

Columnist Tours Farming and Logging Operations

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The most helpful "continuing education" experience for me these past five years as a rural minister has been the annual Country and City Tour Day. Something like it is provided by the Cooperative Extension in many rural counties across our nation. It has helped me better understand the everyday life of the people served by our churches.

This year's tour included two of the five primary stages in the poultry production chain, and a visit to a hardwood sawmill. I hope readers will find the following observations of interest and value for ministry.

Our first stop was at a hatchery, the second stage in the poultry production process. Each year 55 million baby chicks are hatched in this facility, which is operated by a smaller regional broiler company. The eggs used at the hatchery, about 60 million, come from area farmers who care for flocks totaling about 20,000 hens.

The farmers house the hens and an appropriate set of roosters. The company that owns the hatchery provides the chickens and their feed. After about 15 months, the hens are replaced by a new set of layers. These hens are slaughtered and used to make chicken soup, pot pies and baking hens.

Each day at the hatchery more than 200,000 eggs are placed in incubators. They remain there for 21 days. Toward the end of this time the unborn chicks are inoculated for diseases. Most of the eggs hatch out. The chicks are placed in plastic containers, and within a few hours they are taken to another set of family farmers, who make up the third stage in the process. This hatchery serves about 100 poultry-raising operations.

These broiler farms will have four to eight long houses that can handle 18, 000 to 25,000 chicks each. The chicks will remain here for about 8 weeks in a climate-controlled setting. They are encouraged to eat and grow up quickly. During a year the family farmer will have five sets of chicks. So, each of the 100 farms will raise between 750,000 and 1 million broilers each year.

It costs about \$130,000 to build and equip a broiler house. So, many of the family farmers have a capital investment of 1 million dollars in their operation. Most of the farms that raise chickens in our area also have a cow and calf operation. They use the litter from the houses to fertilize their pastures. (At one time some fed the litter to their cows after it had been cured, but consumer objections terminated this practice.) These strong pastures help give these farmers a comparative advantage over other cow and calf operations.

Meanwhile, the broiler company will produce feed for the chicks in its own mill. This product is delivered to the broiler houses. We were also assured that the food fed to the chickens is no longer laced with hormones and antibiotics. Again, consumer objections seem to have ended this practice.

The fifth stage in the production process is when the broilers are picked up from the farm and taken to a slaughterhouse in a nearby city. The chicken flesh is boned, packaged, frozen and for the most part shipped to customers in Europe.

To summarize then, our regional producer owns the chickens, provides their food, and is the market for the poultry roughly 100 family farmers feed out. The farmers grow the chickens under contract. They are paid in terms of the gross weight gain of the birds. If many chickens do not survive or do not gain weight, the farmer's income suffers. If this happens very often, then the regional producer will no longer contract with the farmer, and he must go out of business and probably lose his investment. It is hard and dirty work. One must manage well in order to survive.

Some visitors asked questions concerning the cruelty of raising large numbers of chickens in confined quarters. Responses focused on savings in the costs of production, which are passed along to the consumers, as well as keeping costs low in order to compete in the growing global market.

The third stop on this year's tour was at a hardwood sawmill. It, too, is a smaller, family-owned business. It employs 35 people, including the pastor of one of the churches in our association. His job is to sharpen the band saws. Most of the employees are African American. The processes have been very much automated. Machines do the cutting and sorting with much less manual labor than in the past.

Two pieces of equipment were particularly interesting to me. One is a saw that uses lasers to determine the size of board to cut from each plank. This maximizes the usable wood and cuts down on waste. The other was a sorter that had just been operationalized that week. At the front end, a skilled worker grades and marks the boards. The boards then pass on down the line and are sorted by machine into appropriate piles by grade and size.

The better products of this mill are sent to furniture makers and producers of oak flooring. Lesser products are sold to makers of pallets. The tour guide was quick to say that most of their logs come from selective harvesting, not clear-cutting. The latter method is more common on pine plantations.

Unfortunately, I was one of only two ministers in the crowd of about 50 tour participants. I wished that more ministers had been able to learn about the everyday experiences and issues facing the people to whom they minister.

I suspect that both of us will give better counsel, and improve our contact for witness and evangelism with the farming and logging communities, because we now better understand their lives.

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