

Rural Ministry Leader Listening Session Learnings | October 2021

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Why We Are Doing this Work

Luther Seminary is responding to the challenges facing the church by accompanying, educating, and resourcing Christian communities and their leaders to embody biblical imagination, identity, and practices that address the longings and losses of today's world.

A significant part of this work is listening to the church. On October 28, 2021, eight Luther Seminary staff and faculty facilitated two listening sessions with twenty-five rural ministry leaders for the purpose of expanding our understanding of rural ministry leadership. Many of the participants came from the Midwest region in and around Minnesota. We wanted to get these leaders' perspectives on the unique and specific challenges and opportunities facing those leading in rural contexts and communities.

The following is a summary of our findings from the conversation.

Understanding Rural Ministry (Discussion Round 1)

Realities of Ministry in a Rural Context

Participants noted that **all rural contexts are not all the same**. Some rural communities center on agriculture; others do not. Some are near metropolitan areas (with access to health care, shopping, and various schools), and some are geographically dispersed and do not have access to reliable internet. With these truths in mind, the following themes emerged:

1. Many people within rural contexts feel **isolated and stressed**. The isolation stems from various factors. Some people feel the experiences of rural communities are dismissed. One participant noted that rural people feel like they are both the true American hero and the perpetual victim left behind. *Today's challenges have escalated differences within rural communities as well as diminished community resources, stressed social systems, and cultivated fear-based decision-making.* As rural populations decline, age, and, in some areas, increase in ethnic diversity, these communities face new difficulties.

Tending divisions and managing conflict are common components of leading rural ministry. It is not easy for rural leaders to find resources to address the unique

ministry or personal concerns they face. One leader shared a story about a pastor who wasn't able to find child care. The pastor brought their child to church and ended up getting fired. Pastors who are not "from here"—those who arrive from outside the community—have a hard time navigating these realities and getting the support they need to stay healthy.

2. Rural communities have **deep roots and extended family connections**. *The past is valued and the future comes with a lot of uncertainty*. It is not uncommon for congregations to be more than a hundred years old and have their identity tied to their building, including the accompanying cemetery outside. Familial connections within congregations, often going back five or six generations, lead many congregations to function as closed systems, and ministry leaders or people new to the community (even a decade or more) operate largely outside that system. As a primarily oral culture, rural communities embrace traditions that embody their values and very little is written down. *Members have ownership in church, which creates both the blessing of shared ministry and the challenge of tensions around a clear understanding of their mission and vision*.
3. The **line between the community and the congregation is blurred**. Like the ownership mentioned above, this is both a gift and a challenge. Many congregations are deeply invested in their greater community, allowing them to be responsive to needs as they arise. Many community leaders are also church leaders and vice versa. Church gatherings often form the social hub of a community. These realities enhance relational ties, but they can also erode the call to discipleship and the spiritual growth of the congregation.

It is essential for congregations to discern how to serve the greater community while still articulating their distinct Christian calling. When asked what ministry looks like, one participant said, "[It is] supporting their members both in the congregation and community. It is discovering where the gaps are." As communities and congregations change, the ways needs are met must also change. Change—or doing things differently—happens slowly in rural contexts, so addressing the massive shifts taking place is complex and must be done with a long-range view.

4. Many rural congregations are **facing an identity crisis**. Their imagination about what vital ministry looks like is tied to a model that is no longer viable in their current circumstances. *Fewer and fewer congregations are able to support a full-time pastor with multiple committees and programs, leading not only to concern for the future but also lingering grief and loss*. One participant named the reality that the death of a single faithful financial giver can completely change the trajectory of a congregation's future. As communities age, there is a clear void in attracting younger members and people to take over leadership roles. This raises the following significant questions that force congregations to revisit their identity and mission:
 - What does sustainability look like?
 - What is vital ministry within a congregation's particular circumstances?
 - What is the best way to use the congregation's assets for ministry and mission?

5. There is a **need to imagine new ways of being church** in rural contexts. Challenges are not new to rural contexts; many communities are resilient and able to experiment.

What ministry leaders need are resources, support, and guidance on how to faithfully move forward. Hearing real stories that embody innovative ideas help them imagine new possibilities while also acknowledging that the larger church recognizes the unique challenges and opportunities for mission and ministry in rural communities. *Rural contexts are excellent places to experiment.* Some areas the participants said they are currently exploring include bi-vocational ministry, ministry collaborations, parish models, and practices around radical hospitality.

Understanding Urgent Ministry Challenges and Opportunities (Discussion Round 2)

Particular Issues for Rural Ministry

One of the challenges coming out of COVID is **moving congregational mindsets from maintenance to thriving.** COVID disrupted congregational and community patterns. Some congregations thrived by experimenting with new ways of being church, by communicating and fostering relationships, and by meeting the needs of greater community. Other congregations were pretty stagnant, waiting for the pandemic to end so they could return to “normal.”

For congregations across the spectrum, this is a moment to move away from a “business-as-usual” understanding of the church. It is a time to re-imagine the church as a place that can speak to the spiritual, relational, and mental needs of people with grace and love. **Thriving grows out of meeting the true longings of people in the community.** The participants suggested various ways the church might do this. COVID exposed a whole host of needs, and rural ministry can start by addressing some of them. Similarly, ministry must reconnect with God’s activity in the world.

As an example, a participant shared how their congregation shifted their mindset by *repeatedly asking what God might be up to in their community.* The church’s leaders help others wonder about and interpret what they are experiencing through this lens. For this particular congregation, asking this question is central to being a disciple and being a community of faith.

One of the biggest challenges the participants identified is the fatigue of rural ministers. **People are tired, exhausted, and need sabbath.** Councils were forced to make hard decisions in unprecedented circumstances. For the past two years, rural pastors and deacons have worked hard to sustain and/or reinvent old ministry models using different technologies. For some, learning how to stream on Facebook and YouTube provided a temporary lifeline for moving forward without making major changes.

But others have embraced new approaches to caring for members. *Innovators, decision-makers, and participants have had to learn and adapt in real time and in the midst of overwhelming demands.* Everyone is tired and in need of rest. The participants questioned how

congregations and leaders might find sabbath and the rest they need to face the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

It is also crucial for congregations to **rediscover meaningful relational connections** in a new world where the old ways no longer work. People today have a hard time identifying what's missing and what's meaningful for them, so their longing for community is expressed differently. Ministry leaders must be able to discern both the implicit needs as well as the explicit needs. Though difficult, this task is vital for finding a way forward. Polarizing elements like politics, ideologies, stances on sexuality, and more make this work complex and extremely necessary. *Meaningful ministry taps into people's deepest needs while also imagining a future that is hopeful and possible.*

Understanding What Thriving Means in Ministry (Discussion Round 3)

What Thriving Looks Like in Rural Ministry

For leaders to thrive in rural ministry, three things come together:

- A focus on mission
- The leader being supported and using their gifts
- The people in the congregation being empowered to lead

Tending these three independently has a collective impact. **Putting Christ—and Christ's mission—at the center grounds and shapes the work of ministry.** When leaders know they are supported and can lead out of the particularities of their giftedness, their lives gain energy and meaning. This includes finding time and developing practices for cultivating their own inner spiritual journey. Moreover, empowering the entire congregation to lead within a shared model of ministry fulfills the vision of what our theology says ministry actually is. *Pastors and councils working together, along with lay leaders and deacons serving out of their unique callings, multiplies the opportunities to join God's mission in the world.*

What Thriving Looks Like in Congregations

Congregational thriving parallel's the leader's thriving. It, too, lives in the intersection of knowing why we exist, discerning how the congregation is called to use its gifts for the greater good, and making connections to God, neighbors, and other church leaders in order to work together. *Many congregations have forgotten why they exist.* Remembering their core calling and opening themselves to being reformed through the power of the Holy Spirit is meaningful and contextual work.

As congregations revisit their calling, leaders can invite them to **shift their focus away from themselves and toward their greater community.** This enhances their calling and provides opportunities to use their gifts and assets to impact the lives of their neighbors and friends. In addition, connecting to their history, to other faith communities, and to neighbors invites collaboration and shared ministry that is bigger than anything the congregation could accomplish on its own. This stretching, re-imagining, listening, and experimenting invites the

people of God to let some things go—even really important things—so they might focus again on God’s mission in the world.

How Luther Seminary Can Be a Resource

Luther Seminary has been and continues to be a resource to ministry leaders. One of the primary ways the seminary has helped congregations and their leaders thrive is through their digital resources. **Working Preacher, Enter the Bible, and Faith+Lead blogs are accessible and meaningful.** Keep offering these resources, the participants said, especially with an eye toward ministry in rural contexts.

Another way Luther Seminary can support rural ministry is through **equipping lay leaders with theologically sound resources and opportunities to learn.** Tools, classes, and trainings that help lay leaders run various ministries, lead in the midst of conflict, and have fierce conversations builds up the ministry congregations are already doing and assists them with faithfully discerning and navigating their way forward.

Participants identified additional ideas for rural ministry support from the seminary:

- Convene leaders on Zoom and in-person
- Help rural ministry leaders learn from each other and re-imagine rural ministry together
- Equip and encourage seminary students in degree programs with capacities and interest in leading in rural contexts
- Stay in touch with those in ministry in rural settings
- Be strategic in how you partner, support, and accompany leaders in rural contexts
- Build relationships and cultivate partnerships with those in rural ministry
- Listen to and help us understand what is happening around us

Finally, rural communities need help with **engaging in justice and reconciliation ministries.** These ministries are no less important in rural communities than they are in urban contexts, and it must be noted that the needs and issues are quite different. The participants said this is important work that cannot be rushed. It needs careful attention. Most importantly, it is to be done God’s time, not ours.