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**FAITH**

NORTH MANCHESTER, Ind.

**Sustainable growth**

Some area pastors prefer outreach resembling practice of family farm

By SARA TOTH

Tribune Staff Writer

Dennis Wenzel eagerly pursued a college and seminary education to escape life on his family's farm in Illinois.

Now a pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Plymouth, the Rev. Wenzel looks forward to the one day a month that he drives an hour to the east to spend time working on a farm in North Manchester.

Wenzel joins several other area pastors on a farm run by the Rev. Jeffrey Hawkins, a Lutheran conference dean who uses sustainable agriculture -- farming that doesn't deplete or destroy natural resources or pollute the environment -- to teach clergy about healthy church growth and pastoral life.

Sustainable farms that emphasize quality over quantity not only offer an alternative to factory farms, they offer a model for how churches can experience and measure growth in ways other than numbers, the pastors coming to Hawkins' farm have learned.

The idea has surprised participants and resonated with them in a time when many churches feel pressured to measure their success at ministry in sheer numbers, the same way many factory farms measure their success.

"It never dawned on me to equate congregational life with farming," Wenzel said during a lunch break at the farm on Friday. "I worked so hard to get off the farm. I'm surprised that I'm here."

In the three months he has attended Hawkins' program, Wenzel said he has learned that "things take time." This applies to the potatoes he planted on Hawkins' farm in North Manchester on Friday morning. It also applies to the outreach programs planned by the council of his church at 6835 Union Road.

Growth is not necessarily an efficient process, the pastors have learned. And valuing efficiency over quality can be risky, Hawkins says.

**Healthy growth, no waste**

A truck that carried a corn planter and a tank of chemical fertilizer rumbled by Hawkins' 99-acre farm.

The fertilizer is typical of loads carried by vehicles on the roads of northern Indiana's farmland.

Hawkins equates chemical fertilizers, animals injected with antibiotics and chickens living in cramped quarters with the tools and programs offered to pastors simply to increase church attendance.

Like the factory model of farming, the church-growth movement risks paying more attention to numbers and neglecting long-term quality and health, he said.

"If church is a machine and pastors are mechanics, there's no place for health," said Hawkins, who was elected dean of the Northeast Conference of the Indiana Kentucky Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2003.

In everything he does, Hawkins, a father of two who was ordained a Lutheran minister in 1980, wants to "please the Lord."

"What goes along with that is 'What's the way to farm that is excellent stewardship?' God doesn't want us to treat the earth in a disrespectful, damaging or destructive way," he said.

So, ever since he moved with his family to this farm that he inherited from his grandparents in 1987, his goal has been producing healthy plants and animals, not simply large amounts.

Hawkins uses the resources inherent in nature and avoids chemical fertilizers and antibiotics that may increase production in the short term but also introduce new challenges -- such as dangers to humans and the further mutation of infections warded off by antibiotics -- in the long term.

On Friday, his pigs were confined to a pile of manure and straw. Their snouts and feet were mixing the pile's carbon and nitrogen to produce fluffy compost for this summer's vegetable garden.

He keeps his 300 chickens in six mobile cages that sit on the grass. Each day he moves the cages to give the chickens fresh grass. Their manure replenishes the grass for the cows who next will graze the pasture.

"My goal is to have everything on the farm benefit the farm," he said. "So the farm is, as much as possible, its own economy."

Because he doesn't introduce foreign substances, the manure and even the newspapers that line the bottom of the baby turkeys' pen then later sink and dissolve into the ground. They are not wasted but continue to fuel the soil and the animals.

"Everything that's waste in one system I try to make be a resource in another system, which I think is God's economy," he said.

### **From farm to church**

To teach lessons that are based on the farm to pastors, in 2003 he founded the ministry HOPE CSA, which stands for Hands-On Pastoral Education using Clergy-Sustaining Agriculture.

Pastors from several denominations visit once a month for a year to work on the farm and participate in discussions with Hawkins and fellow pastors. They also complete reading assignments with agricultural themes.

Hawkins' goals for the pastors are learning new practices that promote the development of "holy health."

Hawkins uses this phrase as a translation of the biblical Greek work "soteria," which also means salvation, to include mental, emotional, vocational, as well as physical, aspects of health.

In discussions with the pastors, Hawkins makes many parallels between factory farms and mega churches and between sustainable farming and healthy churches.

Both systems risk putting results and production ahead of growth that promotes health and long-term development.

"I don't want to demonize church growth and factory farms," Hawkins said. "I want to help us be honest about the consequences of choosing those models."

He emphasizes that pastors should use all their parishioners' talents rather than the foreign fertilizer of outside programs to meet perceived needs.

Setting up too many programs that rely on outside sources rather than using people already in the church can make pastors too busy to really connect with their flock, Hawkins said.

For example, young candidates could prepare for confirmation by visiting elderly, shut-in members of the church, Hawkins suggested Friday. This way, two groups of people use each other to learn, rather than relying on reading books, watching videos and taking part in other programs.

They strive to be responsive rather than reactive, to think long term instead of grabbing onto the latest fad to solve problems in their churches.

They learn that the practice of resting, or Sabbath, promotes healthy growth in the long run. This gives pastors time to let ideas really grow and be absorbed inside of them.

### **Productive Sabbath time**

Sitting around Hawkins' kitchen table reflecting on a morning of planting potatoes, Wenzel, the pastor from Plymouth, described his days on the farm as a "kind of Sabbath time."

"That's a wonderful way to put it," said the Rev. Amy Beitelchees-Albers, interim pastor at Calvary Lutheran Church in Angola, Ind. "As pastors, we don't always take our Sabbath time."

The lessons from the farm and the time to ponder their lives as Christians and pastors have practical applications back at their churches, they said.

Helping move the chicken cages, Beitelchees-Albers noticed that a few chickens were afraid to move, a few were eager, but "most were in the middle just clucking around."

This same model applies to a congregation of people when they go through a change, she said. After seeing those scared chickens, "I have more compassion for those who don't want to change," she said.

Wenzel, who has been a pastor for nearly three decades, said the short time he has participated in Hawkins' program has affirmed for him that his choice a few years ago to begin offering a few meaningful ministries, rather than "a whole buffet of things," was a healthy decision.

"Sometimes churches can be just as high-pressured as the rest of society," he said. "If you don't have time to be at peace, how can you hear God's voice?"

And waiting for potato plants to sprout or for a church council to spend time deciding what one program is best rather than starting a whole bunch of programs is not a waste of time, he said he has learned.

"Even when there doesn't seem to be a lot of growth going on," he said, "there is more than you realize."

*Staff writer Sara Toth:*

*[stoth@sbtinfo.com](mailto:stoth@sbtinfo.com)*

*(574) 235-6442*

picture captions:

The Rev. Jeffrey Hawkins, a Lutheran conference dean who lives on a farm in North Manchester, Ind., teaches clergy about sustainable agriculture in hopes it will foster more understanding of creation and the needs of human flocks in churches.

The Rev. Susan Socha, of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Le Otto, Ind., near Fort Wayne, and the Rev. Dennis Wenzel, of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Plymouth, look forward to the one day a month they spend pondering creation and growth at Hawkins' farm.

Pigs peek out from their pen on Hawkins' farm, where they mix straw and manure with their snouts and feet, turning it into compost for this summer's vegetable garden.