

neighbors

FALL 2009

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA



BY BETH GRIFFIN

The people of the prairies of New Ulm have a deeply rooted faith. Their forebears brought the Catholic faith from northern Europe and nurtured it through generations of coaxing corn, soybeans, and sugar beets from the flat lands of southwestern Minnesota. Now, this faith is challenged by the same forces that threaten rural life throughout the United States: an

aging population, the movement of youth to cities in search of jobs, the closing of family farms, and the growing secularization of society.

With the help of Catholic Home Missions, the Diocese of New Ulm operates a landmark two-pronged program for lay leadership formation. Bryan Reising, the director of religious education and adult faith formation for the diocese, says the six-year-old initiative is based on a

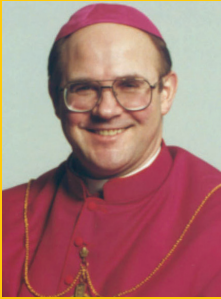
model developed by the Archdiocese of Chicago.

“We collaborate with St. Mary’s University in Winona, Minnesota, and the University of Dayton to give our catechetical leaders and catechists proper formation in spirituality, content, and methods,” Bryan says. “Our goal is to further the education of our current leaders and form our future ones.”

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FROM THE CHAIRMAN FALL 2009



DEAR FRIENDS,

Tucked away in the southwestern corner of Minnesota, the Diocese of New Ulm is one of the smallest, most rural dioceses in our country. The largest city within its 15 counties is home to only 19,000 people. Two-lane, often unmarked country roads run through rich, green fields of corn, soybeans, and sugar beets.

Although small family farms still dot the countryside, many have closed in the far western region of the diocese, as growing numbers of talented young people leave for better jobs in nearby cities.

Within this quiet yet troubled rural setting, the Diocese of New Ulm is creatively struggling to serve 63,000 Catholics spread out across 9,863 square miles of prairie land.

With many small mission parishes unable to financially sustain themselves, and with the dwindling numbers of priests, the diocese recently restructured itself, uniting far-flung parishes and missions into clusters of area faith communities. Each of these faith communities shares personnel, programs, and resources between two to five clustered parishes.

It's a new approach to pastoral ministry and outreach.

On their own, many of the rural parishes simply are unable to afford full-time staff, especially for religious education and adult faith formation. Furthermore, it's quite a challenge to find adult faith leaders and then to adequately train them, with the closest Catholic colleges hours away in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Due to parish size and financial limitations, many parishioners can only work part-time for the Church and require other jobs to sustain their families. Providing formation opportunities for catechists in a rural setting requires time, money, and travel—often serious barriers to diocese-sponsored catechist formation programs.

Fortunately, within this isolation, unique strengths bloom. Strong family ties shape life together within close-knit rural communities, where people know each other's names and care about each other. The seasonal rhythms of planting and harvest, as they mirror the liturgical year, add a rich dimension to the day-to-day life of faith.

The prairie Church is alive. Numerous men and women in these rural communities carry the faith stories of the local church, and they are just waiting to be called upon to tell them. With some understandable pain and struggle, the faithful in southwestern Minnesota are becoming a robust local mission church. Your support of the Catholic Home Missions Appeal makes this possible.

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee
on Catholic Home Missions



The Together in Communion adult faith formation class in the Diocese of New Ulm.

That's a tall order in a wide-open place, but Bryan and his team have it under control.

Bryan explains how the two adult faith formation programs, called Foundations and Together in Communion, help support the rural parishes. "They're planting seeds of a different type and preparing the participants to be spiritual sowers," he says. "The people gain a new appreciation for the catechetical ministry and for their own formation."

Bobbi Refsland, who attended the adult faith formation programs in New Ulm, knows that this formation is more than just a personal matter. "We need to protect our beliefs in order to pass them on to the next generation, or we won't have a Church left for our children to believe in," she says. "The classes helped me gain confidence in what I knew was right, but never had the courage to stand up for."

Bobbi lives in Pennock, a community of 491 people who make their living from farming and light manufacturing. She taught catechism for 10 years with her husband, Gary, and participated in Adults and Teens Encounter Christ. She says that in Foundations and Together in Communion, she learned from both her professors and her classmates. "I learned that the more I learn about my faith, the more I want to know. I learned that sometimes serving God can take us *way* out of our comfort zone. I learned how God transforms us and gives us the ability to change."

Bobbi adds, "I have fallen back on the information I learned in the classes in my relationships with other people. I never really knew how to defend our faith. I would just listen as people would run our faith into the ground. I don't do

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that anymore. Now I proudly explain what our Church teaches. And you know what? They can't argue with the truth."

Bryan says that pastors throughout the diocese invite parishioners to the programs, which meet once a month for a full Saturday at a central location. St. Mary's brings in a theologian who addresses a different theme each month during the year-long program. Since January 2009, the University of Dayton has been helping by offering the programs online, which, Bryan says, eliminates weather-related class cancellations.

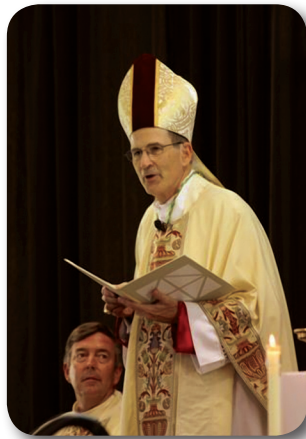
Participants in both programs have the full support of New Ulm's Bishop John M. LeVoir. He says, "As the bishop of a rural diocese without a Catholic institution of higher learning, I am very pleased that, in collaboration with St. Mary's University and the University of Dayton, we can offer these programs for the enrichment

of the Catholic faith of our lay leaders. They are called to continue the mission of Jesus in the family, the workplace, and society in general. Without the financial assistance from Catholic Home Missions, these programs would not be possible in our diocese, and we are so very grateful for the help."

Both programs charge a modest tuition, but grants are available for those individuals and parishes that cannot afford it.

Whether the participants use their experience to evangelize their parish or to enrich their own faith experience, Bryan says, "they are more mindful of the mission of the Church and appreciate it as an undercurrent to whatever they are doing."

Bobbi concludes, "I learned so much about my faith and about myself and all the things I need to work on to make myself more pleasing to God. I learned that I belong to a Church that has gone through so many trials and tribulations and has come out better and stronger. It's such an amazing journey!"



Most Rev. John M. LeVoir
Bishop of New Ulm



The Diocese of New Ulm is the most rural diocese in Minnesota, with 62,787 Catholics who worship at 70 parishes that are grouped into 24 area faith communities. The faith communities each comprise two to five parishes and share personnel, programs, and resources. Some of the parishes have fewer than 100 parishioners.

The diocese is served by 43 active priests, 63 women religious, 3 deacons, and 1,146 catechists. There are 11 seminarians, and 11 more men are preparing for ordination to the permanent diaconate.

There are 16 elementary schools and 3 high schools in the diocese. There are no Catholic colleges. Four bishops have led the diocese since it was established in 1957.

The diocese has no interstate highways, and many people access the Internet with dial-up connections.

The traditional agricultural economy centers on corn, soybeans, and sugar beets, but many family farms are closing as the population ages and as educated youth increasingly leave the diocese for job opportunities elsewhere.

Most of New Ulm's Catholics have roots in northern Europe. There are small numbers of Hmong and Somali people and a growing Hispanic population. The diocese established an office of Hispanic ministry in 1988 and will institute a lay formation program in Spanish in November 2009.

The **USCCB Committee on National Collections**, through its **Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions**, provides financial support for missionary activities that strengthen and extend the presence of the Church in the United States and its island territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

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In this issue . . .

Explore a rural diocese in southwest Minnesota. The Diocese of New Ulm is rich in faith, despite the many challenges it faces. With the help of the Catholic Home Missions Appeal, New Ulm focuses on revitalizing the Church through formation and catechetical programs. Read about how these programs have impacted parishioners in the diocese. For more information about the home mission dioceses in the United States, please visit www.usccb.org/hm.

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