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Pastors in the pastures

On an Indiana family farm, here's the lesson: Pastors and pastures have more in common than similiar names

feature
STORY BY
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On a warm day this summer, Indiana pastors worked up a sweat on Jeff Hawkins' family farm. They dragged a bottomless wire cage filled with about 50 chickens over the bumpy terrain of an old hayfield.

Rather than packing a huge number of chickens into a small, enclosed space and feeding them large doses of antibiotics, Hawkins raises his poultry in a natural, healthier setting. They can scratch in the ground and eat seeds and bugs as well as their regular chicken feed.

It takes only a short while for the chickens to clear off much of the vegetation under the cage and leave behind a layer of droppings. Each day when the cage is moved farther down the field, the chickens have a new area to attack. And Hawkins has added another richly fertilized area for future planting.

Hawkins pointed out to the pastors that some of the chickens are quicker than others to realize they will have new access to crickets and other poultry tidbits when the cage is moved. When the time comes, these chickens position themselves at the front where they can go quickly to the head of the chow line.

"Some are very quick to anticipate," Hawkins said. "Some are a little less quick. Some are just so-so and some are very slow. You can almost see a bell curve."

The pastors immediately saw that the chickens react to change just like people in their congregations. "Some go to the front of the cage," said Fred Meuter of St. John Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Ind. "Others get run over."

"A lot of people don't like change," said Susan Socha of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, LaOtto, Ind. "They want things the way they were."

Back to creation

That was one of the simpler lessons Hawkins taught the pastors to help them better see analogies between churches and farms. Later that day, they dug deeper as they discussed an agrarian essay by Wendell Barry from *The Art of the Commonplace* (Counterpoint Press, 2002).

It's part of what Hawkins calls HOPE CSA, which stands for Hands-On Pastoral Education using Clergy Supported Agriculture (www.hopecsa.org; 260-982-4961).

This is a new ministry for Hawkins, who was pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in nearby North Manchester, Ind., for 16 years and now serves as executive director of HOPE CSA.

Throughout the year, 13 pastors, in two groups, visit the Hawkins farm each month for a full day. Each pays \$1,000 and takes home farm produce--in addition to their experience. In the mornings they work at manual tasks in the pasture, gardens and barns. After a hearty meal, they convene for prayer and discussion of farm topics and the significance they have for church life.

Although he grew up in suburban areas, Hawkins had many farm contacts and experiences. This familiarity intensified when he inherited his grandparents' farm in 1987. He and his wife, Kathy, moved there, and in 2003 he resigned from Zion and began inviting pastors in the region to take part in HOPE CSA.

While pastoring and farming, Hawkins had discovered that both occupations share fundamental similarities. "It isn't such a stretch to imagine that the farm can be useful to teach pastors about their work," he explains.

Hawkins is concerned that as American society has shifted from rural to urban, clergy have become removed from creation.

"The more we are removed from creation, the more we risk being removed from critical insights about God, the church and ourselves," he said. "[Medieval theologian] Thomas Aquinas said, 'Any error about creation leads to an error about God.' And our increasing distance from creation suggests increasing opportunity for error."

Stewards of households

Hawkins also is concerned--and emphasizes in his teaching--that both farming and churches use big business as their model of management. Farms have become bigger and more factory-like, more specialized and focused on increasing production regardless of environmental and social consequences. Prime examples are cattle feedlots and large swine and poultry farms.

He observes that churches now follow the same corporate models that farms have adopted. "Pastors are seen as leaders of organizations, rather than stewards of households," he said. "Organizations are like machines, and the pastor's job is to make it run smoothly and efficiently toward the goal of production: producing more members, more square feet, more dollars, even more faith."

Hawkins says farms and churches are like organisms and need to be more concerned with their health than with production. "In the New Testament," he noted, "the Greek word often translated 'health' is *soteria*, which is also translated 'salvation.' We are on solid biblical ground here."

Hawkins' pastoral "students" are getting the message. Philip Schamehorn, pastor of Our Hope, a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod congregation in Hometown, Ind., said: "I find that too many times I am forced into a CEO role by the church, and the needs of the flock get set aside so maintenance items can be accomplished. I think each pastor needs to push himself away from the desk and go to the pulpit of the bedside and become the nurturer even though other things demand his attention."

Participant Mark Sloss, Christ Lutheran Church, Kokomo, Ind., had another slant: "It's helpful on the farm and in all of nature to see the big picture of the growth cycle from soil prep to planting to tending to harvesting. God is the one providing the growth. My role as pastor is to plant the seeds in good soil, not overtaxing it but doing what I can to help it stay rich and healthy, so the people of God might blossom in love and service."

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