

The pastors of Richland County

Our two ministers associations merged. Our differences don't stop us from working together.

by [Larry Engel](#) in the [September 14, 2016](#) issue



JOBS AT HOME: Students in the Career Educational Cooperative meet at Richland Center Fellowship, a church in Richland Center, Wisconsin. Photo by Curt Bisarek.

At a recent meeting of the Richland County Ministerial Association, I made a brief presentation on same-sex marriage, after which a Roman Catholic priest raised his hand. “Is there anything certain for you?” the monsignor asked. “Anything authoritative?” His question was sincere, respectful, and honest. A United Methodist minister chimed in: “Don’t you think that God absolutely has a plan, and part of the plan is that a marriage is between a man and a woman?”

“Not certain or absolute,” I responded. “Those words no longer hold meaning for me . . . and no, marriage is not only between a man and a woman. And as to life as God’s plan, I believe that life is more like a divine gamble.” A smile crossed the monsignor’s face. The Methodist gasped.

In the old days, we pastors would have drawn battle lines at that point and readied our troops with doctrinal and dogmatic weapons. In the current life of the RCMA, however, we’re seeking not converts or conquest but clarity and cooperation—even when what we have to say reveals the differences between us. There is a sense of respect for all and a confidence that we are friends in Christ.

We have also learned that if religious leaders want influence in the public arena, we must have a unified voice. That means internal work among ourselves and our churches, working to heal divisions, respect differences, and find common ground.

I prompted the questions on authority when I shared my views. Most of the other pastors did not agree. But now the issue was out there on the table for discussion by Roman Catholic, Evangelical Free, Free Methodist, Episcopal, United Methodist, ELCA Lutheran, Nazarene, nondenominational, and Assembly of God pastors.

My friend Mike Breininger, pastor at Richland Center Fellowship, was not present that night because he was participating in a statewide Industrial Areas Community Building project. But we had already had our own wrestling matches over same-sex marriage.

A year earlier we had been driving to a meeting when Mike took one side on same-sex marriage and I took the other. (We were, and remain to this day, on opposite sides of many issues.) At one point, Mike looked at me and said, “What will it take to convince you?”

“Evidence,” I said.

“I just gave you evidence, scripture and verse.”

“No, that’s not evidence, that’s your interpretation.”

“Your view is heretical,” he said.

I laughed. “Well, we’re making progress! In the old days I would have been a heretic and these days it’s my view that is heretical!”

We laughed together, and then began an in-depth conversation. It was through such time-consuming but stimulating talk that we learned that finding common ground meant accepting respectful and open disagreement. We also learned that this type of dialogue was critical to doing effective work together. The *Century* published the story about how Mike and I became friends across the liberal-evangelical divide and worked to rebuild our ministerial association ([“No longer strangers,”](#) March 19, 2014).

One result of a renewed RCMA is that it has been able to organize community worship events, foster conversation, and address some pressing community needs.

For example, last January a Free Methodist pastor wrote the rest of us an e-mail, asking us whether the ministerial association would raise funds for local workers who had lost jobs in a plant closing announced only two weeks before Christmas. Special offerings were taken in the churches, and over \$35,000 was raised. No pastor asked a question, and no planning meeting was held. People acted immediately because they trusted the association. As a result, 84 workers were served. It was cooperative action for the common good.

In 2015, the RCMA gathered more than 600 Christians for an outdoor Labor Day worship and communion service. The Episcopal priest led us, and ten pastors gathered around the altar for the first time ever in Richland County. The Roman Catholic priests respectfully declined to officially participate, but encouraged members of their parish to attend. No one asked any theological questions. I looked at Mike and said, "Who would have thought we'd be sharing communion."

One year earlier, 300 of us had gathered for a community Thanksgiving service at the Roman Catholic church. The monsignor gave a short explanation of the tabernacle, the perpetual candle, the statues, side altars, and the stations of the cross. Protestants in the pews loved the presentation and learned a lot about their faith. A woman pastor shared the message that night, which was a stretch for some of the Catholics. That experience strengthened understanding and respect, and led to the Labor Day communion service.

As a result of conversations between pastors, the mainline and evangelical ministerial associations merged into one in 2014. The first act of the new organization was to develop a local ministry that all could support. We knew that ministry to the homeless was a traditional social service, so we established Lydia's House, an emergency 15-day winter shelter for the homeless. Soon other homeless shelters were added and Lydia's House ministries expanded.

But we knew traditional social service was not enough. We knew that we were not going to be able to take the place of declining government social services. And we knew that the community was suffering in many ways. Families were hurting. Youth were moving out of the area and the remaining residents were aging. Public schools were in disarray and regional industries were all facing labor shortages. Obesity was on the rise. The churches tended to focus on caring for their members, yet felt the impact of the community's struggles. We were in need of revitalization or, to use an ancient word that the pastors could agree with, restoration.

We also knew that pastors working together could not successfully respond to regional problems on their own. To achieve the kind of vision we dreamed about, we needed to go broader and deeper and find other leaders and followers in the community who could join the churches in changing the culture.

The RCMA started a community forum that met once a quarter. Some 30 public leaders gathered to talk about local issues of concern. The group included a police chief, a judge, bankers, a hospital CEO, business leaders, and public school officials. These leaders enjoyed stepping out of their own worlds and engaging the wider community. As they told stories and began relationships with each other, important issues surfaced. The police chief talked about the decline of the family as the number one issue he saw—a problem that leads to crime. The middle school principal noted the number of divorced families with children in the school and explained that he spent two hours every afternoon just trying to figure out which bus the students needed to board to get to the right parent.

At one of the forums, the main speaker was a former pedophilic offender. At the end of a sobering presentation on his family dynamics, someone asked, “At what age could someone have intervened and it would have made a difference?” The answer was “middle school.” The middle school principal, the police chief, a local bank president, a retired circuit judge, and three pastors responded by forming a committee to develop intervention strategies. The Family Restoration Initiative emerged, a program that placed a staff person in the middle school to pair struggling families with families from RCMA member churches in a family-to-family ministry. Once money was raised, the program had to be approved by the school board—and approval meant crossing the secular-sacred divide. Churches would be working with and in public schools. The only dissenting vote was by the president of the school board, who was also the mayor. He left the meeting saying, “I have my concerns with the churches, and I’ll be watching.”

The significance of the program was not so much the vote, or the fact that a pastor was hired to work in the public schools, but that pastors and secular leaders were no longer strangers.

Another issue came to the forefront. A local dairy plant, was in need of 40 employees. The company had invested \$100 million in a state-of-the-art yogurt-making facility but now was experiencing a labor shortage. Labor shortage was a common refrain among other manufacturers, including Miniature Precision

Components, SEATS, Rockwell Animation, Foremost Farms, Scott's Industry, and Lowe Manufacturing.

Accentuating the labor shortage was the fact that the majority of our youth move away from the region after high school. Manufacturing jobs had a bad reputation in area high schools, where the curriculum and counselors tended to push students toward four-year colleges. Technical education programs were underfunded and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) programs were only a dream. To turn around both the labor shortage and the exodus of youth required more than anything a 20-church ministerial association could deliver on its own.

The result of our discussions was Southwest Partners, first led by Mike Breininger. He conceived of the program as helping create a "healthy forward-thinking culture for attracting, retaining, and nurturing people and their dreams in our region."

The first successful initiative of Southwest Partners was the Career Education Cooperative, an organization composed of five area school districts, one private school, and ten regional industries and businesses. The cooperative develops educational programs with college credit courses and apprenticeships in industries for seniors in high school. In its first year, CEC focused on manufacturing. In its second year, CEC expanded its programming to include tracks for health care and for laboratory work. Student enrollment jumped from ten to 32.

On a cold and icy January evening in 2015, over 200 partners gathered at the Richland Center Fellowship to announce the kickoff of the Career Education Cooperative. The church's Eagle School is the only private school in the cooperative; having it host the event symbolized the cooperation between churches and civic leadership. I talked about the history of the initiative and concluded: "I would be remiss in telling the story if I didn't mention the Richland County Ministerial Association. A few years ago area pastors decided to end our divisions and work together. Tonight has its roots in that story." The churches had reclaimed public ground and were partnering with regional schools and industries.

There are other concerns to address in our community. Despite the natural beauty of the area, youth and young families complain that there are not enough recreational opportunities for them. At a community visioning session, the Pine River Trails was born. Today there are facilities for canoeing, kayaking, hiking, biking, mountain biking, and camping along the Pine River. The effort also includes a Rails-to-Trails

bike project that connects with other trails in the region and constructs bike paths leading to area schools: “Safe Routes, Safe Schools.” New partners in this project include sports clubs, school PTAs, and county and city governments.

The Southwest Partners organization is now exploring other issues, including broadband access, housing needs, and small business development. We envision adding stations of the cross along the Pine River Trail and ecumenical prayer walks, working in the schools, and celebrating the achievements of students involved in the CEC.

Pastors hold different understandings on a host of issues. But our members are not asking about those issues. They’re concerned about the labor shortage, worried about the exodus of youth, and wondering about what the future holds if these practical concerns are not addressed. They’re also enjoying the cooperation between churches and celebrating communion with them. And they’re excited by cooperative local ministry.

Of course, the things that divide us are too important to ignore, and we don’t. We’re taking time to talk about them and share our theological views and pastoral practices. The conversation stretches our minds and strengthens our faith. The monsignor said it best at the end of the same-sex marriage discussion. “Robust,” he commented. “Well worth the time.”

Discussing, praying, and worshipping together several times a year with RCMA members builds trust and understanding. Engaging with public leaders in projects that change the culture is kingdom building. Our ministerial association may be small, but we are strong because we work with a broad base of regional leaders. More and more of us are no longer strangers.

A version of this article appears in the September 14 print edition under the title “The pastors of Richland County.”