

Rural church workshop plants hope, facilitates fellowship

Freeman area churches invite rural church expert Dr. Shannon Jung to speak

by Lois Janzen Preheim

Salem Mennonite Church of rural Freeman, South Dakota hosted a workshop “Revitalizing Rural Congregations and Communities,” February 26 and 27 which was co-sponsored by the Freeman Ministerial Association. About forty participants heard Dr. L. Shannon Jung, a noted researcher on rural congregations, speak about “Eating and Growing with Jesus” on Friday evening. On Saturday, 55 people from the surrounding towns attended four sessions in which Dr. Jung explored what is needed for rural congregations to express their ministries in a joyful manner.

On Friday evening, Jung reviewed how central food and eating was to the spirituality of Jesus and the early church. Ten years ago, people laughed when he said he was exploring the connections between spirituality and eating. Now many people are interested in the subject. He noted that cookbooks consistently are best sellers; that people are becoming aware that obesity across the nation is a huge spiritual and health problem; that people are becoming more interested in eating food grown locally.

He went on to name Christian practices around food: saying grace, fasting, feasting, honoring the body, sharing and hospitality. The major practice, encompassing all these other practices, is the Lord’s Supper. The Eucharist emphasizes sharing, is outward looking, recognizes the grace of God, and is an expression of the great banquet in heaven. It is a time of confession and penance that invites us to consider our limitations, and it is a meal that involves preparations for each other and those not present.

Jung began the evening with the reminder that one of the first things the Lord did after the resurrection was make breakfast for the disciples who had been fishing all night. (See John 21: 9-17). John’s account of this breakfast ends with the challenge “Feed my lambs!” Jung ended the evening with the question, “How might we live out food practices in ways that do “feed lambs” and in fact enrich our own spiritual lives?” For further consideration of this question, see Jung’s book, *Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment*.

On Saturday, Dr. Jung revealed his deep respect for rural congregations. He encouraged us to name our present assets rather than always focusing on our losses and lamenting days of former glory. He showed a film about three churches featured in his book *Discovering Hope*. Each of these congregations had discovered how important it is to name what they were good at, to name who they are in their particular environment, and to acknowledge that they had much to give their surrounding communities. These congregations *enjoyed* sharing who they were with their neighbors.

In the first session, Jung emphasized that the definition of leadership is “the management of resources.” Since the church fosters shared leadership, it is important that all the congregation’s leaders recognize and know that what they are about is managing the group’s resources—spiritual, emotional, physical, and social. The gifts and resources of rural congregations are as follows: many wise elders who can work alongside youth; a strong sense of place and relationship to nature; heritage is often expressed through the hospitality of a meal and of food sharing; the ability to mobilize care in times of crisis so people feel known and seen; the people know each other well

enough to hold one another accountable so there is a merging of belief and practice; and there is a physicality and a special incarnational quality to rural people's spirituality.

We spent the afternoon in our congregational groups considering how our congregation did the above; that is, naming our assets and managing our resources. We used a process documented in *The Power of Asset Mapping* by Luther Snow. We ended up naming some things not named in the above list—the widespread volunteerism in all our rural communities, the breadth of many skills and talents, the huge interest in the spiritual formation of our members. We all had great facilities that several groups realized could be used in the community to greater advantage. Most members are deeply involved in the wider community through participation on community boards and townships, so we have good functioning social networks.

The Saturday group included people from Presbyterian, United Methodist, Reformed, and Lutheran traditions. I found it interesting that all our congregations, regardless of denomination, had people skilled in music, teaching, and organization. We all cared about the health of our towns and surrounding countryside. We all wanted to express God's love more clearly and consistently. The ecumenical nature of this gathering was a great blessing.

In the question period at the end, someone asked what the difference was between asset mapping and visioning (which many of us had previously done). Jung said that he liked asset mapping because it helps to name what is already present and functioning well. Then you can ask yourself how you can extend what you already know how to do. "Visioning" tends to get groups naming their deficiencies or what isn't, and everybody goes away overwhelmed and discouraged. He thinks asset mapping leaves people with the energy to extend themselves, to go from where they are to a new level. I found this interesting since M. Scott Peck's definition of love is "the willing extension of yourself for the welfare of others and yourself."