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## **THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN BUILDING COMMUNITY**

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Most people view the Midwest through the windshield of their automobile as they speed across the landscape on interstate highways or catch glimpses of the land below through the side windows of jet planes. But slow down a little, take any exit off of the interstate, and travel through farm country or fly over in a small plane and you will see profound changes occurring on the landscape. You will likely travel several miles before you see any livestock, but you will see scattered metal buildings that are the new homes for hogs and chickens. These new production facilities have attracted much attention because they symbolize the new agriculture of industrialization. These buildings have triggered growing concerns about environmental degradation – especially groundwater pollution. According to critics, the odors emanating from the concentration of large numbers of animals into small areas have reduced the quality of life of neighbors and also pose additional health concerns. The transition of the livestock industry represents the demise of family farm livestock production moving into the hands of large-scale ownership and control, a continuation of the long-term trend towards concentration. Inside these cavernous buildings are situations that cause growing public concerns about animal welfare and impacts on farm worker health. You will likely travel several miles before seeing your first farmer since many of them now rely upon off-farm jobs to supplement their incomes. And you will likely see several rural residences occupied by persons who live in the country but are not farmers; they might be farm workers who are employed in these livestock production units, or they might be rural dwellers who commute to town for work.

In a few miles you will likely see a grain elevator and concrete silos on the horizon letting you know a small town is coming up. Driving through the edge of town you will see familiar chain stores and convenience stores, but on mainstreet you will see family owned businesses, the mainstay of many small towns, have not fared well. There are plenty of places to park on mainstreet, but you see little that beckons you to stop. The second-hand store, the beauty parlor, a tavern, and a branch bank along side of several abandoned businesses, dilapidated storefronts, and a video rental place seem to be the only businesses open. As you leave mainstreet and head towards the edge of town, you see three Hispanic children with their backpacks walking to school. The arrival of Hispanics to rural communities is the latest immigration stream that reminds you of your own ancestors who migrated to the Midwest only a few generations ago.

At the next convenience store you decide to stop to buy gasoline and discover that you have serendipitously found the local coffee klatch. Seated in the booths of the convenience store are a mixture of retirees, farmers, truckers, and others who obviously live and work in the community. As you listen to the jovial conversation, you begin to realize that these men are “regulars” at the morning coffee break. As you slide into the adjacent booth with your own coffee, you overhear them talking about the community. They reminisce about the past, the number of grocery stores, hardware stores, banks, and machinery dealers that their community once supported. Now most of these businesses are gone. Most people travel to the larger city to shop since, according to these local experts, it is much cheaper there. There is an air of concern about the rumors that the major employer in town is shutting down; with low farm prices this would be a double whammy to the community. One member observes that some of the people at the plant will be forced to move away, and if that happens, real estate values are likely to drop even more. Another member of the coffee group comments that the future of this community is not bright, but no one seems to care anymore. Back in the car, and heading out of town you ponder the sobering question, “Is it true that nobody cares about this community?”

Even though this is a fictitious trip, unfortunately the examples reflect the current reality in many rural communities in the Midwest. These slow but subtle changes that often escape close scrutiny are transforming rural communities and rural culture. The idyllic view of rural America held by many is incomplete as the trends in agriculture and rural life are reshaping the social fabric of rural communities. The transformation of rural communities is not new, but it seems the pace of change has quickened. What then is the role of the church in this transition? Some suggest the church maintain its historic role of spiritual guidance; others believe the church should expand its role to address the needs that arise from such important social, economic, and demographic trends. Responding to the needs of rural communities represents a major challenge. Part of the difficulty in responding to these trends is the diversity among communities and the wide array of issues and problems that are presented. Depending upon the industrial mix, natural resource base, and proximity to larger metropolitan areas, some rural communities are doing well while others are in serious trouble. Farm dependent communities, especially those that lie beyond the commuter zones of larger cities where there are few off-farm jobs, seem to be the most stressed.

### **What role can the faith community play in addressing the transformation of rural culture?**

As we begin to think about the emerging roles of churches in rural communities it is important to recognize that much of rural America is heavily dependent on extractive industries—farming, fishing, forestry, and mining. Some of the most troubling aspects of unplanned social and economic changes are visible in these communities. This article explores ways to expand the capacity among churches to respond to some of the major problems facing farming dependent communities. It is likely that many of the emerging roles of churches in farm dependent communities are transferable to rural communities in other regions.

Churches and other rural social organizations seem to work best when faced with crises or emergency situations. There are many examples that show the collective power of people working together when disaster strikes. Indeed, some of the best attributes of rural culture are visible when disasters occur. Whenever disasters strike, people come together and provide mutual support and assistance. The faith community is omnipresent in these situations. Every day, somewhere in the world, the church is working to bring relief to victims of disasters and unfortunate circumstances.

Churches, social service agencies, local, state and federal agencies, and private groups are generally prepared to respond. There are several possible explanations for the outpouring of aid and assistance in the aftermath of disasters. One contributing factor is the visibility of the problem. Often appearing on nightly television news or in newspaper photographs are vivid reminders of the horrors of major storms, fires, or other disaster situations. Secondly, widespread consensus that victims, through no fault of their own, have incurred losses and deserve help. In most disaster situations the victims are readily identifiable, and there is general agreement that something should be done.

While government agencies, local social services, and community organizations (including churches) are generally quite adept at responding to emergencies and disasters, they are less proficient in responding to chronic conditions. These institutions and organizations need to develop the capacity to address persistent or chronic problems. Many of the changes underway in agriculture and rural communities do not share the characteristics of disasters or crises but rather are best described as chronic conditions. Many of the changes of rural communities and agriculture have been long-term, slow, incremental changes, in some cases dating back over several decades. Unlike natural disasters, the ongoing financial stress in agriculture is often explained as simply the rule of the marketplace and is inevitable. The lack of agreement about the seriousness of the situation often hinders recognition and responsiveness among the faith community and local social service providers. In addition, financial problems among farmers are sometimes viewed as the result of poor management or bad decisions. Often the rationalization is to ignore the problem hoping that it goes away or simply not respond. Sometimes arguments are given that victims should be held accountable for their situation, which takes on the tenor of "blaming the victim."

The diverse socio-economic status of farmers and rural communities makes responding to them as a group difficult. Generally in natural disasters, losses are visible, victims are readily identifiable, and they are in the same stage of grief. In farming, it is important to recognize that some producers are doing alright, perhaps even thriving, while their neighbors are struggling to make ends meet. Social action to address the needs of rural communities and farm families must recognize and target vastly different situations. Rather than viewing farm families as a uniform and homogenous group, they should be seen as a heterogeneous group with differing financial capacities and needs.

### **How serious is the situation?**

In an analysis of 1,100 farm operators who participated in the Iowa Farm Business Association mail-in records, only 10 percent were classified as "strong operations" (Jolly et al. 2000). According to the financial data, 41 percent of the farms included in this analysis were judged as "stable," 28 percent were viewed as "weak," and 21 percent were considered "severely stressed." It is troubling that almost one-half of the state's farms were considered either "weak" or "severely stressed" given the record government payments that have been dispersed through the 1996 Farm Bill. Farmers in this category owed about 65 percent of the total farm debt and had -15 to -46 percent returns on their assets. A disproportionate share of the operators in these groups were younger, more concentrated in livestock production (particularly hogs), and often had negative cash income from farming operations.

In a statewide random sample of 3,049 farmers that participated in the 2000 Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll, 12 percent described their farm's financial condition as "a very serious problem" and 28 percent indicated it was a "moderate problem" (Lasley 2000). The increase in the proportion of producers indicating a moderate or very serious problem jumped from 24 percent in 1998 to 40 percent in 2000. When asked to describe the financial health of their neighbors, 73 percent indicated farm neighbors had a moderate to very serious problem in 2000 compared with 43 percent in 1998. When asked about the future, 64 percent indicated that the overall economic prospects for farmers would become either somewhat or much worse in the next five years.

Iowa farm families report that personal and familial stress is increasing along with the financial stress. In the statewide poll, 57 percent reported that their personal level of stress had increased in the past 5 years, and 53 percent indicated that stress levels in their families had increased during this same time. Over 8 of the 10 respondents (81 percent) reported that stress among their farmer-neighbors had increased in the past 5 years (Lasley 1999).

These data confirm the serious financial situation on many Iowa farms. The Farm Business Association data suggests that nearly half of Iowa farm families face difficult financial decisions. This is consistent with survey data from the Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll that 40 percent admit they have a moderate to very serious financial problem. Given the financial stress among farm families, communities that are dependent upon farm business will be adversely affected. It is likely that the first impacts will be declines in retail sales on mainstreet and with agribusiness suppliers as farm families reduce their expenditures. In addition to these belt-tightening activities to save money, we have seen in past studies that families reduce their involvement in communities and withdraw from social events because of internal sense of failure, stigmas, and fear. One of the classic symptoms of depression is cutting oneself off from community activities and social ties. At the very time that social support is most needed, it is most difficult to make sure that persons needing it avail themselves of it.

Social and economic changes are rarely neutral in their impacts often producing gains for some and losses for others. Nowhere is this more evident than in farming in the last decade or so. Some producers are doing well while others struggle to make ends meet. These vastly differing outcomes in economic fortunes tear at attempts to build and maintain strong communities. Less fortunate members too often label themselves as failures; seeing others doing well serves as a constant reminder to one's condition and reinforces self-doubt. Stories abound about producers who are somewhat embarrassed at their good fortune, good yields, and generous government subsidy payments. Producers with low machinery, land, and living costs have for the most part been spared from this latest round of pruning of farm numbers. Yet there is accumulating evidence that many farmers with substantial debt loads face serious questions about whether they can remain in farming much longer. The Iowa Rural Concern Hotline continues to hear from hundreds of farm and rural families every month. Calls to the referral hotline, operated by Iowa State University Extension, include a wide range of questions from borrower rights, when and how to seek legal counsel, to issues of dealing with personal and familial stress.

## **Impacts of Crisis and Traumas**

There is a large amount of literature that documents the impacts of traumatic events or crisis on individuals and families. Much of this literature emphasizes the painful emotions and the physical and psychological symptoms that often define what is meant by trauma or crisis. In many settings it has been observed that in the aftermath of traumatic events or adversity, some people display tenacious resilience and eventually experience personal growth (Schaefer and Moos 1992). For some persons adversity seems to trigger personal and social growth, but the same events occurring to others may trigger a spiraling downward, a shattering of lives, leaving deep emotional and psychological scars. Each of us has witnessed such diverse reactions and outcomes to similar losses or situations. Some people seem to have the ability to rebound, to work towards some resolution, to get on with their lives and return to some degree of normalcy; yet just the opposite occurs among others.

Trauma or crisis events differ from chronic conditions because of the time dimension. Some would argue that crisis or trauma might be more damaging because there is not adequate time to prepare for or anticipate the loss, whereas in chronic situations there may be some time for psychological preparedness. In most crisis situations, however, it seems there is a generalized norm of responsiveness from the community that is often not the case with chronic conditions. Often in crisis situations people tend to pull together and assist one another. But as the crisis drags on, resources become stretched or depleted and support networks tend to retract.

There are a number of factors that make events more traumatic. Researchers have identified some of these factors such as lack of control, events that are out of the ordinary or very unusual, the degree to which it creates long-lasting problems, and the role of blame. Events that lie beyond one's control create higher levels of powerlessness and, in turn, are more likely to challenge psychological well-being. Extraordinary events have the quality that previous experiences provide little guidance on how to respond or react. Traumatic events are more severe when there are long lasting negative impacts that are not easily or impossible to reverse. There is some evidence that people who blame others for their difficulties are more likely to have longer lasting psychological difficulties than where there is no one to blame. It is posited that recovery from natural disasters where there is no one to blame may be faster than in traumas where someone can be viewed as responsible and blamed.

Many of the factors that have been identified as contributing to restructuring in rural economies share features of other serious traumas. Many producers and family owned businesses are victims of economic trends that are beyond their control. Precipitous declines in market prices, crop losses, diseases, or increased competition from national chains are common contributors to financial stress in small communities. Many families face financial stress by a cascading set of events that are often viewed as extraordinary. Such things as a chronically ill child, the death of a spouse, cash flow problems, the loss of an off-farm job, or the untimely purchase of the land due to an estate settlement following the death of a parent can trigger a spiral downward in economic fortunes. While it may have been possible to manage and successfully cope with each event individually, it is the aggregation of these events in a short time that overwhelms coping skills. As these events pile up, the situation is often viewed as extraordinary. The loss of the farm or family owned business cannot be easily reversed, and losses of this magnitude carry long-term emotional scars. Unlike natural disasters where there is no one to blame, in the restructuring processes

underway in many communities, often there is someone or something that can be blamed. Lenders, giant retail chains, middlemen, agribusiness, or others are often blamed for the troubles of the family owned business.

In the last few years, researchers have started exploring the concept of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun 1998). Many people who have faced a wide array of negative life challenges report that their struggle with those difficulties has often resulted in positive effects on their lives. Frequently people claim that they have experienced personal growth following a traumatic event. Personal accounts often include: positive changes in perception of self, increased self-reliance, recognition and appreciation of vulnerability, a changed sense of relationships with others, greater empathy, or a changed philosophy of life. Researchers have also found that frequently persons experiencing a traumatic event or crisis report enhanced social resources such as improved relationships with family and stronger social support networks. Others have found improved personal resources such as self-understanding, assertiveness, empathy, and emotional maturity following a traumatic event. A third set of positive outcomes following a crisis is the development of coping skills – the ability to think through a problem and seek out help. Improved efficacy or skills to deal with adversity is often found among survivors of trauma.

It seems that churches have an ever-expanding role in dealing with the personal and financial stress and uncertainty that farm and rural families face. Churches need to explore how they can provide social support mechanisms in longer-term, chronic situations that would ultimately contribute to post-traumatic growth. While churches may not be able to insulate rural families from the uncertainties of the marketplace and the forces of restructuring, it would seem that a major role should be to provide the essential emotional and social support to help people through difficult times. Social support and resources are important precursors to personal growth following a crisis. Likely this same relationship holds for chronic, longer-term conditions as well. Psychologists note that individuals who have more social resources, especially from family and friends, tend to adjust better to life stressors and have fewer psychological symptoms. Community resources can also foster better adaptation and contribute to post-traumatic growth. Self-help and mutual support groups may be particularly important in promoting successful adaptation following a crisis or traumatic event.

### **What can Churches do?**

As one of the dominant social institutions in small communities, the church provides a sense of identity and belonging. It is when important beliefs or relationships are lost or threatened that a source of continuing permanence and stability is needed. The chronic farm condition is more than a threat to income or financial status; it represents a risk to one's identity, security, and status with the community. There is growing evidence that the church should be prepared to devote more energy and resources to efforts supporting persons experiencing high emotional stress. People experiencing turmoil in their lives need some stability, some predictable routines, and a sense of being a part of a larger community. Often the church and its related ministries provide a sense of community through community traditions, celebrations, and activities.

Given that individual and family resiliency and recovery are directly related to levels of social support, the faith community should focus on ways to provide ongoing social support in chronic situations. While it seems that churches and other social service agencies have developed programs to respond to crisis situations, there is not the level of expertise in dealing with prolonged, chronic situations. Churches should use their

considerable expertise to demonstrate the concept of “caring communities.” Unfortunately in many situations, the resources available through the local church are not sufficient, thus it should be the role of the larger church, the diocese, synod, or conference to support the efforts of the local church in maintaining existing programs and developing targeted programs for those most at risk. In many cases it seems that the larger church has opted to close the local parishes rather than provide additional resources to them. As we watch the closing of rural churches, often the last vestiges of community are disappearing, and people travel further to worship or simply drop out. Churches have the opportunity, if not the moral obligation, to support rural communities experiencing chronic economic struggles. Responding to those in need is the great calling of the church. Towards this end, let’s explore some emerging roles that churches might consider in addressing the chronic farm condition that is part of a larger movement in rural restructuring.

### **Emerging Roles for Churches in Building Communities**

A sense of community or belonging to a larger group is critical for individuals and families experiencing a crisis or chronic situation. Social support is necessary for successfully dealing with adversity. The evidence is rather striking – persons with high levels of social support are much more likely to successfully cope with adversity, are more resilient, and are more likely to experience post-traumatic growth. The faith community needs to carefully consider how it might contribute to providing social support to families regardless of the level of stress.

#### **1. Education and awareness**

Unfortunately many people are under the illusion that the farm crisis has passed. While the farm crisis is no longer in the daily news, for many the crisis is just as real today as it was in the 1980s. Churches contribute to community by fostering dialogue on the nature of the continuing financial stress in farming and its implications for rural communities as well as urban consumers. More effort is needed on discussion of the magnitude and severity of the financial stress in farming and how this relates to stewardship, conservation, and protection of landscapes. Churches can play a significant role in the education and awareness of how stresses in the farm economy are related to the broader restructuring process. Seminars, church newsletters, and other reports such as *Catholic Rural Life* are an important way to keep both rural and urban parishioners informed of the issues. Churches have historically opened up their facilities for educational efforts. Perhaps seminars on topics such as making do with less, household budgeting, cooperation, community supported agriculture, retirement planning, and other short courses could be offered through the churches. Included in these seminars would be how tough economic times are related to and impact these topics.

#### **2. Community building**

Churches have historically played a major role in community building activities. When one surveys the range of problems in agricultural dependent communities, there is growing need for strengthening relationships within communities. One of the misperceptions about rural communities is that because they are small, people know each other and mutual support and reciprocity exists. However, levels of cooperation, working together, and social support in many rural communities are inadequate. In rural communities that have maintained their population base, there is often not the level of community

support or community spirit that has historically defined rural culture. Churches can provide leadership in strengthening social bonds and networks within communities by practicing inclusiveness, addressing the needs of the entire community, and being a beacon of hope. Clearly some churches are more comfortable in the normal routines of rural ministries, but new models of church involvement in community development are urgently needed. Community supported agriculture, involving the church in issues such as farm worker conditions, environmental stewardship, and providing leadership to attracting and welcoming new families are but a few examples of how churches can become more involved in community development.

In many regions there are more people living in the country, not on farms than there are people living on farms. A significant number of residents of rural America no longer have direct ties to farming and simply do not understand farming. The church has been slow to adjust to this demographic change. No longer does rural necessarily mean farm. Churches can play a much larger role in bringing farmers and rural residents together, identifying mutual interests, and identifying how to strengthen the relationships with community. Many of the church traditions such as fellowship activities, potluck dinners, and church sport activities played an important role in bringing people together as neighbors. Teaching the importance and the art of neighboring is an example of how the church might bring people of differing interests together to build stronger bonds of community. Survey data among rural populations consistently show steep declines in people helping each other and visiting with each other. Perhaps community-based forums to discuss issues of the community would help bring people together in mutual support networks. One of the important lessons learned from the 1980s farm crisis was just how little community residents knew about each other. Simply bringing people together to discuss the situation was a new experience for many. Establishing working relationships between social workers, lenders, extension staff, school counselors, and others within the community was the first step in developing response teams to assist struggling farm families.

### 3. Advocacy and social justice issues

If the church is to be relevant then it must speak out on important issues affecting farm families and rural communities. Too often ministers and priests have busied themselves with the everyday activities of the church and have failed to be proactive in the broader issues of rural restructuring. Nearly every priest or minister has examples of the fallout from being proactive in addressing some of the important and often contentious issues of social justice and change in rural communities. Perhaps ecumenical or community-based initiatives can collectively address some of these issues in ways as to not put the entire burden on a single parish or congregation. For example, addressing community receptivity and acceptance of new immigrants, or providing leadership in addressing undemocratic decision-making in policy arenas are important areas where many look towards the faith community for guidance. When the church is silent on these issues, it serves to undermine their importance. The church must continue to address both the spiritual and community dimensions of members and nonmembers alike. If the church fails to raise these issues, then will they go unanswered?

#### 4. Direct assistance

The hallmark of church outreach programs has been and will continue to be providing direct assistance to the needy. Providing spiritual guidance and hope to people struggling with hardships is essential. Religion provides an understanding that life continues to be meaningful even during the most traumatic events. In addressing losses, grief, and providing explanations of life, rural ministries must continue to provide spiritual guidance and hope. Many rural parishes have established a wide range of missions for direct assistance such as clothes pantries, childcare sites, congregate meals, and meeting space and shelters, etc. Churches might better provide social support to farm and rural families by networking with other community groups and agencies. One of the major obstacles in local relief agency efforts to assist is the inability to target efforts to where the needs are the greatest. In some situations the local church may provide better access to clients in need of assistance.

#### 5. Linkage and network facilitators

Often those who share similar experiences are more credible than therapists or counselors with no personal experience. Perhaps the church could organize informal mentoring programs between persons whom left farming in the 1980s with those who now face uncertain futures. The words of wisdom from people who have "been there and done that" may offer hope that transitions can be made. Mutual support groups are powerful in aiding even those who appear to have adequate support networks. Churches can play a significant role in the organizing of support networks and forums so that people can share their fears, seek information, and learn new coping behaviors.

The church historically was the center of community life in many communities. Not only was the church the centerpiece of worship and religious expression, but it was the social center as well. Recreation, cultural, artistic, and educational activities often were held within the church or with church involvement. Likewise the church played an under-valued but important role as the information clearinghouse. Families needing assistance, farmers needing some extra help, announcements about upcoming community events, and other facets of community life were often disseminated through the informal communication networks within the church. If you wanted to know something about the community, a good place to start was with the parish priest, an even better source of information was often the church secretary or staff. Often through their experience and understanding of local customs and traditions, these persons played important roles in the informal communication channel of the community.

Churches need to explore ways they can facilitate information sharing and exchange about issues in the community. In many cases the tasks are not complex, but often are labor intensive. Suggesting program ideas, bringing the right people together on community projects, and providing some leadership and initiatives to address important community needs are labor intensive tasks that also require nurturing.

#### 6. Presence

Of each of these roles, being present is perhaps the most important. Many rural families recall being isolated or ostracized from their community and even their own church when word leaked out that they

were having financial troubles in the 1980s. Others recount the anger they felt because no one seemed to care about their predicament or even offered a word of encouragement. The church must not turn its back on those who are in greatest need. Much of the innocent but yet harmful acts of silence during the dark days of the 1980s indicate that people were uncomfortable to express their concerns. Because of this fear they stayed away or pretended that they didn't know. Many displaced farm families carry deep scars from feelings of isolation and estrangement from their community and church.

Churches should provide a safe haven where people can share their fears and teach members to be compassionate and supportive. Churches must be about the business of building community. In the past, community development tended to be about building things – schools, roads, hospitals, industrial parks, utility lines, etc. Now it appears that community development is about strengthening ties between people or what some have called social capital. Social capital is the glue that bonds individuals and families together in community. Building community is more than providing the physical infrastructure; it is about making people feel a part of the group and developing a sense of belonging. For hundreds of years the churches have been “building church families.” It would seem the skills necessary to building strong bonds and networks that are essential to developing a church family could be extended to the concept of building a sense of community.

It is during stressful times that the church must guard against the natural tendency within communities to subdivide into groups. Churches have the capacity to be broader than special interests, but in order to do so they must focus on the broad needs of the entire community rather than the narrow interests of a particular group. A number of concepts describe strengthening of social networks and relationships such as partnering, cooperation, sharing, and mutual support. One important form of networking is returning to the art of neighboring—bringing people of diverse backgrounds together, creating caring communities, building a sense of community, and emphasizing the values of community cooperation rather than competition and individual gain.

Neighboring is a characteristic of rural culture—an art form that should be strengthened. The process of neighboring is an act of friendship and an expression of social support. Surveying the contentious issues in rural communities, one can argue that many of the disputes would not be issues if people learned to be neighbors. Through neighboring people communicate with each other, and through talking with each other they learn each other's stories. Because they get to know each other, they begin to trust and respect each other, and as a result they begin to work together and cooperate. Developing trust among people is key in the foundation of community. When people know each other, trust each other, and work together, they often can find solutions. It is through the process of working together that people learn about each other and develop bonds and group identity. Then, when adversity strikes, the individual has a support network in place. The faith community should explore ways to foster neighboring. The church's response to important community issues may lie in its capacity to encourage the ancient wisdom of knowing your neighbor. Neighbor should be a verb as well as a noun.

### **Summary**

Returning to our fictitious community, all is not bleak. What escaped your windshield tour of the community is the untapped reservoir of important community resources that lies beneath the physical features of the community. Perhaps these assets are dormant or await someone or something to activate them. There is a

sense of community, maybe not as strong as one would like, but many people have deep ties to the community. Many people know each other, although they probably don't know everyone. These existing patterns and networks are major assets in the community. There is likely general agreement on many of the important issues facing the community and there is a strong spirit of "doing it our way." Residents in this community have taken for granted the importance of existing networks, and have failed to focus them in community or group building activities. What is often lacking is the institutional and individual leadership to bring people together to address important issues.

Upon leaving town you pass by the local church. The marquee on the lawn announces that the annual pancake supper is this weekend and the proceeds will be used to buy books for the library. The sign answers part of the haunting question raised in the coffee group, "Does anyone care about this community anymore?"



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