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Business

Posted on Sun, Jan. 01, 2006

Cultivating their faith

Pastors see link between working soil, caring for congregations

By Jenni Glenn
The Journal Gazette

NORTH MANCHESTER – As they bowed their heads to say grace over the turkey luncheon laid out on the checkered tablecloth, the pastors understood exactly what it meant to thank God for their food.

They had just finished feeding and watering a flock of turkeys much like the one they were preparing to eat.

A group of eight people – most of them Lutheran ministers – travels to this farm every month to work in the fields and explore the members' faith.

To farmer Jeff Hawkins, the pastors' daily tasks of caring for their congregations are not so different from his work tending to livestock and vegetables. He sees an inextricable link between pastors and pastures, between souls and soil. A Lutheran pastor himself, Hawkins formed this ministry on his family farm nearly three years ago to help his colleagues see those connections.

The HOPE CSA ministry – which stands for Hands-On Pastoral Education using Clergy Sustaining Agriculture – promotes a concept Hawkins calls "holy health." While it can be easy for pastors to get caught up in setting church budgets or recruiting new members to the congregation, their real job is to oversee the congregation's health, he said. He means health in an emotional, environmental, social, vocational and eternal sense, as well as a physical one.

J.L. Hawkins Family Farm operates on similar principles. Hawkins does not focus on producing the largest crop of vegetables or biggest herd of livestock possible. Instead, the pigs, turkeys, cattle and chickens are raised on grassy pastures – a natural farming method Hawkins believes makes the animals healthier. Livestock manure helps fertilize the pastures, in turn producing better food for the animals. Hawkins wants the farm to function as its own economy.

Similarly, a congregation needs to focus on making the best use of all its resources, particularly its members, rather than on growth or financial goals, Hawkins said. A church's path should not be viewed as a straight line, bringing in outside resources to reach an end goal, he said. Hawkins prefers to see the path as a circle, just like his farm.

"On my farm and congregation, I'm saying production is important, but it's not the goal," he said. "Health is the goal in a broad sense."

After serving as pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in North Manchester for 16 years, Hawkins left the church in 2003 to focus on HOPE CSA and the farm full time. A group of 12 pastors and others exploring their faith started meeting on the 99-acre farm in March 2003. The ministry grew to two meeting groups, then three. The program will max out with four groups next year, Hawkins said.

Hawkins meets once a month with each group of eight or nine people. The ministry

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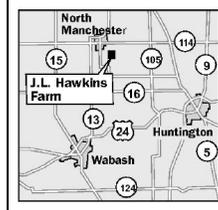
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J.L. Hawkins Family Farm

Farmer Jeff Hawkins runs a church ministry teaching pastors about the connections between tending to a family farm and caring for a congregation on his family's 99-acre farm in North Manchester.



The Journal Gazette

members spend their mornings mending fences, hauling wood and planting vegetables and clover.

For many, HOPE CSA is their first experience with farm labor, but Hawkins is a patient teacher, said the Rev. Amy Beitelschees-Albers, a ministry member who is the pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Harlan.

After enjoying a meal of turkey and potatoes they helped grow, HOPE CSA members occupied themselves in the afternoon with quiet prayer and reflection.

That could take the form of a solitary walk outside or sitting under a tree.

Beitelschees-Albers joined the ministry nearly two years ago to learn about the connection between the church congregation and the family farm.

She rarely misses the opportunity to take a short break from her duties as a pastor and reflect on the meaning of her church community.

"For me, it's my Sabbath," she said.

Hawkins felt compelled to start the ministry, but he needed a way to financially support his family while he worked on it. So he organized a business where area residents could purchase a share in the farm. Each shareholder pays an annual fee – expected to be \$1,150 next year – for a portion of the farm's harvest. In exchange, they will receive half a hog, a turkey, 20 chickens, a quarter of beef and on a weekly basis in the summer, bags of vegetables, Hawkins said.

Most of the 30 or so shareholders live within a 35-mile radius of the farm, Hawkins said. Some shareholders volunteer to help weed vegetable beds or perform other chores.

Many of the ministry members become shareholders, paying a reduced rate along with their HOPE CSA fees.

Shareholders reap the rewards and take on the risks of farming the same way the Hawkins family does. When Hawkins could not coax carrots into growing in dry soil last spring, despite replanting the crop four times, the shareholders had no carrots to take home. But when the farm's hogs fattened particularly well last year, the shareholders received part of the bounty.

"They shared in that added reward," Hawkins said, "and it really does develop a community, a sense of our farm, which is lovely."

That sense of community keeps shareholders and members of the ministry coming back year after year. There is no set point when pastors graduate from the HOPE CSA program because the learning process is ongoing, Hawkins said. He said he still feels as if he is growing through his own participation.

"The kind of thinking we're promoting isn't just some new pieces to integrate in their way of thinking," he said. "It's the attempt to give a different mind ... about what the church is and their work as pastors."

Jeff Hawkins

Profession: Operates J.L. Hawkins Family Farm, selling meat and vegetables, raised using natural methods, directly to consumers. Hawkins also runs the ministry Hands-On Pastoral Education using Clergy Sustaining Agriculture, a program to show pastors how to better care for their congregations by observing the dynamics of a family farm.

Residence: North Manchester

Born: Dec. 25, 1954

Education: Michigan State University, bachelor's degree in political science; Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., master of divinity degree

Family: Married to Kathy; father of Zach, 24, and Sarah, 21

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