

Continuing the Legacy

Thriving in Rural Ministry

By Executive Director, James Ennis

Catholic Rural Life (CRL) has been serving the Church in rural America for 95 years through its various programs and sees first-hand the need for strong and thriving pastoral leaders in rural communities. We recognize that successful rural ministry needs sound and sustainable theological formation and support.

The current state of pastoral ministry in rural communities throughout the United States is extremely challenging and demanding. Approximately 50-60 million people live in rural America, or 19% of the US population. Within the Catholic Church, of the 176 dioceses, approximately 96 include significant rural areas, defined as populations less than 50,000. One of the challenges facing rural America is the increase in the proportion of pastors covering multiple parishes and larger geographies. Many pastors are covering three, four or even five parishes and driving long distances on a weekend for Masses at multiple locations.

The reasons for these changes

are well documented by many studies. In many rural communities there has been a decline in the number vocations to the priesthood. Fewer vocations to the priesthood means fewer priests to pastor the churches. Many parishes are small, making it difficult to maintain programs and services. Parish closures can lead to a loss of identity and fidelity that impacts attendance, participation and contributions. Simultaneously, there has been a decline in the number of family farms due to a consolidation within the agricultural industry. For example, in 1960 there were 3.7 million farms, and in 2017 there are 2.05 million farms. As a result of fewer family farms, there has been a decline in the number of families with whom to build rural agricultural communities.

Many of the pastors in rural communities are unable to hire full-time or part-time help. As a result, pastors involved in multiple parish ministries are often relying on volunteer staff or doing the work themselves.

CRL's decades long efforts to

provide elements of support to pastors confirm in us, however, that being a pastor is a challenging and difficult job. Many pastors experience burnout, quit or suffer mental breakdowns due to the stresses of the job. Pastors often find themselves isolated with no one who understands the challenges they face. The inability to find mentoring relationships is exacerbated in rural communities because of the remoteness of the job. To help pastors to thrive in rural ministry, pastors need to find other more experienced pastors who can relate to the challenges and share encouragement and ideas for how the challenges may be overcome.

Pastors need to see and hear from other pastors, acting as role models, who can provide fresh vision and insights for how to craft the pastor's ministry and work activities in such a way that exemplify authenticity. That is why CRL is launching a new program, *Thriving in Rural Ministry*, that provides a thoughtfully planned and well facilitated retreat that includes rest and renewal, com-

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munity, formation, hospitality, spiritual practices and sharing with other pastors who come from similar situations can provide the double benefit of increasing wellbeing and reducing burn-out, fatigue and stress.

The purpose of the program is to strengthen pastoral leadership in rural parishes, and to help pastors thrive in their rural communities. Our *Thriving in Rural Ministry* program will support rural pastors who want to strengthen their pastoral leadership skills as well as join a community of pastors who want to thrive in rural ministry. The regional focus of retreats and ongoing support will be customized to address these regional differences.

Specifically, CRL will create fraternal time and community space among Catholic rural pastors through a retreat format designed to foster a vision of “the vocation of rural ministry” by providing theological formation and renewal, exemplars of effective rural ministry, and an on-going network of rural fraternity and relationship.

Our decade long experience in offering a Rural Ministry Practicum to seminarians has confirmed our conviction that effective rural ministry requires: sound formation and sustained

community. Effective pastoral formation calls for formative elements that complement theological formation, including social and cultural elements. In all instances, we have discovered the importance of sustained theological formation, i.e. opportunities to reflect, and reflect again, on the successes and challenges of rural ministry in a community of committed practitioners.

The *Thriving in Rural Ministry* program will begin with an extensive survey of the bishops and priest leaders in rural areas to determine the needs of rural ministry, effective practices and the interest levels on the part of bishops and priests in developing a retreat experience. The retreat experience will provide the initial elements of theological and spiritual renewal, encounters with effective pastoral leaders, and opportunities to rest, refresh and renew one’s commitment to the unique vocation of rural ministry.

CRL will offer a series of follow-up gatherings that provide opportunities for further engagement with the convictions first discovered in the retreat experience. These follow up meetings are critical in breaking out of the “one and done” model of retreat/re-engagement, by creating the foundations of a sustained circle

of trusted friends and experts in the field. Isolation can be an especially crippling factor in rural ministry especially. These “occasions in renewal” may include the return to a particular theological topic initially discovered in the original retreat gathering or a further encounter for fellowship with one of the initial retreat pastoral leaders. It will certainly include opportunities for sharing of successes and challenges in ongoing rural ministry.

These regional groups will aim to gather as a larger body in a national gathering, with the aim of renewing Roman Catholic rural ministry on a broader platform. All ministry is local. But, it can also be renewing and inspiring to recognize the broader efforts at work across local and regional lines. We are confident that a multiplier effect will emerge as we strengthen the ongoing relationships among rural leaders and Catholic Rural Life. Our experience confirms that in this area of great need, greater consequences can come about. We thank the Lilly Endowment, Inc. for its financial support enabling CRL to launch this nationwide program. We ask for your prayers and support for this new initiative. Sts. Isidore and Maria, please pray for us.