

## The History of MINC

In 1987, the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of Northern New York began planning for a program to help and sustain small churches within the Presbytery's bounds. Many of the churches on the roll of Presbytery have under 100 members. Several were enduring years of the struggle to survive, and had been subsidized by the Presbytery through money provided by the Major Mission Fund. These funds were running out, and the churches showed continuing need for encouragement. The COM looked to new ideas. The hope was that a program could be developed that would enable small churches to work together engaging in mission/ministry, and that in so doing would themselves be encouraged.

In July of 1987, Art and Mary Ellen Frackenpohl visited Rev. Carl Geores in Leeds, Maine, and observed the mission/ministry of Mission At The Eastward and Rural Community Action Ministry. Rev. Peter Schlichting, then Executive Presbyter for Northern New York, was personally acquainted with Carl Geores and his work, and knew him to be nearing retirement from his 35 year ministry. The possibility of recruiting Carl to be a consultant for a Small Church Project in Northern New York was considered.

In February of 1988, a meeting was held in Potsdam with Rev. Geores and about a dozen participants from small churches, and the need and interest for such a project was assessed. Elders expressed a sense of extreme frustration over their church's lack of funds, members, energies and outreach. Clergy expressed a sense of isolation in their lives and work, suffering from loneliness, lack of intellectual stimulation, and the paucity of resources.

In June of 1988, members from nine small churches met with Rev. Geores in Canton, for a brainstorming session. The COM had suggested two clusters of small churches as pilot projects, one cluster in the north consisting of eight churches, and the other in the more southerly area of five churches. Fears and hopes were discussed. It was suggested that Carl Geores would spend a year consulting in Northern New York if the churches were interested.

By December 1988, a final proposal had been agreed on, and a final preliminary meeting was held with Rev Geores. The Small Church Project description reads: "This project is developed upon the belief that through working together in cooperative ventures, the mission of Jesus Christ will be fulfilled." The churches were asked to make a commitment for 1989, to promise minister and elder representatives at each meeting, and to provide \$25 per month to help support the cost of the project.

January 1989 began the regular monthly series of cluster meetings. There were six participating churches in the north, five in the south. Meetings were based on Bible study "New Models For Ministry" by Rev. Carl Geores, in prayer, in assessing the current programs of each church, and in looking at the communities and identifying needs. It became apparent that people were feeling

impoverished and helpless, sad that they were doing so little in response to the gospel, and that there was great fear that the Presbytery would “close down our church”, or that larger churches would swallow up the smaller ones. It became apparent that communication was a vital tool among the churches. People and congregations need to know what is going on in order to participate and the Project developed a mailing list of everyone who came to even one meeting. Everyone on this growing list continues to receive minutes of meetings and schedules of events. Recently a woman appeared at a cluster meeting after missing one whole year, and she may well bring her church into MINC membership! It also appears to be critical that some one or more persons be willing to keep things together, filling in gaps as they occur, reminding people, encouraging volunteers, pushing towards growth, taking responsibility.

As the meetings progressed through the first year, the northern and southern clusters developed very differently. The northern group fairly quickly settled on housing repair as the greatest need they could see in each of their communities. They spent countless hours talking about it, hearing county housing reports, etc. By November, the group was finally galvanized into action, when an elder who happened to be a building code enforcer for his township, reported on a particular need, and challenged the group to “Do something!” Thus was born what became the Rural Rehab Housing Ministry, geared to help those who are ineligible for a bank loan or to receive public assistance.

The southern group developed into a strong personal support system. They shared each other’s personal and church concerns, prayed, studied, and their first act of outreach was to establish a Parish Deacon’s fund so that help and hope could be given to an ill, alone, and unchurched man.

So in the first year, the Small Church Project met the goal of completion of at least one outreach program in each cluster.

The Project was renewed for 1990, and meetings with Rev. Geores continued. After 16 months of meetings, each cluster elected a chairperson and a secretary who took over arranging agendas and minutes of meetings. The Project was and continues to be led primarily by laypeople from a variety of backgrounds.

By summer 1990, it became obvious to the elders attending the meetings that their congregations were mostly unaware of what was going on. So they agreed to invite themselves to each other’s churches to tell the story, and to ask for a commitment for the formation of a Cooperative Parish. In September and October seven elders visited the churches, and at called congregational meetings, twelve churches (ten congregations) voted to form a cooperative parish - Ministries In the North Country (MINC). A great celebration was held in November 1990, with hymn singing, prayer and good food.

In February 1991, the MINC council, consisting of the minister and two elder representatives of each church, was convened for the first time, and in addition to sharing the news from their own churches and making plans for summer Vacation Bible Schools, began the process of organizing.

Officers were elected at the May MINC meeting, and another celebration was held in August. By May 1992, MINC structure continues to be skeletal. There seems to be no time to confront the writing of by-laws, but awareness is there that it should get done.

During 1991, four more Presbyterian churches joined MINC. and for the first time congregations of 200 or more members were included. By this time the smaller churches had acquired enough confidence in their ability to answer Christ's call to serve that they were unthreatened by larger congregations.

Ministries undertaken by MINC center on Housing and Youth Ministry, with the Rural Rehab program growing to the extent that 7 work groups are expected in the summer of 1992. Over 25 projects have been completed, from the building of a house, to simple plumbing repairs. Youth ministry includes cooperative Vacation Bible Schools held at several locations, with shared materials and training, done primarily by lay leaders. Saturday schools for children age 4 through 6th grade are held monthly, moving from church to church, and 9 churches are participating on a regular basis. Sunday teen events are held monthly. A Help Fair for teens and interested leaders and parents was held to acquaint teens with public services available to them.

Employment of seminary and student interns has stretched MINC's resources, providing an opportunity for the interns to learn much about rural parishes and about cooperative ventures, while providing parishes with teaching/preaching help. In the fall of 1992, MINC will host its first 12 month intern, and hopes that can become a tradition. This intern position is funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.

September 1991 saw the beginning of the first sustained clergy support group. Seven clergywomen began meeting weekly for lectionary study, sermon preparation and mutual support. This group continues to meet and is providing sharing and encouragement in personal and job related areas. Efforts to start such a group in the past have failed due to lack of interest. Key to the current success seems to be that the clergy themselves felt a need and acted on it

In the fall of 1990, the proposed "MINC" prepared a grant to the General Assembly for funding to hire a coordinator part time. The grant was rejected in May 1991, but resubmitted in the fall, and approved for a five year grant in conjunction with the Synod of the Northeast and the Presbytery of Northern New York to help MINC carry on ministry.

In October 1991, MINC asked Presbytery for permission to pay the coordinator for the Rural Rehab Ministry, and in January 1992, with the help from grant monies, a pastor in one of MINC's small churches was hired as 1/4 time coordinator of MINC. The bulk of the program is run by volunteer lay people, who as one presbyter observed "are on fire for the Lord". Congregations who were without hope and were struggling to "hold on" have found a sense of hope and purpose. Churches are still small, but no longer isolated. They are low on financial resources, but high on spiritual strength. They know that they are serving.

The essence of the experience is that people who sit in the pew are hungry to put their faith into action, and most simply don't know how to do it. To hear the gospel preached and have no corporate way to respond is to feel powerless and hopeless. MINC is serving Northern New York and providing hope to those who give and those who receive.

[signed]

Mary Ellen Frackenpohl

Chair, Small Church Project.  
Presbytery of Northern New York

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