

Diocese of Madison Rural Life Listening Sessions Report

By Tom Nelson; Rural Life Coordinator

Bishop Hying began to personally attend the Diocese of Madison Rural Life Listening Sessions in Autumn 2021 and has recently completed listening sessions in all eleven counties of our rural Diocese. The Bishop tasked the Rural Life Coordinator to assist and conduct each of the county sessions; allowing our Bishop to, in his own words "spend more time in our smaller communities with a focus on listening to the needs and challenges of our rural farmers and producers and the rural communities in which they live and work and to respond with practical help. How do we offer spiritual support, access the existing services and advocate for sustainable family Farms?" It starts with listening and learning from those most directly impacted by the current farming crisis across our family farms and struggling rural communities.

Over this last 13 months we crossed the Diocese of Madison holding public dialogue with our rural county parish communities and the Bishop listened as we asked each county gathering to identify the concerns and issues which impact daily life within our farming communities- the **gifts** of what we already have and are grateful for and the **challenges** we face in order to sustain one another in the work of human hands- the growing of Our Daily Bread.

The **Gifts** listed in most of the communities centered around our parish, our priests, and the strong support of an active culture of parish volunteers. When there was a Catholic school within the area the support of Catholic education was celebrated and cherished as a vital function we have to sustain and prosper. The gift of rural life and the heartland each farming family is tapped to cultivate and to steward also was regularly recognized as a demanding but awesome call to the "land of our Fathers". Our head Shepherd's humility was also tested as each rural community praised our bishop for his continued and regular presence within their parishes- no matter how far from Madison.

Many of the **challenges** stated flowed partly from the list of Gifts- declining family sizes and the youth exodus from our rural towns for education and employment needs centered in the urban areas, lack of family support services within rural counties from everything such as child and elder care (especially during busy seasons of planting and harvesting), EMTs and limited rural hospital staffs; and across all the sessions was the concern for the very stressful nature of farming itself. On a good day farming is dangerous, and adding the stress of work safety, unpredictable weather, dwindling financial options and a fickle world market can lead the healthiest and calmest among us to become over-stressed and at our limit of physical, mental and spiritual endurance. This issue of rural resiliency- or lack of was a major concern in almost all of the sessions and is currently being explored by the Bishop and the diocesan offices for what the Church might do to assist all who quietly despair. Our Diocesan Catholic Charities and The Apostolate for Persons with Disabilities are exploring potential

service opportunities to assist in educating our parish communities to better support struggling members within our churches-whatever the challenges they face.

There were many gifts that surfaced during our listening sessions. The major themes throughout the fifteen-month process were:

- Rural living and community – joy of rural county; strong community support; citizen involvement in politics; solid work force – reliable employees/strong work ethic; English ESL availability through library system; Catholic Charities; St. Vincent de Paul; Knights of Columbus; Diocesan Council of Catholic Women; strong family values; other lay volunteer associations; our Family; strong volunteer EMT and Fire services; trust; WCC strong relationship in legislature; good community support in crisis; cooperation amongst various denominations and assistance to their community
- Parish community – supportive religious sisters and deacons; support the “Family Home Church”; gift of vocations to Church, religious, and military; aging services/Catholic Charities (CC) Care Teams; Music ministry; building Evangelization efforts (with diocesan support); good parish cooperation between worship sites and communities; keeping in touch with our education-bound students out of county; power of Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; increased need to Pray for our Priest(s)
- Stewardship of the land – dairy grazing apprenticeship; abundant natural resources; favorable water resources (sustenance and recreational); strong sense of stewardship to our generational legacy to our land
- Parish priests – our pastor as Shepherd; Holy Mass; liturgy for Spanish speakers (limited); strong leadership of our pastor; an individual priest's limited time in multiple parish communities; frequent priest assignments are disruptive to developing relationships within our parish
- Parishioners - Drawing Youth back to the parish, seeking best ways to assist our priest; exploring tech to reach our absent youth members; Mass attendance declining;
- Lay volunteers – senior citizens, as the volunteers and service to others; need to recruit younger volunteers across all parish ministries; care and upkeep of local parishes, shrines and church properties
- Catholic schools – virtual high schools (live and local); skilled teaching staff; strong and supportive school community; Catholic School Produce Garden
- Religious education/formation - develop Hispanic Community leadership training; consider parish staff and lay ministry training
- Farming as a vocation - Growing network of Organic/natural Food Producers - growing Female Farmer's network; good work ethic; multiple skill sets across available work force; developing rural tourism opportunities; farm stand local produce; developing local community garden projects

- The Bishop Hying Effect – diocesan offices providing service and resources to parish ministries; Bishop Hying draws us closer to our Lord and Savior; visibility of Bishop Hying throughout our Rural Diocese of Madison; holding Rural Listening sessions throughout Diocese; our Bishop Hying;

There were many challenges/opportunities that also surfaced during our listening sessions. These major themes include:

- Food, Fuel, and Fiber – food cost both in production and as consumers; need for additional food pantry support to meet the increasing demand; surrounded by growing and expanding urban areas with urban-centered concerns; rural food pantry concerns/client id clarified
- Declining rural population – loss of parishes and their communities; loss of small businesses; housing shortage; loneliness across all age demographics; lack of youth/ young adult culture; difficulties of hiring and keeping young employees
- Youth exodus – limited options for children and youth programs, camps, and travel; Sunday Sports competing with Parish Liturgy/education programs (Sunday is Ours - family and faith); challenges to sustain youth oriented programs, Sunday sports programs drain parish of young members
- Lack of employment opportunities – low living wages and teen starting wages; language difficulties;
- Lack of job training - Lower base wages in rural counties; worker shortage for employment; lack of Peer Leadership
- Limited support and family services - Daily tensions of individual farming choices in a more complex and unforgiving economy- need for mental health programs; lack of affordable and safe childcare and senior-care; more Hispanic Clergy and Spanish Pastoral services; Evangelical Hispanic Churches; understaffed County social services
- Rural health issues – hospital/rural clinic employee shortages; high cost of healthcare for farmers; poverty is hidden within rural counties; Hispanic health care services; good primary care; lack of free time (for individuals and families); our isolated Seniors and their basic needs
- Lack of counseling services availability – reaching farmers in mental, spiritual, and physical distress; drug and alcohol abuse; depression and farmer suicide prevention; access to marriage and family counseling services; sexual orientation confusion; need for Women's Shelter and services, mental health needs and treatment options (both secular and Catholic faith-based counseling services)
- Dwindling financial options – mileage covered in rural counties with inflated gas/fuel cost; farm estate planning difficulties; crop insurance; banking consolidation limiting small local bank options; fuel cost with greater distance to travel for all rural needs and activities

- Resource challenges - high and increasing land prices; government farm policy and excessive regulation; urban annexing of farm land; tax policies not favorable to farmers and rural communities; over regulation of production by state government; limited Catholic education for youth; need for a Catholic resource guide; limited professional services; limited access to groceries and fuel; limited rental/lease of local farm land- high prices; wind and solar farms challenging food production
- Infrastructure challenges – no public mass transit for all people- especially seniors; limited WIFI/cell phone availability; impact of alternative energy and its production; poor roads in production areas; housing shortages (rental and private); limited locker/slaughter house facilities creates a production backlog; Catholic Radio service unobtainable outside Madison; lack of Hispanic Catholic Radio services; poor cell phone reception outside rural communities