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PARISHED-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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What should be the role of parishes or congregations in the economic development of faith and civic communities? We examine here two very different approaches with a single common characteristic. Both provide hope to their communities. It is an active hope that encourages the possible, that emphasizes assets, strengths, active love, and nourishment of the body of Christ.

These stories both begin with the people of two small, rural parishes in the upper Midwest, with members of committees that have an interest in social justice. The committees, typical of rural parishes, are small; they are hardly ever comprised of more than two or three people with membership that changes from one infrequent meeting to the next. These are people who desire to be signs of Christ alive in their community. Typically, the work of these rural social justice committees is directed toward the needs of people outside the parish and local community and include activities such as blood drives, clothing drives, food pantry Sundays, meal preparation at homeless shelters, Pro-Life rallies, and the like. The stories of the committees in these two parishes have a different emphasis. They focus more internally, toward the people of the parish and the local community emphasizing existing assets: their skills, talents, and aspirations.

Work of Our Hands was born at St. Mary-Holy Cross Parish in the rural plains town of Elkhart, Iowa. This is a parish of 300 families spread over 20 small communities including seven school districts. The youth ministry program has for several years conducted the Catholic Relief Services-sponsored Work of Human Hands project as a way of building solidarity between rural Iowans and artisans in developing countries. Two and one-half years ago, while considering activities for the coming year, the four or five parishioners which comprised the social concerns committee that night in the church basement considered the question "Should we continue to support artisans from other countries while neglecting the talents and skills of the artisans within our own parish community?"

Later that same year, 300 miles to the northeast, Strengthening our Local Community began to germinate over pie and coffee in a small café in the rural river town of Alma, Wisconsin. The Peace and Justice Committee of the 200-family St. Lawrence Parish was discussing possible activities. Being small-scale,

family farmers, the committee of two couldn't escape the question "What can our parish do to help farmers look at their lifestyles and vocations through their faith?"

In the spring of 2002, the ideas generated by the questions raised by both church committees began to blossom. St. Mary-Holy Cross Parish distributed its first Work of Our Hands directory; a listing of products and services offered by parishioners. This was the first step toward helping parishioners share and further develop their personal skills and talents. St. Lawrence Parish put on a parish gathering to look at how people of faith could help make farming a viable option for the future. This eventually led to a community-wide assessment of its assets. In both cases, the people of these churches, the body of Christ, drew upon social relationships that helped them move from concerns and ideas to action for the common good.

The initial conversations of the committee members grew to become conversations of larger groups. St. Mary-Holy Cross gathered together on two evenings parishioners who wanted to do more with their talents and gifts. Some were hoping to expand hobbies to be part of their livelihood. Some wanted to share their skills and talents with people who needed them. Others had small enterprises they wanted to grow. And some just wanted to help in one way or another. The pastor, a member of the social concerns committee, and a facilitator provided by National Catholic Rural Life Conference led two gatherings of these people to decide what steps they might take toward supporting artisans in the parish community.

St. Lawrence gathered parishioners together over lunch to begin conversations about faith and farming. A panel composed of farmers, a farm insurance agent, a farm broadcaster, local leaders of FFA, and the director of the Churches Center for Land and People suggested how people of faith could help make farming a more viable option for the future. Discussion generated optimism and enthusiasm that there was something the church could do to improve the plight of local farmers and the community of Alma. Their expressed interest in revitalizing the larger community intrigued the Justice and Peace Committee. So, the committee sought funding from the Diocese of LaCrosse. They wanted to gather people from throughout the community and begin a conversation about possibilities and decide on next steps in building a more vital rural community.

The tasks before both parishes at that time were to move this initial interest and enthusiasm toward action with concrete results.

One of the outcomes of the gatherings at St. Mary-Holy Cross, was a decision to ask parishioners to complete a simple one-page survey after Masses one weekend to see if parishioners would be interested in "buying local" products and services if quality was good and the prices reasonable. At the same time, parishioners were asked if they had services or products they'd like to offer parishioners. Nearly one-fifth of the parishioners responded that they'd be interested in purchasing and a like number that they would be interested in offering goods and services. Based on that high interest, the group decided to put together a directory of local talents and enterprises that would encourage building a "buy local" network. "Work of Our Hands" was selected as the name for the project.

The group at St. Lawrence invited rural community development experts to spend an evening helping the local people generate enthusiasm and ideas to revitalize the community and provide promise for farmers. Representatives of the Crossroads Resource Center and National Catholic Rural Life Conference accepted invitations to speak, as did a former resident who was a farm broadcaster at a Minneapolis radio station. A professional community development facilitator and author also accepted an invitation to participate. So, a year after the parish gathering on faith and farming, more than 100 people of all ages gathered in the Alma High School gym to identify assets in the community that could be used to revitalize the community; these assets included physical, economic, and financial resources and personal talents. Papers listing groups of assets covered the gym walls and as people moved among them they began to make connections and build project ideas. People stayed late into the evening, exchanged many phone numbers, and promised to meet again.

It takes many hands to bring such projects to fruition. At St. Mary-Holy Cross, a parishioner stepped up to coordinate Work of Our Hands. Several participants volunteered to take pictures of Work of Our Hands participants for the directory. Another with some computer skills agreed to format the directory. Two others agreed to proofread. The daughter of another designed the logo. The pastor wrote an introduction. The parish provided paper. Participants did the copying, collating, and stapling. The result: each parishioner received a 15-page Work of Our Hands directory with photos of 35 parishioners ranging from 14 to over 70 years of age, and brief descriptions of their talents, gifts, or enterprises. Now, semiannual parish Festivals showcase these gifts and talents to parishioners before and after Masses in the parish basement. Individual participants handle organization, promotion, facilities set-up and decoration, and everyone pitches in to clean up.

The coordinator of the St. Lawrence project, a full-time farmer, mother, and wife, had little time to organize the Alma gym gathering by herself. She found townspeople, once asked for help or advice, were overwhelmingly generous. As she describes it, "Visits to town for routine errands became community organizing outings. A trip to the post office, and donated baked goods were secured from the post office manager and a donated room for one of the presenters from the bed and breakfast owner. I dropped my child off at school, and the secretary helped me with layout on the meeting flyers and the superintendent offered the high school as the gathering place. On another morning visit to school, the 6th grade teacher offered the assistance of her media class. A trip to the local café, and I had advice on marketing and more help on flyer design. Walking out of the café I ran into the Methodist minister and agreed to an invitation to speak at the Sunday service. I stopped at the insurance office, and I found the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, who was delighted to help. I stopped to buy flowers for our wedding anniversary and I had the president of the Chamber of Commerce excited and on board. Soon I was speaking at all four churches in town and at the Chamber, all of which agreed to cosponsor the gathering with our parish, with the women from all four churches offering to provide refreshments."

Four editions of the Work of Our Hands directory have been printed and distributed among parishioners. Participants use each others' products, share resources, and support and promote each other. Parishioners who need a specific service or product look first in the directory before going to the Yellow Pages. People

who have an upcoming event, baptism, or wedding look in the directory for the cake decorator and the caterer. The directory is now on the parish website. Seasonal reminders of product availability are published in the parish bulletin. Some participants have begun to exhibit their products at local community celebrations and intend to increase that and branch out to farmers markets in the area. Copies of the directory placed in the church keep disappearing! New people are becoming involved. And the Festivals are becoming regular parish social events.

In Alma, meeting participants and the Chamber of Commerce, energized by the meeting and with a renewed attitude of pride in their town, went right to work on asset-based projects suggested at the meeting. Project ideas hatched earlier that had lain dormant for months also began to take on new life. An arts group was formed and provided a network for local artisans. A beautification group developed a list of projects and several ideas for fund raisers. A local theater owner and musician organized the first-ever Alma Art and Music Festival, which drew more than 800 people to the riverfront. A town and country day brought kids from town to a local dairy farm to enjoy a hay ride and to learn the realities of dairy farming and the economic contributions of farmers to the local economy. An \$800,000 grant was acquired to dredge an area that had been popular to migrating tundra swans. A new jewelry store, a bait shop, and a gift shop opened. An existing store front was converted into a theater for a variety group. Tour buses continue to discover Alma and its little shops along the river.

One of the St. Lawrence parishioners, while discussing with others in a parish gathering the reluctance of people and communities to embrace change, said "The only person that likes change is a baby with a dirty diaper." Who steps up lovingly and willingly to make that change? People who love and care for that child of God. It is people instilled with that same love and caring that lead rural parishes and rural communities through the difficult process of change. They are Catholic Christians.

The introduction to the Work of Our Hands directory begins, "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. (Acts 4:32-33) As the early Church shared their talents and gifts with one another, we ... also share with each other."

There are many of us that are called to be the body of Christ, to use our gifts and talents to build God's kingdom and bring hope to God's people. What better place to start than with the gifts, talents, and enterprises in our own communities working through our own parishes and with our friends and neighbors?

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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St. Mary-Holy Cross

Work of Our Hands participants are involved because they want more people to become aware of their products and services, want to gain experience in expanding what they do, and because they enjoy the fellowship of like-minded people. The effect of Work of Our Hands on the parish is expressed in many ways.

“It increases the interaction among parishioners. It is creating a stronger bond in our church family.”

“It’s put the parish ‘on the map.’”

“We’re more aware of all the creative and talented people in our little corner of the county.”

“Work of Our Hands has made me realize what a wonderful faith community we have.”

“Oh, you’re the family that sells organic popcorn!”

It’s a way for parishioners to identify people in a different way.



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