Mission in Missouri: Churches and immigrants

by David L. Ostendorf in the June 13, 2006 issue

In 1994, things began to look up for Milan, Missouri, a remote, rural community of 2,000 that had been struggling for years with a declining farm economy and weak job market. Premium Standard Farms (PSF), the second-largest pork production company in the U.S., opened a state-of-the-art packing plant in Milan's rural enterprise zone. Today the company raises 2 million hogs annually on 38,000 acres of rolling northwest Missouri hills, then brings them to Milan for processing.

PSF workers slaughter over 7,000 hogs a day. It's one of the most dangerous industries in the nation. Most of the workers earn $21,000 per year. After a decade of PSF operations, 22 percent of Milan's population lives below the poverty level, and the median household income is less than half the U.S. average.

Area churches have struggled to accommodate the influx of immigrant workers, hundreds of whom found jobs at the plant. Congregations began to provide for the basic needs of newcomers and challenged a local landlord who was exploiting them. This was no easy task. In the Milan area, few of the dozen scattered congregations have full-time pastors, and pastor turnover is high. Cooperation among congregations is difficult. There are cultural and racial differences—an Anglo Baptist church ended up forcing out a fledgling Hispanic congregation that it had once nurtured. There is competition for newcomers, complete indifference to them, or a tendency to offer only Band-Aid ministries that fail to address systemic conditions of poverty and low-wage employment.

Still, there have been signs of progress. From 1998 to 2004, Milan's United Methodist Church recruited a Hispanic missioner to the community and converted a residence into a "wait house" for newly arrived immigrants.

In 1995, congregations in nearby Trenton created the Renewing Rural Missouri (RRM) project, and its leaders—Hispanic and Anglo laypeople, part-time pastors and paid staff—determined to take on social and economic issues. When many Hispanic

residents were unable to get a driver's license because of their work schedules, RRM secured a commitment from the Highway Patrol to provide bilingual driver's license exams in the community. RRM began developing immigrant leaders, providing interpreter support in the health care system, and helping the local hospital find ways to improve interpretation services. RRM leaders are busy with other challenges: they are trying to secure transportation for immigrants who have no vehicles, addressing education issues for immigrant children in an underfunded school district, and building relationships between all those who are affected by the environmental impact of PSF hog operations.

The exploitation of low-wage immigrant laborers in the U.S.—from Chinese workers on the transcontinental railroad to Eastern Europeans in Chicago's packinghouses to farm workers in California's Central Valley—is nothing new. Nor is the nativist response to "too many" immigrants—particularly to those not of northwestern European descent—as embodied in the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the National Origins Act (1924) and other restrictionist policies, including the ones currently under consideration by Congress and in statehouses across the nation.

What is different today is the extent to which our industrial, service, construction, agricultural and food-processing sectors rely on a largely undocumented immigrant workforce. This workforce is now employed far beyond the nation's urban and metropolitan centers and also away from the major agricultural fields. Traditional gateway cities—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago—have given way to "new gateway" communities in second- and third-tier population centers, suburban rings and rural towns like Milan.

In this emerging landscape, churches face daunting challenges. Few small communities or small churches have the capability of addressing burgeoning immigration or the capacity to absorb or redirect the social and economic costs that employers lay at the public door. When immigrants need help in securing a living wage or in fighting prohibitions that exclude them from government services, solo attempts by churches or even denominations are not as effective as organized interchurch and interfaith partnerships.

In his classic 1942 sociological study *Millhands and Preachers*, Liston Pope chronicled the travails of a southern community where churches and pastors were part of the mill owners' matrix of power and worker exploitation. This dynamic still holds. Congregations tend to support the company that brings jobs to town, or to be passive despite the visible needs of newcomers. Christians will have to step out of

the shadows and engage in mission with immigrants, and address the tough social, economic and racial-justice issues that come with a new demography. The recent proposal by Catholic bishops to defy unjust anti-immigrant laws is a starting point.