study 2009* for Sunday, April 26, 2009, written by the Rev. Peter Reynen, pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Sisseton, South Dakota:

Rural does not mean “small,” but “tied to the land.” Rural people have learned to persevere and work hard, but are dependent on conditions beyond their control. That reality has helped shape us into faithful, practical, community-minded people who value justice and kindness and humility.

Daily, less and less of America is rural. Those who know the grace of a rural life mourn that. The economic challenges of rural communities and the changing demographics have altered the social landscape. This has posed special challenges for every rural church.

Some say the rural church is in trouble. Many see instead the Lord doing a new thing. Most rural churches are without an installed pastor, so churches have developed alternative models of ministry using lay pastors, bi-vocational (tentmaking) pastors, retired pastors, or seminary interns. Church members are developing gifts for ministry otherwise ignored in lieu of a pastor.

Circumstances have led to interdenominational youth groups and other shared ministries resulting in greater witness to the unity of Jesus Christ. Without the luxury to say ‘We’ve always done it this way,’ churches have found a new freedom for worship and ministry to reach people with the gospel. Statistics look dour but attendance is actually up.

The rural church is not in trouble. It is changing. Change can be frightening, even for people who are used to not being in control. Change is also exciting because our faith tells us the One who is in control “is doing a new thing.” That process is not always painless, but in the will and grace of God it is good.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE & THE LORD’S PRAYER

[Follow the tradition of your congregation in offering prayers of the joys and concerns of your congregation and community. On this Rural Life Sunday, we encourage you to remember the congregations of the PC(USA) who serve rural congregations and communities.]

OFFERING

(See section on Giving Opportunities on page 8)

GIVE THANKS TO GOD

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Leader: The Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

Leader: Lift up your hearts.

All: We lift them to the Lord.

Leader: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Leader: Giver of eternal gladness, Fountain of life from whom flow endless blessings, all that we have is a gift from you. Accept now these offerings of thanksgiving, symbols of our grateful response to Christ's sacrifice for us. Use our gifts to spread the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins. In the name of Jesus, the Risen Christ, we pray. And all of God's people said,

All: Amen!

GO IN GOD'S NAME

HYMN

(See listing of suggested hymns on page 7)

CHARGE AND BLESSING

Leader: Let us go out into the world to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in our every word and deed, knowing that we have been clothed from on high. And all God's people said:

All: Alleluia! Amen!

SUGGESTED HYMNS from *The Presbyterian Hymnal* published by Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1990

#487 When Morning Gilds the Skies

#461 God Is Here!

#332 Live Into Hope

#339 Be Thou My Vision

#341 Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine

#358 Help Us Accept Each Other

#361 How Firm A Foundation

#435 We All Are One In Mission

WORSHIP RESOURCES:

Prayer of Confession and Litany of Assurance, Prayer of Thanksgiving are taken/ adapted from *WHEN WE GATHER: Year B, a book of prayers for worship* by James G. Kirk, Geneva Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1984

The Presbyterian Hymnal published by Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1990

Mission Yearbook of Prayer and Study 2009.

GIVING OPPORTUNITIES

We encourage you to consider allocating a portion of your offering to support a particular rural ministry project in or near your community or one of the General Assembly's Extra Commitment Opportunities (ECO) listed below.

Small Church Ministry Network

ECO #051567

This project supports Small Church Ministry Networks—local, regional, church-wide—by providing resources for network participants, enabling participants to attend events, advocating small church concerns to the church-at-large, sponsoring small church ministry events.

Appalachian Ministries Education Resource Center (AMERC)

ECO #048299

This project supports the vital contextual educational opportunities offered by AMERC in collaboration with seminaries and presbyteries.

Coalition for Appalachian Ministry (CAM)

ECO #048304

This project provides quality materials and equipment for low-income Appalachian crafters who participate in CAM's craft project. The goals of this project include enabling economic strengthening of crafters and providing an opportunity for ministry among crafters, purchasers and CAM.

Rural Ministry Network

ECO #051559

This project supports Rural Ministry Networks—local, regional, churchwide—by providing resources for network participants, enabling participants to attend events, advocating rural ministry concerns to the church-at-large, sponsoring rural ministry events.

Visit the GA's Small Church and Community website: www.pcusa.org/smallchurch and click on "Support Our Work."

SOIL AND WATER STEWARDSHIP WEEK

April 26th is also the start of Stewardship Week, sponsored by the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). This year's theme is *Dig It! The Secrets of Soil*. Resources, produced by NACD, are available for the celebration of this week, including a church leader's guide. Resources may be ordered from NACD: phone: 1-888-695-2433, website: www.nacdnet.org; click on "Stewardship & Education," then click on "2009 Stewardship Program." Some materials are downloadable.