

## **NOURISHMENT AND STRENGTH MINISTRIES**

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of  
Drew University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree,  
Doctor of Ministry

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **NOURISHMENT AND STRENGTH MINISTRIES**

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The St. Thomas Charge consisting of  
New Hope, Stewart Chapel, and Zion United Methodist Churches

2469 Cainhoy Road

Huger, South Carolina 29450

The purpose of this project is for the St. Thomas Charge to establish a cooperative outreach ministry in Huger, SC. The term “charge” refers to multiple churches that have the same pastor or pastors. The St. Thomas Charge consist of three rural congregations located in Huger, SC.

The advisory team for this project will work to organize a St. Thomas Charge cooperative outreach ministry that will develop and implement a food distribution program in the Huger community and lay the foundation for building and renewing community and congregational relationships. The scope of this project was done in two phases. In phase one our advisory team developed a plan for food distribution in the Huger community. In phase two our advisory team managed the implementation of the plan.

The St. Thomas Charge consisting of New Hope, Stewart Chapel, and Zion United Methodist churches worked together to establish a food distribution ministry within the local community. We accomplished this objective with the help of an advisory team. The team consist of three members from each church and at least one person from

the community, the associate pastor and myself, for a total of twelve members. We interviewed staff from the Low Country Food Bank to determine the trends across the calendar year identifying the months of plenty verses the months of scarcity. This gave us a more focused picture which informed our action plan. Interviews, questionnaires, on site distribution documentation of participation and management were all tools used for our evaluation. The advisory committee was responsible for recruitment and training of volunteers.

We set times to celebrate this ministry with the churches of the charge. We set timelines to coordinate distribution dates. We have supplemented food bank purchases with food drives in the local church. We have shared general information on healthy living and improving personal and community life made available through helping agencies.

## CONTENTS

### Chapter

1	INTRODUCTION .....	1
2	THE FOUNDATION.....	18
3	THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS .....	38
4	PROJECT PREPARATIONS.....	47
5	PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION .....	61
6	WELL DONE .....	70
7	DO IT AGAIN.....	74

## **Dedication**

I want to thank God for sustaining me on this journey. I dedicate this project to my loving wife, Mamie, who never gave up and kept encouraging me. I also want to dedicate it to our son Stephen Jr. who kept motivating me to see it through.

I Love You!

Stephen

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Personal Narrative**

I learned from my parents the importance of community service. They seemed to always be involved in meeting the social needs of the community. They joined efforts that were designed to improve the lives of others. We were members of a small family church where my grandfather and father were the patriarchs. I observed these two men as strong independent leaders in their church and community. Our worship services were twice a month and often my parents would visit other churches on the other Sundays. When I was older and we were given options I wanted to go with them to church whenever I could. I guess it was somewhere to go and there were not many other opportunities. I also enjoyed being in church. I think the influence of the church leaders laid a foundation which inspired my interest in congregational and community development.

While attending another church's annual homecoming worship service, I overheard two ladies talking to one another about how they shouted or at least that is what I thought I heard. I was not yet a teenager but that image has been with me all of my life. I shared it with my mother and she explained that for some people church has

different meanings. We later discussed it as I was older and she reminded me that everyone has their life to live and their own interpretation of how to live for God. She also told me that we have to be concerned that we are making the right choices about our faith and living for Jesus Christ. I still wonder did I really hear what I thought or was I mistaken. Either way it has given me reason to revisit my own motives on my faith journey.

I was baptized and joined our church at the age of twelve. I took very seriously the vows of membership. These vows included a commitment to make disciples of Jesus Christ through a commitment to give my prayers, talents, gifts and presence in my Christian service. I later became an usher and was active as a youth and a member of the choir. I graduated high school and moved to Greenville SC and lived with one of my sisters, her husband and family for two years while attending Greenville Technical College. I was never really disconnected with the church because I was home once a month and then twice a month. The third year in Greenville also marked the time my brothers were building my parent's home and so during that time I was home as often as possible. I will also say that I had another incentive in that my high school sweetheart and I remained close during those years I spent in Greenville. I moved into my first apartment and out on my own in my third year out of high school and after finishing a two-year degree in marketing and business management.

The house was finished and my parents moved in along with my youngest brother. A year later I found a job and moved back to York and lived a little over a year with my parents, my brother and my grandmother who had been living with them for ten years. We continued to be very active in the church. Mamie, my high school sweetheart

and I were married in February of the following year. I worked in the community, lived in the community and three years later our only son was born. Mamie is from a family of four children and she was the youngest. We learned that we had very different experiences when the family would come together. She is also from a close knit family but the size of the gatherings was quite different. Sometimes we discussed the impact our family structures and our environment has had on our perspectives. We were both somewhat shy growing up. We both had similar experiences being among the youngest in the family.

I sometimes felt I had to fight for recognition in the family. My youngest brother and I were not only the youngest in the family, but we were also considered very protective of one another. No matter what, whenever one of us was involved in anything the other was there. We cannot remember fighting as many brothers do, however, we would team up against the older siblings. We all laugh about it now but I think that being thirteen months apart and often thought of as twins, that we lived out that role.

### **Ministry Journey**

My work experience was in retail management prior to pursuing what I interpreted as a call into ministry in 1990. I continued to work in this profession as store manager of a retail drugstore during my first appointment as a student local pastor. Responding to a call in ministry at the age of 28 meant that I had to go back to school to obtain my bachelor's degree and then attend seminary.

I believe this ministry began as a seed sown which over time was nurtured and developed by God's "miracle grow" In 1991, I was given the responsibility of supplying



my home charge during a pastoral change, which occurred and that would give us a month without a pastor. The next year my first official appointment was to a new church start as an associate pastor. This was a cross racial appointment. The appointment to a new church start meant that there were no members initially and yet the church was in a predominantly white affluent community with a white senior pastor and me as a student pastor. The training and experience really got me interested in congregational development and I have continued to be interested in the development of communities and congregations and how to effectively lead in their growth.

I was introduced to some basic principles of church growth in the new church start trainings. I later attended more congregational development sessions. All of these experiences left me with this understanding. Location is still primary, however, timing is equally important. I live near one of our district's new church starts, which has struggled since the beginning. Part of the struggle has been location and planning. The congregation has property and has not been in a position to build for many reasons. One of the primary reasons is the amount of investment dollars being spent on current facilities and the amount it would take to build with a congregation that has mixed emotions. We have to make time to build community in new church start efforts as well as in existing congregations. Developing small groups has been instrumental in many situations to help make this happen. I believe that it all points to establishing and strengthening relationships. Part of the reason for this ministry's success is because it includes small groups that have specific roles which will serve the greater community. The lessons learned about forming new faith communities are applicable for this new ministry of outreach.

It was a great learning experience, which gave me insights to some of the basics of identifying leadership and music ministry as a critical component for starting a new congregation. A few months after the chartering of this congregation, I was sent to an interim assignment with a neighboring three-point charge, to fill a vacancy because a pastor abandoned the appointment. I served for four months and returned to my appointment at the new church start because there had been an incident, which ended with the pastor being charged with arson on the rented worship center. A new senior pastor arrived six weeks after my return, and I served with him a year and a half, and then I was appointed to serve as an associate of a four point charge where I served for three years before moving to my first appointment as senior pastor of a three point charge. I served this appointment for a total of twelve years. Six years after being appointed these congregations merged to become one church.

The merger of these congregations were a result of closer working relationships among the churches and great celebrations, and successes of joint efforts for ministry. The South Carolina Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church had recently changed guidelines to reflect direct billing for financial responsibility of each pastor. This meant that the current rule in which the conference through apportionment dollars which are requested assessments asked of each congregation and resulted in sharing cost of all pastors with the full conference was about to change. These changes did not really affect our situation much. However, it began a conversation of merger among the members as a way of joining their resources and efforts to be in ministry together within their communities. After developing a plan which would give a picture of what this would

look like if a merger was to happen, each congregation voted independently to merge by majority vote.

During this time, I was also given the responsibility of serving as the director of a cooperative ministry, which consisted of ten rural congregations and five pastors. This is a ministry of churches focused on outreach and strengthening the ministry opportunities in a geographical area by pooling resources to meet the needs of the community and shared needs of the participating congregations. The merged congregation later donated one of the facilities to the cooperative ministry, so for the first time in the forty -five year ministry there is an outreach center and a place to call home.

I was appointed to the St. Thomas Charge in Huger, SC as senior pastor at the SC Annual Conference of the United Methodist held June 2010. I would officially begin in this new appointment, July 1, 2010. The name charge indicates more than one church and in this case there are three congregations. The membership of the three churches total over one thousand members. I was excited and hopeful for the possibilities that were ahead for ministry. There was a rich history with exciting growth that had been recorded for the congregations I was to serve. So there was a lot to be excited about. I have a very dedicated associate pastor, who has been helpful in developing ideas. She is in her first appointment. We are both learning in this new context. We have been together approximately four years now and we are making a difference. This is proving to be another rich experience in ministry. The community is located twenty five miles from downtown Charleston, South Carolina and it has a rich history. Charleston is known for its appeal to tourists from all over the world.

There are still several plantations present with the landscape similar to when it was used for farming during slavery and sharecropping days. The churches are located on a peninsula named Cainhoy, Wando and Huger. Specifically these three rural churches are located in Huger on Cainhoy Road. The history indicates that these were among the earliest areas settled in the Carolina colony after European settlers arrived. By the mid 1700's Native Americans, who were the first people to live on the land, were almost extinct due to disease, war and exploitation.

The Huger area communities are Williams Corner, Brown-Hill; Hamlin Corner; Charity Church Road; Baldwin Corner; Richardson Corner; Red Hill; French Quarter Creek; New Hope; Quinby Creek; Steed Creek; Moore's Corner; Old Joe: Duffy's Corner; Grant Hill; Kelly; and Greenbay. These predominantly Black communities, still cling to the culture of their ancestors. It has some of the best sweet grass basket makers in the area and continues to worship God with the uplifted spirituals with syncopated hand clapping with traditional low country cooking of rice and greens and beans and yams. The culture is known as Gullah culture which is a distinct and fertile language a blend of English and African words that roll off the tongue. Many of the African ways have been retained and passed down for generations. This history has been referenced in the 2011 publication by Herb Frazier titled "Behind God's Back." The area of the Cainhoy Peninsula's history is captured in the pages of this book; it describes the numerous changes and challenges that continue experience growth and development today.<sup>1</sup>

I was told by the member who was assigned to meet me and introduce me to representatives from the churches that Huger looks like it is poor community at first

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<sup>1</sup> Herb Frazier, *Behind God's Back* (Charleston, SC: Evening Post Books, 2011) 17-19.

glance. She stated however that there is a cross section of residents who have incomes from poverty level to six figures. She also said that some of the residents have done very well financially. She, along with others, indicated that there is a division within the community. They describe the community as being divided, and one that needed to come together for common goals. I have met this kind of discussion before in ministry. It seems that with the changes that take place over time that many of our communities, (and my experience has been in rural settings), face similar challenges. I have been observing community initiatives and would agree that while many small groups have similar interest it seems that we are not together as a whole. I noticed when I moved here that our local elementary middle school does not offer any type of summer enrichment for the children.

### **The Huger Community**

The community is located in a remote area where there are no community athletic programs or enrichment programs. The second year I was in the community I approached our schools about the possibility of a summer enrichment program and again there was nothing. I did not have the resources to establish one. During the spring of the following year the conversation continued and the resource possibilities begin to come together. One of the ways in which we began to bring the community together was to ask them to join the effort to support a summer enrichment program. The program was a great success for it offered a reading enhancement program for the children in grades 1-8. It also excited the community because it was held at the school and was offered to the children of the area. This was a great start to what became a community project. I have also worked to develop has been The Huger Wando Men's Coalition. This effort has been

to draw attention to the possibilities of working together. It has representation from the above named areas and is a representation of the predominantly African American presence. The focus has been on empowering our youth and children and to address community concerns. It is probably the first time in a while that an organization has been successful in two years of operation across denominational and social lines. It focused on purposes that are to benefit the larger community.

These efforts have been successful primarily because it has identified and met some community needs. Now the question in my mind was centered on next steps. What would be the next steps in community development? How would we go about redefining community to be inclusive of building bridges and renewing community life? Initially I thought that I wanted to rally the clergy and talk about how we could effectively make a difference within the context of establishing or reestablishing worship opportunities. Then I thought about the challenges sometimes facing clergy as it relates to territorial claims on membership, as well as the fact that some of us are in denominations where our pastoral assignments change without much notice. This led me to focus on creating an opportunity beginning with the churches of the St. Thomas Charge as a lay driven ministry. It is my hope that this will lead to a model that will grow into a collaborative ministry first of the parish and then of the larger community.

A term known as “glocal” context, which describes a new reality for North America which includes the global reality converging with the local reality. This concept pushes the church to consider new strategies for meeting people where they are spiritually physically and emotionally. In the book “Breaking the Missional Code” by Ed Setzer and David Putnam, the cultural norm in which barriers are present are referred to

as a code. These cultural barriers are present in every community to some degree. In order to remove the barriers, we have to identify them. Referring to these barriers as codes is one way to speak about them in a way that helps to more clearly see our need to recognize that there are visible and invisible dynamics with a community, and this can lead to resistance to the church as it seeks to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ before others. Our “glocal” reality is something we must understand in order to be effective in overcoming these barriers or codes. Setzer and Putnam describe the church in North America in a situation where the culture has shifted and the church has not. They write about the rejection of the modern view of life and rejection of embracing something new. They point to the growing number of unchurched and diversity of communities and growth changes up or down that the communities face. So the new reality is that we must still do what has been done such as identifying our context and creating practical ways, which relate those within our communities with the current needs and expectations.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, this keeps all of our ministries of outreach relevant to current needs and common vision for the future.

My observation supports this concept and analogy for the Huger area. Various conversations with community members indicate that some of the barriers facing our community are; independence, poor communications among organizations; lack of support for one another and a sense of complacency. These barriers or cultural codes can be connected to a community which was developed in subservient roles of many of its residents. There were some who stretched themselves beyond the limitations seen by previous generations, and in others, the code of limited possibilities reign in their minds.

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<sup>2</sup> David Putnam and Ed Setzer, *Breaking the Missional Code* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2006) 4-15.

The challenges now still carry some of the overtones of the servant roles lived out by ancestors. Breaking these missional codes has its own set of challenges. Many may still perceive that there is nothing wrong and the old cliché “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it,” comes to mind. There are some challenges because not everyone believes that anything needs to change. There are others who have set their minds on what needs to change and really are stuck and fixated on their personal agenda. Still there are others who recognize the growth change in population, as well as the projected increase growth which is project to also drastically change the ethnic make-up of the community.

In this rural setting we are now finding persons who did not grow up in the church. While family ties may currently connect the longstanding family names, persons moving in do not have this same foundation or connection to the church. The church must rediscover her mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ and introduce Jesus in settings beyond the walls of the church. I continue to look at our congregations as churches who must learn to make this our new reality as we seek to connect and reconnect persons with Jesus Christ. Although it is a self-analysis based on the conversations during my first year of ministry in the Huger area, I have come to the understanding that one of the complaints within our community and within the congregations I serve is that we do not work as well together as we did in the past. In the minds of the people we have a fragmented community because of strained if not broken relationships. In the conversations I also heard that there are those who are hurting and in need in spite of a median income that is above poverty level (census estimate 35000.00+). I believe that a mission outreach project to serve this identified need that has the interest of many community persons is the first step.



I have reflected on the ministry within the rural church context during my 22 years of serving in the United Methodist Church. It has been quite rewarding and at the same time challenging. I am intrigued by the profession of our faith in worship on Sunday mornings and the contradictions of our walk through the week. I believe that this is a challenge for churches everywhere as we the people of God seek to live out our faith. We are human, and in need of the grace of God. I am reminded that my father often shared with us that “there is enough good in the worst of us and enough bad in the best of us that it would behoove all of us not to talk about the rest of us.” I am referring to the powerful worship experiences and the territorial ministries that I have witnessed in various communities where I have served. If you have had this or similar experiences then you may understand why I felt called to examine more closely a way in which the church could overcome territorial claims and focus on the larger vision of making disciples of Jesus Christ. I hope to outline a model that will at least foster an environment that could lead to a cooperative effort to bring churches and communities together for the common good. There will be many benefits, but our identified benefit for the community is a more loving and better connected community. The benefit to the church is the Christian example of uniting as Christians to build a better community while witnessing Jesus Christ by our actions.

The churches and community working together for positive change can and will make a difference in the lives of people. It will impact the community and lead them to a closer and more meaningful relationship with one another. It will give the church an opportunity to live out her faith within community and it will foster a more loving environment conducive for change.

This project began as a concept to show that in the rural setting where there are many different factors that lead to both positive and negative influences for building and rebuilding community. In the book of Nehemiah, he noticed that his homeland was in ruin and the ancient wall of protection had been destroyed. This gave way to outsiders invading, and keeping the people at a disadvantage wondering when the next attack would come. This burning desire is why Nehemiah had to see his community restored whole again is the kind of desire many who have watched the decay of their neighborhoods experience in various settings today. I am convinced that just because there may be a lack of presence in the various rural settings of some physical resources, there are still “people” resources. That is exactly what we expect to find as a result of finding a good place to start. The St Thomas Charge, consisting of three United Methodist churches are located within ten miles on the same road. It made sense to the people to have these churches in this community many years ago when walking was their means to attend church worship. These three churches as well as some of the other churches of the community found themselves in a place of changing times. Although they never referred to it as church planting that is exactly what happened. This led to changes which matched the changing environment.

This community is now in the midst of changing times and exploring new ways of being effective in ministry is critical. I have considered introducing our churches to some of the basics of cooperative ministry. This approach offers some things that are familiar with a focus on shared outreach mission oriented ministry. My experience with a cooperative parish has helped form this idea but there are other resources which make cooperative parish ministry worth discussing. The concept of cooperative ministry has

been implemented in large cities, urban areas and in some rural settings. I know of it through the United Methodist Church. However, the idea of cooperative ministry transcends denominational lines. In the United Methodist Church cooperative ministry helps churches move beyond survival to develop ministries of community outreach. Cooperative ministry has been a grass roots movement lead by a constituency committed to this as a valid style for ministry. It has been defined in various ways. Jerry Chapman writes an article entitled “Cooperative Ministry: A Tool Dealing With Today’s Critical Issues,” in a Resource Notebook for Cooperative Parish Ministry. In this article he defines cooperative ministry, its purpose and what it helps to be and do. “In its simplest form, cooperative ministry exists wherever two or more congregations come together to share some part of their ministry. The purpose of cooperative ministry is to do things together that could not be done alone, and to do together those things that can be done better together than if they were done separately.”<sup>3</sup>

Our 2012 United Methodist Book of Discipline offers the following statement and guidelines regarding Cooperative ministry. “Local churches with the guidance of the Holy Spirit may enhance their witness to one another and to the world by showing forth the love of Jesus Christ through forms of mutual cooperation. Annual conferences shall implement a process of cooperative parish development through which cooperative parish ministries are initiated and developed in both urban, town, and country situations. The discipline further describes the various forms of cooperative ministries recognized at this time in the denomination. While this project is not designed to establish a cooperative parish it could lead to that end. The enlarged charge form of cooperative which states that

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<sup>3</sup>Harold McSwain, ed., *Resource Notebook for Cooperative Parish Ministry*, (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1997) 4-9.

two or more local churches usually of the same charge and of relatively equal size that work as a unit with the leadership of one or more pastors. There may be a charge council and appropriate committees.<sup>4</sup>

In the Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist, there has been a working definition of cooperative parish ministry. I am including it here so that the connection between our attempt to form this cooperative outreach initiative and a possible future exploration of cooperative parish ministry would seem to be a natural progression. This working definition for cooperative ministry was developed by the Cooperative Ministry Task Force and written by Don Nations. A working definition: A parish consists of the “people” groups and communities that are significantly impacted by the ministries of a particular pastor, church staff, church (congregation) or churches. These people groups and/or communities are their intentional focus of ministry and are so identified for the purpose of increasing the number of disciples of Jesus in a manner that is loving, just and inclusive.

Implications of the working definition:

1. Two churches next to each other could serve two different parishes if the focus of their ministries differed substantially.
2. Neighboring churches can (should) be viewed as serving in cooperation instead of being in competition.
3. Churches that share a common focus of ministry may best be served by working together in a cooperative parish setting – even if they are not geographically contiguous.
4. The question could plausibly be asked, "How many churches lack a clear ministry focus and an impact on their community and, hence, are not really functioning as a parish"?

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<sup>4</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.) *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2012) 144-147.

5. If a church (or a group of churches) is not a parish due to a lack of an identified ministry focus and an intentional outreach effort, should they receive the appointment of a full-time Elder? If not, what kind of appointment would be most appropriate?
6. Clergy and laity will need to be trained in how to identify a ministry focus and engage it in a manner consistent with Christian stewardship and integrity.
7. "The world is my parish" (Theologian John Wesley's phrase meaning wherever he finds himself he will proclaim the salvation of Jesus Christ), would be seen as a clarion call to live out ministry in such a way (and with incredible vitality) that the impact of the ministry of a pastor, church staff, church or churches is felt around the world as transformed people encounter others, lead them into a transformative experience with Jesus and they repeat the process over and over again.
8. Churches will not be "clones" of each other due to the embracing of differing ministry foci. Each church could become more different in the particulars of its ministry yet more similar in the commitment to be a vibrant faith community.
9. The making of appointments could be impacted as it will become ever more important to match the skills and ministry focus of pastors with that of the faith congregation to which they are assigned.
10. The current guideline of not starting a new faith community within five miles of an existing United Methodist church is shown to be an old wineskin. If the focus of ministry of the new faith community is significantly different from that of the nearby existing church, then there are few valid reasons to retain the current guideline.

This conversation concerning cooperative parish makes this project even more needed even more in our setting. A successful ministry launch could further prove how we could expand this outreach ministry and keep congregations engaged in vital ministry beyond the walls of the church. Establishing our intentional focus on ministry and identifying the shared interest and common goal of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, increases the effectiveness of a shared ministry. It is this shared focused that fosters the growth in the relationship of the participating congregations that make this project a practical step toward developing a ministry of churches with shared interest for a particular setting. It is very possible that this model could be used to expand into an ecumenical initiative that helps develop a ministry that

leads people to a relationship with Jesus Christ first and into membership into the body of Christ second.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church (U.S.), *Cooperative Parish Ministry*, [www.flumc.org/cooperative\\_parish](http://www.flumc.org/cooperative_parish) (accessed December 4, 2013).

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THE FOUNDATION**

The St. Thomas Charge churches have experienced change that has led them to focus on their own goals and objectives as individual congregations, and sometimes, the needs of the community suffered. The churches were not alone in this change of focus. The community had several initiatives by different new organizations that began working for improving what they thought was important in the name of improving the community. I believe that examples of communicating with the people of these various churches and of the community as a whole will be a good place to start. I see our charge as a mirror of our community for the most part. We have to begin by addressing some of our opportunities to build community. This program provides an opportunity to open conversation by focusing on a common interest.

I believe that establishing a joint venture to improve the lives of others by meeting them where they are, we can draw attention to the model Jesus set forth, when he called his disciples, Peter, James and John to drop their nets and follow him. The ministry opportunity I chose is to utilize a food distribution as a way of drawing people into a working atmosphere and to serve others. This in and of itself is a blessing, but it would also create an environment that would give opportunity to witness by doing, and to share important information about assistance with spiritual, physical, and mental wellbeing.

Walter Brueggemann in his book *The Prophetic Imagination* speaks of a concept that I believe is relevant for us in examining the possibilities of this project. He writes about the hope-filled language of prophecy as a language of amazement. “A language that engages community in new discernments and celebrations just when it had nearly given up and had nothing to celebrate.”<sup>1</sup> The St. Thomas Charge has much to celebrate when pointing to the past. Currently a celebration of gifts and graces would be appropriate but these gifts and graces have waxed cold in light of the reflections of past accomplishments. I have seen this in other ministry settings as well and reviving, restoring and even creating new opportunities is one of the ways this model of ministry can breathe new life into this collaborative effort.

So then how is this project to accomplish this objective? Let’s start by identifying some of the challenges that will be addressed. First, we are faced with overcoming some historical or preconceived ideas that this ministry should focus on the members rather than the community. Second, we live in a community where there are several organizations who want to see a better community and yet there is poor communication between them. Third, this poor communication has fostered disunity. There are churches that work hard to bring about positive changes. Perhaps you have watched as persons become burned out from giving so much time and energy to good causes, it happens more often than not. My observation has helped me to realize that many of these persons have a passion to serve and are committed to making a positive difference in their communities. Why is this so difficult? It seems that there are often years of practices that have been passed down for generations that lead to some of the individualism.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 67.



The impact of the previous efforts is not fully realized because of some of the walls of division. In order to begin a process to expand the effectiveness of the positive efforts being made by those who have committed themselves, so there has to be some truth spoken to the situation. Questions must be answered relating to the barriers of communication that exist. The missional code referred to previously has to be acknowledged. It may not all be pleasing to hear. Identifying these questions and answers may take time but some of the work has been done during the first few years of my appointment to the St. Thomas Charge. My narrative of concern after listening to many stories of our charge and community is related to the rapid changing community and how to prepare for the expected growth when there is fragmentation. It is obvious to me that there will be some adjustments and I would like to do all I can to encourage unity which would make for a more welcoming community. In his book, *New Wine New Wineskins*, F. Douglas Powe Jr. writes about how African American congregations can reach new generations. Powe describes the new wine and the efforts congregations should make to become missional congregations. "New wine represents the new mindset that is needed to rethink evangelistic practices."

Missional congregations must impact the community through intentional witnessing. He identifies three things as a part of this effort. Missional congregations must invite others to participate by extending hospitality. Missional congregations must ignite a flame in individuals to become connected to God. Missional congregations must be willing to be transformed by the Holy Spirit, praying to God every step of the way. This is a new mindset in the sense that we should be willing to reinterpret these ideas for the post-civil-rights generations who have a different cultural context. Powe also says

that one of the toughest challenges for all congregations is figuring out how to reach out. Inward focused congregations will not reach out naturally and I would add that this will likely be uncomfortable.<sup>2</sup>

We are in a time of rapid change within our community. I am concerned about how our congregation can be better prepared to reach a changing and growing community as persons of different traditions move in. A reflection upon the passage in Luke 5: 36-39 describes some of the challenges we face within our community. There is an old song that asks the question what's the Matter Now? (The verses then state, "we don't pray like we used to pray, we don't sing like used to sing, we don't preach like we use to preach, tell me, what's the matter now"? Traditions were being challenged. Jesus was addressing the Pharisees and scribes who had raised their own questions to challenge Jesus and his practices of healing and more specifically that of eating with the tax collector. They too wanted to know, what's the matter now? They felt that he was violating traditions that had been passed down for generations. Jesus represented change and he was bringing many into his following as his ministry grew from place to place. It seems that today the church is faced with the reality that what we have been doing lately is not working effectively. It was not the basic practices of our faith such as praying, studying the word of God or even fasting that has lead us to be challenged, rather it may be work that we have left undone down through the years. When Jesus was questioned about his actions he told this parable the second of two he told that day. "No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and

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<sup>2</sup>Douglas F. Powe Jr., *New Wine New Wineskins* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012) xi-xix.

will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.”<sup>3</sup>

His words speaks to us today. We spend a lot of time and energy doing the same things that we always have done in many instances. We gave a dollar or nothing when we were young and we give at the same level now. We wanted to be in charge, and have our way, and think that our way was the only way, and sometimes we think that now. We were afraid of change and challenge for years and we are afraid of change and challenge now. We are faced however with some new realities in the life of the church. We have generations who are distancing themselves from the church and we have many who don't know the Bible stories. We are faced with the urgency that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., described it as an “urgency of now”! And yet we find the Pharisees and scribes mentality alive and well in the church today.

What's the matter now? New technologies, new challenges, same message, but as Jesus met people where they were; we the church are being called to follow his model. His parable helped them to relate for in that day wineskins, which some say were made out of goats skin would shrink over time. New wine must be put into new skins as the skins shrink and the new wine gets old they will both adjust together. We have some new wine in our new generations in this day. We have social concerns that require us to be faithful to our call to meet people where they are. The doors of the church are open but this does not mean that people are coming in. New wine has to be put into new wineskins. We have to take the church to the people. Sometimes we will have to worship other than the traditional times. Sometimes we will have to leave the comfort of the sanctuary in order to reach and meet people where they are. Sometimes we will need to

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 5:36-39 (NRSV).

confront the social pressures of this world and stand on the good news of Jesus Christ and his love.

The old wineskins may have rejected the outcast but the new wine of acceptance should replace it as we are reminded of Jesus' extended grace. The old wine of criticism for all who did not fit the traditional mold as a Christian is faced with the new wineskins that make room and continue to teach the basic truths of Jesus. "The old wineskins may represent the Old Testament tradition of labeling folk as outsiders. The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the spirit of new wineskins says, "come unto me all of you who are burdened down and heavy laden."<sup>4</sup> There will be those who will challenge us and our ways but Jesus reminds us that those who are not against us are for us. We have to take a look at ourselves and prayerfully discern whether we have become too much like the Pharisees and the Scribes, by being set in our ways and attempting to use tradition as a way of justifying our actions.

I submit to you today as Jesus did so long ago, new wine must be put in new wineskins. A new thing is springing forth, don't you perceive it? The Lord has called us just as he called Abraham in /Genesis 12:1 "go to a land that I will you," and so, we also must prepare for what lies ahead. The new wine will require new wineskins of transformation that Jesus may be glorified. The Pharisees mentality has us so comfortable with our freedoms that we sometimes forget to look at the struggles of others. It has us ignoring those whom we have separated ourselves from, it has us pushing people away rather than welcoming them in. Let us embrace the last, the least and the lost for that is the model that Jesus set before the church then and the church today."<sup>5</sup> A cooperative

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<sup>4</sup> Matt. 11:28 (NKJV).

outreach ministry, which brings people together to live out their faith in Christian service, is needed to feed the body and also the spirit. There has been a sense of rejection experienced over time because our area is on the periphery of our county geographically and by most accounts also socially. Many have felt that we have been the last to be considered for things that would benefit the county. This is the predominant mindset of those that I have seen as well. The major concern is that our community is not overlooked as the area grows and changes because of the growth. There is concern about the fragmented relationships in the community and the rest of the concerns are around resources facilities and sidewalks. The residents have also made it clear that the seniors and the youth and children have unmet needs which we should work together to address. These are community related concerns and they have been raised by many members of the church. Assessing and reviewing these concerns are important for the strength of this project. Keeping these concerns in mind, this project must find common ground for a successful launch. The Nourishment and Strength Ministry meets this requirement. This is a ministry established based on the common interest of supplemental food distributions and community concerns. It uses the food distributions as a way of offering supplemental food and sharing information related to community concerns with handouts and special events done in conjunction with the distributions. It brings our community together and creates opportunities to share valuable information regarding community interest. I believe that Nourishment and Strength Ministries accomplishes this unity in the community. This ministry's focus is well received by our community.

We have to identify common goals and interest. We must pose and answer the question for all involved, "what's in it for me?" This question may be unspoken, but our

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Love, "Old Wine New Wineskins," Sermon, Charleston, SC, November 2013.

reality is that people expect to know what benefit they will receive for their effort. It is a critical question that must be answered. We will want to evaluate the benefit over against the investment. The benefit will have to outweigh the investment. This project idea is based on the above stated conditions, and the premise that finding what is important to the community and churches and focusing on this will give the foundation needed to build bridges of hope and re-establish relationships that have been strained or non-existent.

Ministry in the rural context has some lessons for ministry everywhere. The context I will use for this project is located in Huger, SC. The geographical location is at the county line just inside Berkeley County and bordering Charleston County. I am currently serving as pastor of the St. Thomas Charge of the United Methodist Church. The St. Thomas Charge consists of three churches in rural South Carolina. These churches have a combined membership of over 1100 people. They are located in ten-mile stretch on the same highway. We are in a stage of healing from some of the experiences of the past. The churches have been spotlighted in our denomination for their unique worship style and for several years of vital ministry. The first year was what I considered to be a year of healing, but also a year of renewal. I recognized that it would be great to limit the healing process to one year, however this has not been the case. There have been continued reasons to be sensitive to the deep hurt that was experienced during this time. We are repositioning for better opportunities for growth and development. My recent years in ministry have led me down a path of reflection on my role as pastor and leader. While I have witnessed firsthand how engaging in Christian mission has helped

congregations discover a sense of identity and purpose, now is a time of re-engaging our churches with intentional mission outreach.

Bill Easum writes about congregations as being stuck or unstuck conditions. He makes the following points: Faithful congregations follow Jesus into the mission field to make disciples who make a difference in the world. Jesus commanded his disciples to “Go make disciples of all nations”<sup>6</sup> describing the heart and soul of any authentic Christian community of faith because it is Jesus’ Last Will and Testament. Faithful congregations intentionally go out from the congregational post to make disciples; congregations that omit this purpose are unfaithful. No individual, congregation, or denomination is excused from this mandate, because disciple-making away and our congregations have no justification of existence.”<sup>7</sup>

The idea of saving our institutions, our churches, our traditions in many cases override our commitment to living out the Gospel before others. John Wesley is quoted in Rob Weber’s *Reconnecting Study* with words that place emphasis on what was an existing condition of the church then and still today. In a section title “What makes a Christian? Wesley responds with these words.

“In these [places], every branch of Christianity is openly and largely declared; and thousands upon thousands continually hear and receive “the truth as it is in Jesus.” Why it is then that even in these parts Christianity has had so little effect? Why are the generality of people, in all these places, Heathens still? No better than the heathens of Africa or America, either in their tempers or in their saying among the Christians in the primitive Church. “The soul and the body make a man, the spirit and discipline make a Christian;” implying, that none could be real Christians, without the help of Christian discipline. But if this be so, is it any wonder that we find so few Christians; for where is Christian discipline? In what part of England (to go no farther) is Christian discipline added to Christian doctrine? Now,

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:19.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Easum, *Unfreezing Moves: Following Jesus Into the Mission Field* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 10-25.

whatever doctrine is preached, where there is not discipline, it cannot have its full effect upon the hearers.<sup>8</sup>

One of Wesley's points in this passage is that the Church has ceased to be all that she should or could be because of the lack of Spirit and discipline. Perhaps that is where we need to focus as a charge and community. Inviting and embracing the Spirit and discipline that makes being Christian vital and gives the church the power needed to fulfill her purpose.

It overrides our faithfulness and yet our call as Christians is to be with Jesus and to allow Jesus to lead us everywhere we go including out on the mission field. Sometimes the challenges of being faithful can lead us to stuck places. We can become frozen in place. I recall as a child playing the game that whenever you were tagged you had to freeze in position and when given the opportunity one of your teammates could tag you again and you could become unfrozen. It seems that sometimes we need our church to be tagged so that we are unfrozen. Too many times we are frozen and we are stuck in place. Stuck places in relationships, stuck places in mission and ministry. The one thing that still remains true about being stuck is that we do not have to stay in a stuck position.

I think that there is a sense of urgency as I lead this charge into the mission field in a time of reflection on the past and charting our path for the future. Giving consideration and thought to church growth and congregational development as it relates to community participation and involvement as an important aspect of understanding our mission field. It has affirmed my belief in the importance of building community as an effective means of building congregations. The words of Carlos F. Cordoza-Orlandi *Mission: An Essential Guide*, which speaks of mission as one of the unpopular terms,

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<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, "*Causes of the Inefficacy of Christianity*," Sermon no. 116, 1872, *gbgm-umc.org*. <http://new.gb-gm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/116/> (accessed November 4, 2013).



used today. It has many different connotations and is sometimes misunderstood. "Mission" has become, for many North American Christians, an ambiguous and often uncomfortable term. To many it brings to mind a past in which western culture was identified with the gospel in missionary practice and programs. Distressed with this history and uncertain about how to overcome it, many prefer to ignore the New Testament mandate that the church must be in mission if it is to be the church. Others swing the other way, declaring that everything the church does is mission, depriving the idea of mission of its power to define those specific actions of God which proclaim the gospel and build God's kingdom. "The church exists by missions, just as fire exists by burning." With these words of Emil Brunner, the author reminds us that to be the church is to be in mission. After describing the various "captivities of mission" which plague North American Christianity, the author argues for a robust and engaged practice of mission, beginning in congregations and extending to the broader community.<sup>9</sup>

In the past year I saw firsthand the benefits of walking with my congregation and leading them into God's vision for the church as revealed after much prayer and meditation. All things considered I have come to realize that there is still a tension between my vision for the church and God's vision. I am suggesting that it is not always as clear as it sounds in discerning God's will for the future of the churches I am serving and my personal preferences. The decisions I make as a leader are reflected within the congregation and set the tone for the future of the church. When I step back and acknowledge the great responsibility that falls on the pastor and other leadership it is humbling.

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<sup>9</sup>Carlos F Cordoza-Orlandi, *Mission: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 19-37.

We discussed the importance of building community before building congregations in our class. I would agree that this is critical and have taken this approach in my current ministry setting. I interpret this as building relationship, building trust, building or casting vision and walking together in God's divine path. The temptation sometimes is to focus on the end result without realizing the time that must be given to building community in this way. Fifteen months after moving to serve these congregations I have sensed that my relationship with the congregations now is stronger because of taking time to build community. Koinonia defined by Thayer and Smith, meaning fellowship, association, community, communion, and joint participation.<sup>10</sup> Koinonia, as discussed in class gave a deeper understanding and picture of how this is applied. "Something in the fellowship happens when there is a sacrifice and authentic common life in which people gather joyful presence of the Holy Spirit sharing and caring inspired by the event story of Jesus Christ."<sup>11</sup> Practicing Koinonia helps congregations claim and live more fully into their identity as they re-imagine themselves. The Spirit gives the gift of being as well as doing. We can get so focused on doing that we negate the importance of being. Psalm 46 says "Be still and know that I am God." This verse reminds me of the importance of being and I believe it comes before doing. I am referring to being the persons we are created to be. Building community for the leader will mean responding to persons looking for a place to belong, a place to feel at home. It answers the questions of "How did we get here? What are we doing well? It means getting to know one another.

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<sup>10</sup> Thayer and Smith, "Greek Lexicon entry for Koinonia" in *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon*, 1999, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/koinonia.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Drew University DMin Program CONCD 903 Class discussion, Session I.

The book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, written by Diana Butler Bass, highlighted success stories of congregations which are vital and making a positive difference in their respective places. One of the significant insights is that people follow leadership. In reflecting on the various congregations it seemed that the pulse of the leadership set the pulse of the congregations. The stories revealed the people of God responding to being the church in their setting or context. She makes clear that while our times change, it is the churches that are willing to be transformed and open to change. Discovering a new identity that seems to lead to congregations that are effective in ministry. It seems that the success stories have recognized the changes around them and were willing to adapt their focus to reflect change by making a connection to the needs surrounding their community of faith.

I think that the need to develop leadership must be met as a priority in creating congregations where people are loved and witness the love of Christ lived out in community. I believe that building community helps us build strength among congregations. I have been working diligently with the churches of the St. Thomas Charge to accomplish this end. Our leadership trainings have been focused on basic Christian responsibilities. I know that there are challenges to leading people to and through change. I believe, however, this becomes possible as we offer new experiences that introduce persons to new realities. Neighborhood churches have to overcome the way it has always been and explore how it can become. Some of these challenges are anger, resentment and the need to know the outcome before stretching or stepping into something new and transforming. Dr. Michael Christensen speaks about idolizing the text and how we need to realize that there is breath in the text. I understand that to mean that

we can sometimes focus on Scripture as words and overlook the life that is present. We should consider this life in leading our neighborhood church, which sometimes grows complacent, to a place of renewal and transformation, especially in the face of the challenges that present themselves.

The characteristics of the neighborhood church and the rural family churches have some similarities. Sometimes we get stuck in a place of complacency because it is “the way we have always done it.” Sometimes the tenure of leadership because it often reflects the position of a particular family, the focus shifts from what is best for the congregation to what is best for the family. One of the observations I have made is that people will drive for miles to attend worship and are not available to participate in weekly studies or ministries which require their being physically present in the community. This raises the issue of defining the community. Listening to our discussion around community opened my eyes to the possibility and importance of focusing on the overall goal of making disciples individually as members, congregations, and in partnership with others who have the same goal. The Christian church is faced with many challenges, and we do not need to create or support barriers to our mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ. However, often with all of our energies working independently of one another sometimes this is exactly what happens. The dynamics vary but it does not erase our responsibility to discover and live into the *mission dei*, or the mission of God.

We have explored examples of churches effective in ministry in Diana Butler Bass’ book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. She identifies ten signposts of renewal and offers examples of how this looks in our religious climate today. I have realized that I agree to some extent on most of her assessments of the neighborhood church. I would

add that perhaps there are many similarities with all congregations. Also some of the distinct differences that stand out in my mind are that in the African American tradition in rural communities where I have served, we find a loyalty to the church based on family connections, and traditions. This loyalty will keep persons on membership roles for many years, and the church will justify it as long as some financial contribution is being made. It seems in my current setting, names on the role really are about preserving a right to be buried in the church cemetery. Beyond this opportunity there is some resistance to following procedure for engaging inactive members and reconnecting them to the church or asking them for a commitment based on membership vows. There is much to be done in the area of evangelism. In addition to the challenges neighborhood churches face, there is also the observations from Bass' visits to mainline churches I would like to expand upon.

Bass suggested that weaving the traditional forms of religious life with the spiritual quest that people have can lead to transformed lives individually and in mainline congregations.<sup>12</sup> I think that she effectively identifies signposts to help congregations find vital ministry, and discover new levels of effectively making disciples of Jesus Christ. The fact that there are varieties of cultural influences that may make transformation difficult in some settings does not make it impossible or even improbable. I agree that we will need to see ourselves as pilgrims on a journey building Christian community that reaches beyond the walls of the church, and is inclusive of fellow travelers.

Change will come and as in some congregations' failure to adapt can lead to death and the other side of that reality is that adaptation can lead to new life. In the face of change and challenge, I left thinking about how we must always infuse hope in order for

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<sup>12</sup>Dianna Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983) 45.

renewal to follow. When there is no vision there is no hope and we must lift up life that is offered through the Scriptures and relationship with the living water, who is Jesus Christ. Our discussion in one of the sub groups reflecting on Dr. Michael J. Christensen's book *Equipping the Saints, Mobilizing Laity for Ministry*, in a section titled "Three Streams One River," reveals a way of reminding all of us of the source of all of our hope. Christensen says, "What I envision for the *Next Church* is one order of Christians with a threefold ministry of the baptized. The three streams of ministry in the one river of God, I believe are community, worship and mission.<sup>13</sup> He explains that the people of God swim in this river without being confined by any particular stream but as a part of the river may swim any given stream. This image seems to reflect the life in the passage recorded in Psalm 46:4 "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God." I have received some very positive responses from this understanding. I accept that we must explore our source, and be open to the unlimited possibilities for church growth and development. We need to respond to God breathing on us as we serve in a way that re-ignites the spark that is within us.

Strategies which stand out in my mind that would probably not be effective in my context, relate to church planting, house church, and merger at this point. The make-up of our congregations is rural and family oriented and there has been hesitation about changing. However, I see a shift as we explore ways to reach the un-churched and de-churched of our community and the inactive members of our congregations. A class leader system which is now being revitalized to serve as means of helping the membership connect and reconnect with the life of the church is repositioning us to

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<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Christensen with Carl E. Savage, *Equipping The Saints Mobilizing Laity for Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008) 47-61.

become more intentional about mission. It is in this light, that I believe some effective strategies forward would be consideration of cooperative parish ministry, in which we partner with other churches to make disciples. We have some growing edge as it relates to hospitality and evangelism in the church which would be great places to start mission re-education and ministries.

Ed Stezer and David Putnam speak to some of the strategies used today in *Breaking the Missional Code*.<sup>14</sup> I do not think that we would be successful duplicating other success stories in other areas without first identifying the processes and strategies which would work based on our culture and unique qualities. I have identified these strategies because of the high level of respect given to the position of the pastor, and the fact that people of this faith community respond to invitations and guidance given from the pastor. Once, I asked the congregations to come together to worship in an alternate worship experience on the outside. This was not something they were familiar with and at a location belonging to one of the congregations. However they responded very well and continue to celebrate the experience all because they were willing to participate at the pastor's request. Although potential merger is not a part of their conversations, there is a growing willingness to meet some of the community needs in partnership with other churches.

When I completed my first semester in this program, I had a sense of a spiritual combustion that has taken the spark of commitment and service, and led to a burning flame of desire to build community and renew life in the local church while inspired to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. The metaphor of fire and water are often seen in

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<sup>14</sup> David Putnam and Ed Setzer. *Breaking the Missional Code* (Nashville: Broadman and Holeman, 2006), 108-119.

contrast to one another, however, I see them as powerful partners in casting a new vision that comes from God. A vision of hope and a vision of transforming power and love

The St. Thomas Charge, like many churches, has had some great days of effective ministry. Sometimes it seems that the salt has lost its saltiness. Reclaiming the flavor and overcoming the hurt of their experience is beginning to take place as we seek out and reflect upon God's vision for the Church. Living as the light of the world and claiming it for our future. Realizing the needs of those around us and engaging in the great responsibility to go out is helping us discover God's vision for ourselves and our church. We still face the challenge of addressing our willingness to change our authentic worship, and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

I believe our common desires will be the driving force to build a stronger ministry within our community. Nourishment and Strength Ministries will be one model which can provide this opportunity. This ministry is designed to serve the people of the Huger community. It is also designed to build and renew community partnerships beginning with the churches of the St. Thomas Charge. History seems to teach us that we work together in response to crisis. In our area, Hurricane Hugo was a prime example. People, friends, neighbors and strangers alike, worked together so that everyone would be able to recover from the devastation of that storm as soon as possible. New ministries emerged in light of the destruction. We discovered that although the loss of physical property, damage and relocation of some families was devastating. The coming together and genuine concern extended to one another was a blessing.

Nourishment and Strength Ministries offers new opportunities for this unity to be built around community outreach. So why this ministry and why now? In the few years



that I have been in this community, I have noticed that there is missing a catalyst for a ministry that brings the community together. This is missing in the larger community and specifically, this is missing in the churches of the St. Thomas charge. There seems to have been a breakdown or something that has the focus on ministry limited to within the walls of the church. I found resistance when attempting to share ideas that would be joint experiences for our youth and children as well as joint worship experiences that focused on a united body of believers working together. I was also aware of my background or experience of leading a congregation through a merger had also permeated the minds of some of the members. The fact that I was told that some thought that my being there meant that I had an ulterior motive to merge the churches. I could understand some reservations as I pushed in the direction of joint studies, ministries and efforts that seemed to me to be rational as the pastor of three churches. Some of the concerns have now been laid to rest at least for a season.

So why this ministry now? In keeping with the vision of making disciples of Jesus Christ, I believe that we have to find ways to move our study, our lessons learned in church school and bible study to practical mission outreach. The common denominator for all of the churches is that in this community there are persons on both ends of the financial social status. Some who have the big house and had large incomes are struggling to make ends meet as much as those who never had those high incomes. Why this ministry? This seems to be a ministry that proved to be of interest to members in the three churches. It was something that we all could identify with at some level and it offered a much needed relief to many. I believe that in order for churches and

communities to effectively work together everyone has to find something that is in it for them.

As noted earlier, the question often unasked or overlooked when conversations began related to joint ministries or ventures is “what’s in it for me? “This outreach project answers that question by providing opportunity for everyone involved to be represented, and to be served. It is connected to our mission of making disciples as it puts into action the lessons taught by Jesus Christ of meeting people at their level of need. I believe this is also a critical time to raise our awareness to our role of serving others through our local mission efforts. The vision of this ministry is to serve the physical need of food by offering an outreach that feeds physical body, while providing information that also helps sustain our mental and social wellbeing. It is designed in a way that will keep people coming while offering support and directing them to other resources for better living and lifestyles. It is not intended to be a primary evangelistic tool and yet it will lift up this as a ministry of Christian outreach within the community.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

Nourishment and Strength Ministries by name indicates that there is a biblical foundation grounded in the understanding that we are our brothers' and our sisters' keepers. The Scriptures which reflect Jesus as provider and his feeding of the multitudes also point to the solid foundation of this ministry. I also want us to consider the responsibility that the Scriptures lift up as ours individually and collectively as followers of Christ. Some of my personal reflections are the songs that were sung at my home church, Cedar Grove United Methodist Church, while growing up during the sixties and seventies. The Lord's Prayer as a model was often the way my father and grandfather would close the prayers for the people. Even in their prayers they reminded the hearer of the things in which we lacked and how much we needed God to provide for us. Many times their prayers would begin "Almighty and all wise God it is again that we come before you in a spiritual manner. We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done. We are just an empty picture before a full fountain. Forgive us we pray."

They would continue praying to be more loving and then they would make their petition known. That taught me that the scriptures had spoken to them in a powerful way. They were intent on living out the word of God before others. We can learn much from

the history of those who loved God and have been called to eternal rest. Many of them were committed to becoming the change that they sought in Jesus Christ. Our daily prayer before meals would include “Lord make us most humble and thankful for the food we are about to receive for the nourishment and strength of our bodies for Christ’s sake, Amen.” It was while preparing to eat one day and thinking about this ministry that this prayer stuck with me as one that connected very well with this project. I was sure that this would be an appropriate name for the project. It captured what I envisioned as a ministry of cooperation undergirded by prayer and one that would include a ministry for the whole person. Nourishment meant more than just the physical nourishment, it extended to the spiritual wellbeing, and this is what I heard even as I prayed this prayer.

Brueggemann identifies three images that are the result of history being inverted. While writing of the Israelites in exile he describes the new song as the first image. New song time is defined as the time when a new covenant inaugurates a new reality. The second image is birth to the barren one. In this case barrenness is likened to hopelessness and despair; a future that is lost is inverted to a new future of hope. The third image is that of nourishment, in this context, Brueggemann says that while those who eat the bread of Babylon would be destroyed and the Israelites who are exiles will not accommodate this imperial bread. So he points to Isaiah’s statement of alternative bread:

Ho everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your life may live; and I will make with you and everlasting covenant, my steadfast sure love for David.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Is. 55:1-3 as quoted by Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2001) 74-77.

In this passage the prophet points to the true bread that sustains us not only physically but spiritually as well and this is the concept that is the basis of Nourishment and Strength Ministries. It will create an opportunity that extends beyond the physical. Nourishment for the needs that may have been lost in the immediate need for food. Nourishment in the sense of being provided for, with information that leads to a more productive life because of more opportunities to overcome some of the hurdles or obstacles encountered by life circumstances.

The anchors of the church, the matriarch and patriarchs who walked before us were committed to allowing the relationship they had with God and Jesus Christ to be a visible light that is put on a candle stick to be seen by others. This was not for their glory, but rather that God may be glorified. They experienced this as an urgency, much like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described when he wrote.

This call for a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one's tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men . . . When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John:

Let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. If we love one another God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day. We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate.

We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked and dejected with a lost opportunity. The “tide in the affairs of men” does not remain at the flood; it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residue of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: “Too late.” There is an invisible book of life that faithfully records our vigilance or our neglect. “The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on...” We still have a choice today; nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation.

We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace . . . and justice throughout the developing world — a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act we shall surely be dragged down the long dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter – but beautiful — struggle for a new world. This is the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full men, and we send our deepest regrets? Or will there be another message, of longing, of hope, of solidarity with their yearnings, of commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise we must choose in this crucial moment of human history Amen.<sup>2</sup>

In Ephesians chapter four, we have in Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus a word urging the church to live a life worthy of our calling. It is also a call to unity and to responsibility in which the people are admonished to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. In verses 11-13 the New Revised Standard translation records it this way:

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” sermon, Riverside Church, New York, April 4, 1967 as quoted by Diana Butler Bass, “Martin Luther King Jr. Fierce Urgency of Now” in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/christianityfortherestofus/2011/01/martin-luther-king-jr-fierce-urgency-of-now.html#ixzz21YOMrsxh> (accessed November 24, 2013).

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

These are gifts which launch laity into their ministries. Why did the writer place the gifts in this order? Bishop Roy I Sano offers this suggestion in the Cooperative Parish Resource Notebook. “If we are to be authentic evangelists, we must first be apostles and prophets. Apostles are sent forth into the world. The gift of being an apostle sends us out to touch and to be in touch with the world, even when the sights or senses are terrifying. The gift of prophecy used by the apostles clarifies what we are to do once we see what God is doing in the course of events.”<sup>4</sup>

The prophetic message announces the end of the old and the promise of a new future. Evangelist as the third gift Christ gives the church helps guide persons in their decision for a new future filled with hope. Through prophetic evangelism people see God’s reign pressing into their lives and their churches and as evangelist we must invite them to turn from the old to God’s New Creation. The gift of pastors and teachers is appropriately listed here. Once people decide to join God and other Christians as they enter into the Church’s community of believers, and grow in their commitment to the words of promise they have shared. They are empowered through the testimonies of word and deed to become better witnesses of the gracious God. Pastors and teachers are gifts for equipping the saints for the work of ministry. Cooperative parish ministry needs to see our ministry in light of other ligaments or connections, which we can activate at the

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<sup>3</sup> Eph. 4:11-13 (NRSV).

<sup>4</sup> Roy I. Sano, in Harold McSwain, ed., *Resource Notebook for Cooperative Parish Ministry*, (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1997).

appropriate points in time for God's ministry.<sup>5</sup> The biblical foundation of cooperative ministry is the biblical foundation for ministry of the body of Christ.

So what is the urgency today? What is the urgency in this community and among the churches of the St. Thomas Charge? We still face the fact that we have a plentiful harvest and few laborers. We still have relationships that are broken among one another and therefore severed with Jesus Christ. We are still troubled by the hurts of the past and have not yet found our way forward in some circumstances. We still need to be the body of Christ in the fullest sense. The vision of a future is being revealed. We are the ones who are now responsible for how the story will develop. We are the ones that make up the change we seek. We are the ones with the responsibility to adapt to a changing community while bringing and keeping our community together. We are the one church, and God expects us to meet the challenges of this day and time. I believe that this common interest and common desire to help others is an example of how we can build bridges of hope and highways in the desert places in the lives of people. Outreach ministry, in any context provides an opportunity to bring the Word of God to life in practical ways. The theology of the rural setting brings its own set of unique challenges. Among those challenges are understanding the fact that rural communities are overlooked, and sometimes undervalued, which are realities that rest in the minds of rural residents as well as non-rural residents. The theological question that must be answered in our response is where is God in our actions? How do we live the word of God before others in a way that others may see our good works and glorify our Father in Heaven?

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<sup>5</sup> Harold McSwain, ed., *Resource Notebook for Cooperative Parish Ministry*, 27-41.



The rural ministry is built on what I will call a rural theology of community understood as the body of Christ. I have recently paid close attention to how in my rural context, I see an outpouring of support for neighbors as one hurts or goes through times of difficulty. Some of the concern for one another, which I observed growing up in the seventies are still visible and very prevalent in my rural setting. I liken the examples of caring and sharing to the examples set forth in the book of Acts in the third chapter. I believe that we have a unique opportunity to build upon this Christian value and create a strong and vital ministry of caring reflected in the book of Acts.

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 3: 32-35). All theology comes out of a particular community and context. This context might be the community of Luke-Acts... it might be the community of European and American intellectual life. It might be the African American community, or it just might be the Rural Community.<sup>6</sup>

In the rural context, the question of what God is doing here and now is relevant for understanding how to be in ministry within the rural setting. One of the common interest of our community is making sure that those who are hungry are fed. I believe that this is only a part of the common interest of a larger goal to make sure that the persons who are in highest need are not left out or left without. I am convinced that the change that we have been looking for is us. We can begin where we are by accepting our current roles as agents of change. Nourishment and Strength Ministries addresses our need to come together as the body of Christ and extend our hands together in to a community

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<sup>6</sup> Shannon Jung, *Rural Ministry the Shape of the Renewal To Come* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1998) 127.

where people are hurting, and where we need to accept our responsibility as it relates to meeting people at their level of need and understanding. Meeting people where they hurt and offering to be one vessel where their hurts can be comforted.

Even as I reference ministry in the rural context, I realize that respective communities have their unique qualities that make them who they are. I remember once describing my rural setting as “rural, rural”. When I said this it was my attempt to help the listener understand that this particular setting was faced with many negative challenges of a declining population growth, and our statistics reflected high numbers where we would desire low numbers, and low numbers where we would desire to have high numbers. The degree of rural or the descriptive terms of rural communities still have much to offer, and a need for unity within the community exists regardless of our descriptions. The biblical foundations for ministry in any setting are reflected in the one who saw all of creation as important, and so important that he was willing to die for all of our sins. Jesus Christ our Savior helps us to understand that rural communities have equal value and self-worth. It is this mindset that leads the St. Thomas Charge’s Nourishment and Strength Ministry to be a ministry that breathes life by extending beyond the surface of food distribution, to being concerned about meeting larger needs by pointing people in the directions of assistance they may need, and opportunities to strengthen individual and community life.

It was at our first official meeting of the lay advisory team that I shared the passage of Ephesians 5:1-2 “therefore be imitators of God as dearly loved children and live in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.” The message undergirds the essence of this outreach ministry.

Throughout the lives of many Christians the word of God has breathed life into situations that seemed to be lifeless. I have personally experienced how people informed by the word of God, have used songs to help interpret and explain cooperative ministry. It has been used to inspire persons to work together for common goals. These same relationships are strengthened to joint efforts and sometimes lead them to discover a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In our rural context, I am expecting God to move us so that we may accomplish the goal of building and renewing community life through this Christian ministry of outreach and cooperative ministry.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PROJECT PREPARATIONS**

The idea of developing a cooperative ministry project takes into consideration the changing dynamics facing many rural and small membership churches. The reality of many of our churches in rural settings is that the churches are declining in numbers, and it is affecting the morale and motivation of the congregations. In declining communities this is to be expected it is also true in communities where there is population growth. One of the realities of rural congregations is that many of them are family congregations in which the membership can be traced back to a few core family groups. Oftentimes the challenge of these congregations is that there are visible and invisible barriers for new members. There is sometimes the unspoken approvals that will be required for those who may be interested in joining. The mentality exists which says “you are welcome as long as you do not attempt to change us and the way we do things.”

Sometimes these barriers are less obvious and yet there is a sense of exclusion until invited into a closed family system. This sounds rather harsh, but most of my experience in these settings is that sometimes we do not realize how we have allowed our churches to become closed communities of faith. A test of this theory becomes evident when we ask our members about our church being a welcoming congregation and when we ask a first time visitor the same question. The surprise is that we often overlook our

growing edges, and we perceive ourselves very different to the way others receive us.

The idea of cooperative ministry has been around a long time and it is supported biblically. Some of the formal findings of cooperative ministry models have worked to bring leadership together and build cohesiveness, so that congregations in geographically close proximity could join together, pooling resources for a more vital ministry. I served in a cooperative parish ministry setting twelve years and served as director of this ministry for the last six of those years.

When this ministry started it was designed to help rural congregations with much needed access to resources that challenged the churches individually when it came to doing ministry. There was excitement about having cooperative to help effective ministry take place. It has been about forty-five years since this ministry began. The dynamics have changed and what began with a clear answer to the question of the churches, “what’s in it for me”? and is now one that is not as clear and one in which the congregations have questioned whether the answer still meets the needs or desires of the congregations. I served during a time when some of the congregations decided that it no longer answered that question in way that was enough to continue to participate. It appears that the transitioning cooperative ministry from a ministry that existed serving the people of the member churches to a ministry that challenge the member church’s to be in mission within the community. This ministry is still a vital ministry, but it is now a mission ministry of outreach. While it still offers some support and guidance to the individual churches, it is more focused on mission outreach. What has been true in the beginning and now, is that there is still more accomplished by working together than any of the churches could have done individually. Now this ministry, who for years yearned

for a physical location, has now acquired a home in one of the facilities which was owned by the merged congregations of the charge where I previously served. Outreach has taken on a new and expanded look now that there is a ministry base.

So what are the challenges of this ministry? The challenges that stood out in my mind was with the leadership which was appointed by our bishop and cabinet of district superintendents. Sometimes the appointments were pastors who did not support the concept of cooperative ministry. This sometimes led to ministry of the churches being isolated, and to the point of non-support of the cooperative ministry objectives. There was the challenge of territorialism. Some churches would support as long as they saw it serving needs in their communities. There was also the challenge of developing and maintaining financial support for the ministry of the cooperative without the churches feeling strained. I lift these up because many of these challenges must also be considered when building this cooperative outreach initiative. The opportunities we experienced outweighed the challenges. Opportunities to utilize the gifts of the pastoral leadership for additional local church trainings. The advantage of having support for colleagues in ministry as a team of pastors in a designated area. The advantage of learning from one another as pastors and members. The advantage of building relationships that helped develop models of ministries that could be duplicated and customized for our respective locations. I believe this model of cooperative ministry has much to offer rural communities that seek to build bridges of hope for a better future and a better community. We cannot ignore the challenges, but we can build upon the strengths of this ministry opportunity.

The St. Thomas Charge is also uniquely positioned in a community that is growing and projected to have significant growth over the next three to four years. I see the cooperative outreach ministry as an opportunity to establish community relationships that will be inviting for those who move into our community. The word of God lived out in community, will draw attention to the source of our strength in Jesus Christ. Currently we also need to strengthen relationship among the member churches of the St. Thomas Charge, and this ministry is one way in which this can be accomplished. I do not know what lies ahead for each of the churches. My history with my former assignment in which three congregations merged inform my leadership; However, I do not believe that we will have a repeat of that dynamic. These are very different congregations and I truly believe that each of the churches could thrive in another scenario. I envision our largest congregation becoming independent. I also envision our two other congregations having conversation about the next steps. I think that they may want to have dialogue about whether to become one congregation or become a two point charge. I know that my personal assessment of this community and the projected growth has led me to consider how our community would look with two congregations predominately African American and one congregation that would be more culturally diverse. My own experience in a new church start many years ago when I was appointed as an associate who happens to be African American, reminds me that we cannot dictate how congregations will develop, we can only offer our influences to such situations. It is the culture of communities that we must focus on reaching. I think that this ministry of outreach will cross cultural lines and be more inviting for those moving into the community in a way that connects with their experiences.

I believe that every parish needs to identify the direction forward and paint a picture of what that may look like, as well as chart a course as to how they are going to accomplish or realize this direction. I called this picture, our vision and the path to realize our vision our mission. I will describe the process as it unfolded in each of the churches. The first church completed the first phase before I began the DMIN program. I began a charge Bible study of the book of Acts. I was very intentional about leading the churches through a study of the early church as recorded in Acts.

In the spring of 2011, I discovered Stewart Chapel, who has approximately two hundred members had started this work. I led them from the point of broad concepts to a more focused vision. I called together our church council and led them in some brainstorming sessions about ministry as it could be for this congregation. I explained vision and mission, and we discussed how we perceived ourselves and how the community perceives us. We were successful in stating our perceptions and what we thought the community thought of us. We proceeded to list some of the things we would want to include in our vision statement and used small groups to write a statement that included these thoughts. We then took those statements and found the similarities and condensed it into one statement. We later used this process for identifying how we could accomplish this vision and by consensus and developed a mission statement. The vision statement for Stewart Chapel is “making disciples of Jesus Christ, transforming lives and sharing God’s love.” Stewart Chapel’s mission statement is worded this way, “Strengthening our relationship with God through God’s Word, witness, nurture, outreach, and fellowship.”



I realize now that the concept of Albert Winseman in *Growing an Engaged Church*, of how to stop “doing church,” and start “being” the church again, is one that I have embraced in my ministry. I see firsthand the challenges of addressing this at the local church level. We are filled with opportunity in local parishes and sometimes we have been satisfied with being busy even when our relationship with Jesus Christ has not been central to all that we are doing.

The process with New Hope, which has the largest membership with six hundred seventy three members, has begun slightly different. We currently have a shepherding ministry in each of the churches, called the Class Leader system. Every member is assigned a class leader who is responsible for assisting him or her on his or her spiritual journey, and keeping them connected with the community of faith in pastoral ways. I chose to use this small group at New Hope to begin a process of visioning. We had already begun some of the initial steps of prayer and ministry surveys. This was one of the groups I thought would be ideal when I thought of the role of the class leader as the one group that is in relationship with all of the members at some level. This is the first group in which I used a combination of my past experience and some of the insights I reflected upon from our classes. Specifically, I identified the leaders as one of the vital small groups in the church who had relationship with every member.

In addition to some of the steps used above I asked each of them to be prayerful about the vision for their life, and then began a discussion on how others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves. This seems to get genuine interest in exploring these answers for themselves. We then talked about developing our church’s vision and mission statements. We had to have follow-up sessions in February 2012 to continue this work

because our rich conversation led to more questions, and we realized that we have a great work to do. This congregation has a missionary mentality. They have had some challenges over the past few years in the transition of leadership as have all of the churches. Prior to entering into a period of challenge, they were following a visionary leader who led them to acquire land and set up a recreational complex in the middle of a rural community where there has not been any recreational resources. The complex was not completed and the mortgage payments have begun. Their aim was to meet the needs of the community with much more than the recreational facility, but rather a place to restore and foster hope for the future generations. The transformation loop described in Ed Setzer and Thom S. Rainer's book, *Transformational Church*, seems to fit this congregation well. Discern, embrace, and engage are words which describe the way the parish was headed.<sup>1</sup> It was obvious that something was done in a way that effectively set a course for the future. We are, however, challenged now because of some major setbacks in recent years that have led to years of dormancy as it related to this dream. Needless to say, it has affected every other aspect of this faith community. This is our current reality and yet our process of visioning is paving the way forward for a new day and a new time for New Hope. Our process has begun and it is bringing with it a level of enthusiasm about what is possible. I have been intentional about honoring the emotional stress of the past, while celebrating the waves of excitement around current and future ministries.

Last but not least is Zion United Methodist Church. Zion has approximately two hundred thirty members. This parish family experienced the leveling of their church

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<sup>1</sup> Thom Rainer and Ed Setzer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010) 45-60.

building by a tornado in 2008. They worshipped during the time of rebuilding in the New Hope United Methodist Church Sanctuary. They were able to move back into their facility in the spring of 2010. The Tornado and the unfortunate circumstance around the leadership change, devastated the church and the attendance has not fully recovered. Some left during this period, others drifted away and rarely attended. I have noticed some tension among those who stayed during this period and those who left and returned. I realized that it was a combination of all that transpired during recent years which left the congregation wounded in many ways. However, we are now experiencing consistent growth in attendance and excitement. I began several months ago lifting up the importance of visioning and utilizing a ministry audit to help get some input and focus. This is one tool using questions to help the congregation think about current ministry and future possibilities. It also has led to meaningful discussions about the ministry we are called to as a congregation.

I notice that the conversations leading up to our planning session helped to lay the groundwork for our time of visioning. Our attendance was diverse in ages and gender. We had some who were in leadership roles and some who were not. This group began with much of the same process of identifying who we are as a church in this community. I noticed one thing about this gathering was that the response and reality of some of the perceptions of the church by the community were not very positive. Most of the responses carried with it some truths that seem to be hurtful and difficult for the members to admit. I sensed that there was tension as some of the things were said and yet I felt that the honesty of this group was very helpful in drafting a vision statement. We allowed time to talk about and identify the things we would want to be sure was in our

vision statement and in this process the things listed that had led to unfavorable perceptions seem to give us some good ideas about the thing to be included going forward. We finished the day by drafting three statements that embodied what the group felt would express our vision. Again we compared and found that there were similarities and repetition. We highlighted what was common and restated the vision statement and used consensus to identify a statement that we all felt very good about.

So what are some of the key elements of these three distinct United Methodist Churches, which have the same pastor? There are many similarities as well as differences. Family connects them. The rural community connects them. The Elementary/Middle School where most of their children attend connects them. The approach to the process of visioning reveals some of the difference. I notice there is more of an openness to the process in one of the churches than in the others. I see the level of participation and lively discussion was also evident in another. I was also reminded that the personality traits present at the sessions all contributed to the amount we were able to accomplish. Prayer, support, reflection, learning, participation, and mission all help keep Jesus Christ central in our thoughts and activities. Using this method and applying to current circumstances reminds me to think about the unique qualities of each congregation and each member. The Wesley Quadrilateral describes another method of reflection with Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. John Wesley the founder of Methodism believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture,

illuminated by tradition, vivified in personal experience and confirmed by reason. Scripture is primary revealing the Word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation.<sup>2</sup>

Theological reflection has challenged me to think about the power that lies ahead of us as we center all of our efforts on Jesus Christ and keep him central in our prayers, our planning and our actions. Evident in each of the congregations is a desire to learn and to fulfill our calling to make disciples. The DNA of the churches are quite different. The process may have led to different discussions. However, the outcome in all of them has been rewarding. Some have more left to do in order to move to the goals and strategies for realizing the mission while reaching toward the vision. The St. Thomas Charge is in the midst of transformation, and the challenge of the future is one that is being met with determination and with ambition. In the United Methodist Church, we have defined vital congregations as those that have “inviting and inspiring worship, engaged disciples in mission and outreach, gifted and, equipped and empowered lay leadership, effective, equipped and inspired clergy leadership, small groups and strong children’s programs and youth ministry.”<sup>3</sup> This working definition describes where the three churches are developing every day. We are already vital congregations by these standards and we are ever engaged in increasing our effectiveness in each of these areas. This experience of visioning and re-visioning is helping us to prioritize our plans for the future. Bill Easum said this of leaders: “leaders surrenders to something bigger than their own lives. They know their destiny is to create God’s new future, to continually change the status quo, to create environments in which people mature spiritually. They intuitively know that God

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<sup>2</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2008* (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2008) 77.

<sup>3</sup> United Methodist Church (U.S.), “Vital Congregations” <http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/vital-congregations> (accessed November 28, 2013).

will provide whatever they need to fulfill their destiny, so their primary purpose is to place themselves at the center of what God is doing in history, their prayer is; “Lord put me in the center of your will. Let me bless what you are doing.”<sup>4</sup>

I continue to serve with great expectations. I intend to stay the course fostering an atmosphere for dreaming God’s dream for our churches and community. My specific goal is to lead each church through the visioning process while designing ministries that help us live out our mission. I also plan to engage our community and work to bring together other churches in a shared vision for the future. I believe that to do this I will have to build relationship and establish teams of leaders who can join me in this effort. The process of these small group-visioning sessions also helps us identify leaders that we otherwise may have overlooked. I see this as a gift of the small groups in our rural context and I believe that this would be true of small groups in any setting. It has given participants an opportunity to speak in a setting, which they are comfortable with, while affirming them in ways that may not be possible in a large group setting. The concept of focusing on small groups will be important to this process and together we will place the lamp on the lamppost and be a beacon of light. It will be obvious by the way we live out our faith serving Jesus Christ and one another in Christian love.

The most important factor should be faithfulness to how God is leading us and praying that God helps us to be where and who we need to be. These reflections help us in many ways to discover our place as a new ministry. The initial meetings and conversation about possibilities inform and also motivate us to review and evaluate on a regular basis the needs of the ministry, and just as important, the relationship between the

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Easum, *Leadership on the Other Side* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 19.

churches. It is my hope that regardless of the choices the congregations make about their individual future that there will be a strong bond and commitment to this ministry of outreach that it will continue beyond any individual transition the churches may make. I prepared for this project by developing my project outline. The outline was significant and gave me a picture of the ministry project and context. The image I saw was one of churches with their unique gifts working together in harmony for a common objective that looked or reached beyond themselves and extended into the community. It was an image of ministry beyond the walls where members and non-members would pool resources to help make a difference within our community. This process began with an idea that I would be able to pull churches of our area together behind a united cause to make a positive impact on our community. The vision was good but it was little too large and I realized after conversations with my professors that it may not be manageable. I really would not have been able to control enough of the variables with other denominations and other congregations.

It was this understanding that led me to refine my vision to focus on getting the three rural congregations of the St. Thomas Charge, New Hope, Stewart Chapel, and Zion United Methodist Churches to work together in this initiative. The total membership of the three churches make up close to ten percent of the population which we intend to serve. I first shared this idea for a ministry project with a group I initially considered to be the lay advisory team. In our church these person now have the title lay servants. The lay servants of our charge represent members who have attended special classes around ministry interest. They have planned and implemented worship services led Bible studies and other specific ministries where they felt called. They were a good resource to discuss

the idea and to develop the concept in my mind prior to moving forward. Most of our lay servants would not have been available to serve during the implementation times for the project. There are other church leaders whose title made membership on the advisory team more practical. However the input of the lay servants served me well in developing this idea. They helped me to think through how to develop the scope of the project. Specifically, we identified the fact that we wanted this to be more than a food distribution, but also a place where persons would be able to receive helpful information about opportunities that moved beyond the need for physical food. These considerations led me to identify a different team. We are meeting monthly and the idea was one they could own. I developed the idea of this outreach ministry as a food distribution ministry which would work to address other community concerns by sharing information that we would offer on the days of distributions.

The food distribution was a concept which I discovered interested all three congregations. The new idea was to include helpful information and using this opportunity as a way of disseminating this it. Health screenings, special classes for life skills, youth and young adult community involvement, community service projects and several other ideas around building the opportunities for our local residents for improved lifestyles. They saw this as something that they could do as a way of Christian service and outreach, financial literacy, workshops and ministry. It was also something that each had interest in doing.

One of the points of establishing an outreach ministry with churches working together is the fact that we have to find something that is of common interest to the congregations involved. I discovered this by having informal conversations about the



community and past ministries. I found that there were locations where food distributions were being done outside of the area in which many of our members would receive food. Often times the drive would prevent many who live in our area from receiving this supplemental food. I also learned that it was a food distribution and there was not any other information shared during this time. The key for us is to establish a cooperative outreach ministry that serves the Huger community where our churches are located.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION**

Once the overall plan was written up, I identified representation from the churches and community to establish an advisory board. The members of the advisory team consisted of the following, three members from each church; a community member, the associate pastor and myself to make up a twelve member board. Before meeting with the board I shared the vision for this ministry with each of the congregations and the appointed representation from each of the churches. I selected individuals based on gifts and areas of responsibility. This became the core group who also later went out to recruit persons to serve for the pick-up and distributions. I also met with our local food bank to obtain application for membership and to get an understanding of the times of scarcity, and times of plenty. Once we were accepted as an agent for distributions we had representatives from the lay advisory team trained on the guidelines and necessary paperwork to be filled out when distributing food.

In the fall of 2012, while in class reviewing prospectus I was advised that my initial title may not be specific enough. I prayed and reflected on what our mission was for the project and thought of the prayer I learned as child to use when blessing my food before eating. “Lord make us most humble and thankful for the food we are about to receive for the nourishment and strength of our bodies. Amen.” This was it. I knew at

that moment that this ministry, which is to feed the physical body is also to feed the spiritual and mental body when it is fully developed. That is how the name evolved. Our lay servants, which is a ministry within our churches for those who feel called to additional training in areas of ministry of the laity were the first to hear of the plans for this cooperative outreach ministry. This conversation began in September of 2012 before I had a name. I shared that this would be a ministry designed to address a shared concern by the churches of the St. Thomas Charge. It would be charge managed and implemented. I asked for questions and suggestions relating to the idea. The group agreed that this was a good idea. The suggestions began with making sure that we look at the history of the churches working together and the experience some of the members had before when they attempted food distributions individually at each church.

I learned that each church had a membership with the local food bank and operated a food pantry. The food pantry was designed for emergency food assistance, and while designated for the community, it primarily served members of the local church mostly because of operating hours. So this outreach ministry was limited in its reach. We discussed sharing information related to housing, medical, financial literacy and other community concerns. Some were very excited about the possibilities of health fairs and community forums that could be done in conjunction with the food distributions in an effort to offer something that would touch the lives of others in a meaningful way. They shared ideas for making this a successful ministry of the charge, to be transparent, and to be sure questions are answered as they arise. They were clear about the importance of keeping the individual churches informed. Those conversations were valuable to the planning and the next steps. This group of lay servants served as a pre-lay advisory team.

The scheduling of the food distributions and the work schedule of this ministry made it clear to me that many of them would not be able to serve on the lay advisory team. My next step was to finalize the team which included some of the lay servants that were a part of the initial conversations. The team had been identified and the input thus far had laid the foundation for this ministry launch.

I met with Zakevia Lewis, representative for the Low Country Food Bank and asked about process and steps for becoming a member to do community food distributions. During this meeting, I discovered that there were several options for membership, and that while we may start as a monthly distribution organization, we could later qualify for other categories; all of which would lead us to serve our community in unique ways with supplemental food. Membership meant that we would agree to our signed contract of following guidelines set forth by the food bank. One of the most important was to keep accurate records and distribute food without a cost to clients according to the guidelines. The ordering procedure and pick up schedules had to be followed or we would be charged for cancellations for failure to pick up. We also agreed to have a base location which would have to be approved by the staff of the food bank. We were in a position to start at the beginning of 2013, when the next signup period would begin. We were already cleared for using Stewart Chapel UMC location as our base location. This was possible because we still have a food pantry there for emergency assistance. I received all of the documentation and information needed to begin this process. I completed the application and followed up with the food bank to be sure nothing else was needed.

In January 2013, I updated the boards of the churches and revised our timeline. In February of 2013, we held our first lay advisory team meeting. This meeting was to organize the team and give an overview of the project. We began to set tentative goals for obtaining membership, training dates and our first distribution. There was excitement building over the possibilities. The theme for our ministry and spreading the love of Jesus as imitators of God set the tone of our meeting. The overview of this ministry of compassion was well received and there was sense of eagerness to get started. There were, of course some details that had to be worked on prior to moving forward. We had to overcome some of stigmas of past experiences. This charge had a unique history in which they worshipped only one Sunday per month. During that time, the members often worshipped together on their designated Sunday to host worship services. Some members also worshipped with neighboring churches and some stayed at home when worship services were not at their church. I am told that the community relationships among the churches were much stronger. When this changed, the relationship remained strong for a while, and there were some joint ventures that were implemented. While in this time of new developments and transition, relationship among the churches were strained and there are some apparent experiences that left a negative spirit in place. I am still not sure what caused this, but I know that there has been some challenges facing this charge as a result.

The atmosphere is right to address the need for strengthened relationships and the need to restore and renew the areas of brokenness. This cooperative outreach ministry will provide a ministry of healing of past hurts, as it builds and renews relationship among the churches. The conversation of community needs has sparked an excitement

that includes working together. We are not going into this unaware of fragile circumstances, but rather we are determined to make the necessary adjustments to keep the ministry of sharing the love of Jesus Christ as the priority going forward. We discussed how the preparation for and the food distribution would be implemented. We talked about the abuse of our generosity and how that would affect us. Our resolve was to trust God to do God's part and let us focus on doing our part. In other words, we would do what we know to do and make every effort not to get caught up with those who would take advantage. We did commit to monitor to the best of our ability, and make necessary adjustments for the subsequent distributions. Our lay advisory team serves as our core group and were charged at this meeting with getting additional support by way of workers and contacts for possible funding.

Our second meeting was held on February 25, 2013. Here we reviewed schedule and asked the council to sign up for areas of interest. We heard some great ideas for helping to make this more than a distribution event among the ideas were to have a health fair to share a meal prepared with health in mind and to distribute brochures about healthier eating habits. We also have decided to share the ideas of community interest when available in handout format, and to encourage participants to share information they may have received that could benefit the community. This meeting gave us time to address short term goals as it related to funding request from our churches, and to identify nearby projects and how they operated successfully. This also gave us the opportunity to discover patterns for participants. We intentionally set our distribution dates toward the end of the month in light of the difficulty that statistics show happen for those on fixed incomes near the end of the month. Our team for implementation had grown, and our

plans for distribution were in place. We identified training dates and established April as our first distribution. The location decided upon was our local community center. This location was to make an intentional effort to reflect our desire to be a service with and to the community and not to our individual churches. The plans were now in place and the development of the Nourishment and Strength ministries had begun.

The orientation and training for the lay advisory team was held on April 1 at the Low Country Food Bank and our first distribution was held on April 23, 2013. We reviewed the guidelines as set forth by the food bank. Some of the principle guidelines were to ensure that the food which left the facility would be effectively distributed to the residents, and that adequate records could prove its distribution. We were told that the car someone drives or the house that they live in does not necessarily mean or determine their need. In other words, we were not to judge their situation, only record their information and serve all persons equally and fairly. Some of our attendees were familiar with former practices either having been served or volunteering in the past. This gave them an opportunity to see the changes in the guidelines and to gain a better understanding of current practices. The information was shared with the lay advisory team as a whole so that we all would be on the same page as we moved closer to the implementation phase of the project and first distribution. We were all set. Our location would be the local community center and our date would be at the end of the month. We had met our requirements and the shopping would begin. Our goal was to serve one hundred families. And we served approximately 110 families with some having to be turned away because of limited supply.

We reviewed the process and implementation of our first distribution. The areas which we were pleased with were the organization, flow of the lines and the location. The community comments about the location and about the fact that this was being done at this location was appreciated by those who had come out. We noticed that we failed to serve all of those who had come for items. We had spent our budget but we did not have enough to serve everyone. We also had the opportunity to greet the people while they were waiting in line. I served as the greeter and walked through the line speaking to those who stood in line and thanked them for coming out as they thanked our charge for taking this initiative. This would have been a great opportunity for us to gain more insight and to identify who we were serving as it related to church affiliation. We have been very appreciative of this feedback and begin immediately debriefing, and looking for ways to increase our productivity as well as our effective serving all of those who come for assistance. This gave us a very good first indicator of what would be possible. All of these were based on feedback from recipients and volunteers.

The very next week I had my visit by my professor Dr. Kevin Miller, who was well received by our lay advisory team. We all were excited about this process and about our first distribution. The team prepared a meal and we sat down for fellowship while sharing about our new ministry.

Dr. Miller also facilitated a discussion that helped us further identify some of the possibilities as we continue our efforts. We discussed the event and we talked about creating packets of information that could be distributed. We also entertained the idea of training of our lay servants and utilizing them specifically to assist with greeting, communicating information about upcoming events, and identifying persons with other



needs while they stood in line. We discussed holding intentional conversations to help determine if we may have additional information for service that they may want to take advantage of to meet their current needs. We also realized that we missed opportunities to engage people about their faith and to share information about the services and ministries of the local churches. We did not have any community information to hand out but this was a great opportunity to put additional information in the hands of the persons while in line. We served approximately 110 families at this event and were looking forward to our next event. We also realize that some of the larger families could have really used more food. This made us aware of the need for additional resources to have a greater impact. We also missed an opportunity to connect our new outreach ministry with the current food pantry for those who were turned away. This would be a big part of our future events. We closed this time together thinking about the ways in which we could improve the next steps. This discussion gave us great insight to future possibilities.

We learned that we were spending more based on how we ordered our food and when we picked up the food. In time we would qualify for a different designation at the food bank which would give us other opportunities to serve more families and to give more items. We also scheduled a planning meeting for the next month's distribution. The lessons learned were very helpful moving forward and working through our planning and implementation more effectively. We had a lot of names submitted as workers and on the first day of distribution everything was ready. We also realized that if we are going to serve more people, we needed more people in the different phases leading up to bagging and packaging the food as well as loading and unloading. We need a steady flow of funds

to serve with more quantity per client and to serve more clients. A great start and yet there is so much more to be done.

Our second distribution was in May 2013; our target number was to serve 100 families. This time we would increase our purchase amount for food and we would have the same distribution site, our local community center. We had some handouts and we had more workers at the different stages of preparations. We had a very beautiful day for this distribution. People were excited to receive whatever we had to share. This distribution went really smooth and we were prepared to offer families a time to meet at the pantry to pick up food if we ran out. We didn't serve quite as many families this time, but the numbers were still slightly over 100 with a little more in their bags. Our South Carolina Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church has announced a "Stop Hunger Now" project that will take place in June and we are taking the challenge to have an extra distribution on the same day set aside for the drive at our 2013 session of the Annual Conference. The project for the purposes of this paper and evaluation were over by this time. The work that was done was instrumental in getting the cooperation from the churches and the people in place to plan the next distribution in conjunction with the "Stop Hunger Now" efforts of our conference. I have felt confident that while I was at conference the model had been set and the necessary adjustment had been made and this too would be a great event for our community, and it was indeed. We continue to learn more about this project and how we can use the information gathered in assessing the effectiveness of this ministry as we commit to pressing on.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **WELL DONE**

If we were to do it again, there are a few things we would do differently. I was pleased with the outcome of this project. The outcome met and in some cases exceeded expectations. We are planning to continue this ministry, and a vital part of continuance is based on the experiences of these two events. The second distribution seemed to be better than the first. It brought out more workers, even though we served fewer families. We were better organized and had plans in place for the over flow. The preparation, ordering, bagging and distribution were all done effectively. These are all reasons for doing it again.

I want to discuss what this has done for the relationships among the churches. Overall we have seen persons communicating that are not usually in the same sub-groups. We have crossed generational lines and offered a ministry that has made that easy. We have also been able to build new relationships and renew old ones to reach a common purpose of feeding the hungry. One of the things that I have noticed is that some of the families that are in need have joined the effort distributing to others. We are beginning to see the joy in giving spread among the churches. What difference does it make for the community? I believe that we are offering a ministry that is catching on and that fosters renewed relationships within each congregation. I am seeing our attendance increase. I

also see in one of the churches families returning, and I think that what we are offering inspire families, as they see God at work. My father used to recite a portion of a poem entitled "I'd Rather See A Sermon" or "Sermons We See" by Edgar A. Guest

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day;  
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely tell the way.  
The eye's a better pupil and more willing than the ear,  
Fine counsel is confusing, but example's always clear;  
And the best of all the preachers are the men who live their creeds,  
For to see good put in action is what everybody needs.  
I soon can learn to do it if you'll let me see it done;  
I can watch your hands in action, but your tongue too fast may run.  
And the lecture you deliver may be very wise and true,  
But I'd rather get my lessons by observing what you do;  
For I might misunderstand you and the high advice you give,  
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.  
When I see a deed of kindness, I am eager to be kind.  
When a weaker brother stumbles and a strong man stays behind  
Just to see if he can help him, then the wish grows strong in me  
To become as big and thoughtful as I know that friend to be.  
And all travelers can witness that the best of guides today  
Is not the one who tells them, but the one who shows the way.  
One good man teaches many, men believe what they behold;  
One deed of kindness noticed is worth forty that are told.  
Who stands with men of honor learns to hold his honor dear,  
For right living speaks a language which to every one is clear.  
Though an able speaker charms me with his eloquence, I say,

I'd rather see a sermon than to hear one, any day.”<sup>1</sup>

I grew up hearing him make his point about things by reciting this poem and explaining why he would say it. I find that this ministry is one of the sermons we see. It is one that gives us responses in which those who serve have reported having persons sharing their deep gratitude and the fact that they have other needs. In turn, some persons have been pointed in the direction of other services of assistance. One comment that stood out for me came from a man who was tall in stature and came to meet at one distribution saying, “Rev., I sure do appreciate what you all are doing.” I responded saying that you are welcome and we realize sometimes we can use a little help getting to the next month and we hoped that this would help. It was with tears in his eyes that he looked down at me and said, “Rev., every month is like this for me, every month and this sure does make a difference.” Hearing these words from a man who on the outside seems so strong and realize that this ministry is making a major impact on his life makes our efforts worthwhile.

I also observed him showing his appreciation as he helped direct traffic and helped others to the cars and he stayed to assist until we were done that day. Wow! What a difference, I thought. It is a sermon people can see and it is making a difference in relationships. Our feedback has been very positive with other stories of appreciation. The opportunities still seem to center around having enough and reaching enough. Once in a while I also noticed that among the volunteers from the churches there are some strained relationships that still need attention. It has been a challenge for some to work together

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar A. Guest, *I'd Rather See A Sermon*, <http://sofinesjoyfulmoments.com/quotes/sermon.htm>. (accessed December 1, 2013).

without criticizing each other. We have responded by bringing out the impact this has on our effectiveness to the community and the perception it may leave upon those coming in for food. We have had a few concerns around our volunteers not getting their bags or in some cases, taking advantage of the opportunity. All of these concerns are being addressed in our follow-up meetings as we talk through the joys and challenges of each distribution. It seems that the more we discuss and evaluate the process, the better our events are becoming. I think that the criticism has been fair. Some of the areas of opportunity are funding support, order quantities, and strengthening our team. We are asking each congregation to commit to a monthly contribution and going forward. I think that we will need to plan specific times for the community to be given an opportunity to give. We have discovered more by attending additional training opportunities. And have been able to plan for obtaining more items based upon how and when we shop with preorders and pickup day. We have found that we can spend the same money and receive considerable more with the lessons learned about purchasing. One case in point is that the produce is much less per pound and when picked up on Fridays, the supplies are greater. This will offer some great values for our ministry and great products for our clients. We also learned that certain days have proven to be better shopping days and we are establishing a great relationship with the local food bank.

We still have some work to do to strengthen our relationships and we are thankful for the distance we have come. This ministry offers proof that working for common goals can bring us closer together as congregations and communities of faith. I believe that our Charge will continue to see great things out of this partnership. We are attracting supporters and those who may not have any money are still contributing with their

presence and assistance. I have found that there are many places to serve within this ministry and the joys of this ministry far outweighs its challenges. To God be the glory!

## CHAPTER 7

### DO IT AGAIN

This is a vital ministry that is worth continuing. Every distribution brings its own set of challenges. This does not supersede the benefits. The goal of building relationship has extended beyond the churches to include the relationships of community, which are being renewed. People are helping each other. Hearts are being strangely warmed and loving thy neighbors is the theme that seems to be taking place. This is worth continuing and doing over and over. People are being served who need a helping hand. Eyes are being opened to a greater need to be the community that supports one another and shares information. Howard J. Hubbard, in his book, *Fulfilling the Vision Collaborative Ministry in the Parish*, identified four characteristics of vital parish ministry. The first was worship that had meaning with effective preaching and good liturgy. I have always strived to make this happen because I firmly believe this is true. The other three are things that I believe are strengthened by the efforts of community outreach done in collaboration with the faith communities. Second, they value the ability of the parish to help people deal practically with their life concerns, such as alcohol, drug abuse, poor schools, crime and safety issues, unemployment, job instability, and especially their concerns about family and children. Parish support and small faith sharing groups provide an arena where people can feel safe and understood, cared for and accepted. Parish ministries such as parish social outreach address the human concerns, and also provide advocacy for the underserved. In this environment, parish gatherings promote



networking and peer ministry. Third, parishioners need a feeling of ownership, a feeling that they belong, that their concerns are being listened to and that they can have the opportunity to affect parish policies and practices. Parish leadership, including parish staff, parish pastoral council, and parish ministers can facilitate the creation of an environment which empowers parishioners to discover, develop, and utilize their gifts and talents in a way that give them a sense of belonging and of contributing to the parish community. Fourth, the people appreciate an active quality in the parish, a sense that something is going on and that there is something happening for everyone.<sup>1</sup>

These concepts when applied to the Nourishment and Strength Ministry helps us understand the importance of collaboration and the involvement of the members in the planning and implementation. This is what leads to a sustained ministry, especially in a community where the largest churches are served by pastors who are in intenerate ministry where pastors will move; and their moves are determined by their denominations. It is critical that the lay members of the congregations lead this effort with the full support of the pastors. Another reason that this ministry is effective is also because of the great amount of respect that the community has for the role of pastor. I have been reminded over and over that the people are waiting to hear what the pastor thinks. In the culture of the low-country of South Carolina this is still the case. It is a blessing and it also challenges the pastor to be clear with the vision and follow through with it. There are some clear reasons why this ministry should continue and other should consider a version of this ministry in their respective communities. I am sure that many of our rural areas could use support from outside resources. However, I am convinced that

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<sup>1</sup> Howard J. Hubbard, *Fulfilling the Vision* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

part of our opportunities in the rural setting is to realize the assets where we are. Sometimes we overlook that which is before us and we limit our expectations. If our aim is not high enough then we will not reach the heights we are created to reach. I believe that we have all that we need to do all that we are called to do at this appointed time in our ministries, and this is a concept drawn from the teachings of Scripture where Jesus stretched person beyond what they could see. It has amazed some while challenging others. It is a theory that is mentioned in a process called “natural church development.” In this process the area where we are weakest is identified and given attention and then while maintaining areas of strength, congregations are asked to develop in their areas of weakness. This is a valid concept in my mind. I think Nourishment and Strength Ministries goes further to take what may be a weakness in the church and community and it has found a way to target both church and community development. We sometimes overlook the fact that our churches do not exist in isolation. It is important for the church to claim and reclaim her place as a vital part of the community, and be the sermon lived out in community. There will be ups and downs in this model as it is implemented, but the expression of God’s love will transcend the obstacles in a way that inspires and encourages others.

We should avoid supporting any negative energy that may arise under the pressure of long lines and limited supply. Avoid the dialogue that can arise among the volunteers that point out what’s wrong rather than what’s right with the efforts. I suggest that we minimize the negative by giving ample opportunity for dialogue around issues important to volunteers, as well as comments made by those being served. Going forward with this ministry, we will address need changes as they are identified. We will also take

time to celebrate the ministry's successes within the community. The impact we have when we come together, work together and serve together.

I have decided to consider one area that we omitted when implementing our plan for this ministry. We have missed a great opportunity by stopping short of the invitation, the invitation to worship services and the invitation to join the effort of outreach and most important an invitation to a relationship with Jesus Christ. Our community is considered rural but we are in an area that is growing and projected to grow significantly or above ten percent in the next few years. We have a ministry opportunity that is seen as vital by our neighbors, and we did not give an opportunity for others to contribute to our cause. We did not utilize that most common means of current technology to help promote our efforts. We did not maximize our potential for garnering support from our residents and businesses. We did not, but we will plan to include this as we build upon what has been started.

There is a description in Leonard Sweets book, *Going Viral*, which is worth addressing with this ministry. He speaks of our need as humans to be in relationship with others. He presents his case with examples that point out that we are in one of two categories or tribes. He says it this way:

Your life and your experience of God will differ from mine in significant ways. But like every human on earth, we share the basic needs of nourishment, shelter, and a network of companions. These longings and pursuits shape us, even when we are not consciously aware of them. Incubating within us is the desire to reach out in order to fill our biological and relational needs. We gather food, find shelter, and do all we can to avoid being alone.” The tribe that feels most at home in the twenty-first-century Digital Age is what we will call the Googlers— the digitized, globalized group that spends much of its life getting to know one another in a virtual world. The tribe that immediately precedes the Googlers we will refer to as the Gutenbergs— those who arrived from the twentieth century

bringing with them influences and assumptions launched long before, in the fifteenth century.”<sup>2</sup>

This is a major culture adjustment for the churches and yet it is a norm for the culture of the majority of those under the age of fifty years old in their personal lives. I have come to realize that this is an indication and it is very possible to have those who understand the advantages of using technology and social media in helping us connect with a larger population as well as with current members, and yet they are not convinced that this change is appropriate for the church. The leap of faith stops short of connecting the advantages with our primary mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

So, how do we introduce this change effectively in our local congregations? I am finding that some are yearning for us to catch up somewhat to the rest of the world. Some do not seem to care much one way or the other. Some think that we should just leave things as they are. Guided conversations focused on various possibilities for using technology and social media in worship seem to be the avenue the St. Thomas Charge churches will receive. The idea of segmenting the message, so that targeted audiences receive information, while leaving the window open for others to listen to the exchange. I believe that each generation has their own experience of connection, disconnection and reconnection. The extent to which this cycle is successful depends on the effectiveness of the generation to receive or accept their current state, and their desire to be connected. In the life of the church, observing these generational transitions is of vital importance as we seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We face these challenges among generations and among cultures. Currently we are living in a culture of many different variables. One of

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<sup>2</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival* (New York: Random House, 2012) Kindle Edition 1.

the main constant is that technology is continuing to develop and many more people are growing up without knowing or being taught the biblical stories. “The harvest is plentiful,” could very well refer to the vast number of people who cannot relate to the stories of the Bible and not because they are not relevant, but rather because the stories were never shared with them. It is this population that stands to benefit most from churches taking the initiative to engage people and invite them to hear the stories and show the ways in which there is a connection between the stories of the scriptures and their stories of life and faith.

I decided to open a conversation with the senior citizens which meet mid-week at my church for prayer and study. After sitting in on one of the studies and hearing a sermonette, I decided to download a YouTube video clip and play using the audio to connect with a point made in the message. The congregation could hear an old style of singing called “lining a hymn in common meter.” Reference had been made to the calling upon all of us to serve God by serving this present age. . A verse of the Hymn “A Charge To Keep I Have” was identified to make the point. When the song had played which immediately took many of them back to the style of singing they heard as children, and how it connected with what had previously been stated in the sermonette I asked two questions. Do you know what social media is? Can you think of ways in which technology and social media can be used in preaching, worship and Bible study? Only three thought they had a concept of social media. When I shared that we had just experienced one way in which technology and social media could be used in church, the ideas began to come forth. They realized that some of the very things to which they had been afraid to consider really could be beneficial to the church by helping reach people

for Jesus Christ. I was a little surprised to discover how open and even interested our senior members were to incorporating technology and social media once they had a better understanding of how it can be used to connect with people in and outside of the church. I realize that the new experience helped give them understanding, but it did not remove all doubts about making changes in the worship service as they know it. However, I believe this will help them to make that transition. I also think introducing this to the cooperative outreach ministry and I think this would be equally valuable to the ministries effectiveness.

“It’s correct to consider that the image-rich scriptures as the mind of God made available to us. “The Bible thinks, not in propositions and bullet points, but in images, metaphors, narratives, symbols and song. ... The church’s failure of imagination is directly attributable to its failure to take up the poet’s tools. Image and imagination, metaphor and story, and metaphor stories known as parables.”<sup>3</sup> These stories or parables reinforce the messages of the Scriptures and our stories do the same for our faith walk. It is the shared stories that will help our seniors and other members appreciate the use of images, metaphors and technology in preaching. I mentioned to our seniors that this could be considered a return to a more effective preaching that the story telling which created images in our minds, and of what was a part of the tradition of the African American worship experience for many years. This still remains a very important part of the culture of our churches. While I accept that I still would be classified as a Gutenberg, I am more open to becoming TGIF in the sense of recognizing the importance of learning to communicate through these media methods and leading the

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Real Church in a Social –Network World* (Colorado Springs: Water Brook Press, 2011) Kindle Edition, location 1133.

church down this path, in order to become and remain relevant in this current and yet ever changing culture of technology and social media.

We can use social media to bring more life to our ministry of outreach, which we preach by doing. The images speak volumes even without words ever being spoken. I thought to myself “how powerful.” I wonder how many more people we will reach for Christ as we embark in this time of technology and social media. We have the best example of meeting people at their level of need and understanding. One of the challenges is keeping balance. Leonard Sweet wrote about this when he said “Jesus’ life illustrates that the sweet spot is not in the middle, but in holding both extremes together. The goal is not to balance competing opposites, but to make opposites dance with one another.”<sup>4</sup> It is this dance that brings about excitement and connects with many diverse groups of people. It is this dance that will help the church to make disciples of Jesus Christ. The ending remains open as we focus on leading others into stronger more meaningful relationship with one another and with our Savior.

I believe that he is right on target by identifying “relationship” as critical for ministry effectiveness. This ministry is based on the fact that relationships are important to people. We did not plan on how utilizing the relationships of the generations which grew up with technology, as well as those who later developed a passion for creating, sustaining and strengthening relationships using social media would impact this ministry.

How do we connect with these generations and those on the move during this age? In our ministry thus far, we focused primarily on the recipients and avoided

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<sup>4</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival*, Kindle Edition 187-192.

promoting distributions beyond the word of mouth because we knew that our resources were limited. However, in doing this we failed to use the social media to help tell the story of ministry, and extend an invitation for support. In effect, we limited our resources by limiting our territory for telling the story. I would encourage others not to overlook the social media when identifying assets for ministry. Listening to the reflections and comments made. Pay attention to negative remarks and be sure they have no merit. Address any conflicts that may arise and build relationship through fellowship. Going forward we will implement processes that will ensure that we monitor and address concerns raised by clients, volunteers and others that may have constructive criticism. We are discovering that to address these potential conflicts offers a genuine sense of concern and it is appreciated by our team and out clients.

The future is bright for Nourishment and Strength Ministry. I want to share some of the insights since the official date of the project ended. We have been challenged with some of the ownership and territorial claims of the churches and have charged the lay advisory team to help address this issue. It developed primary after one distribution at the base church, Stewart Chapel. The community center has proven to be the better outlet. We also have worked to build additional partnerships to help with pick-up and delivery, as well as distribution. The Huger/ Wando Men's Coalition has accepted this challenge and is currently a major supporter providing trucks and men to participate in the process. Our last few distributions served one hundred seventy five to over two hundred families. We are becoming known for giving to the community using community locations rather than our churches. In 2014 we plan to have health fairs, community forums, and meals



all at no cost to the public. We will also include information sessions utilizing agencies to share their services and valuable resources and how to access them.

The final question which may arise is, Will this really work as a model? I have worked with churches in many rural settings and with a variety of variables. There will always be challenges for every community of faith. The difficulty that surrounds taking faith steps in ministry will always be challenging. There will be circumstances that will test our integrity and push us to the edge of our faith. The planning and casting of a vision grounded by prayer and built upon the assurance that the Holy Spirit will guide us on the mission field, is the blessed assurance that we need to press on. I am convinced that the success of this project has been because the foundation is strong and the mission is focused. Relationships are being strengthening. The stronger and closer we are to God, the stronger will be our personal relationship as congregations of the St. Thomas Charge, and as member churches of the Huger and Cainhoy communities. We have had to wait at times for the next steps and that is okay. In the first and second chapters of the book of Habakkuk, we listen to a prophet who is tired of the order of things that are happening around him and within his community. He complained about it even to God, as he waited to hear from God, this is what he said as recorded in the second chapter.

I will stand at my watch post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Habakkuk 2:1-4 (NRSV).

We will find that this cooperative outreach ministry is one tool that offers an example of how we can build and renew community life with churches and communities working together for common objectives. I am excited about the next steps. I know that we do not yet begin to comprehend all that God will make possible because of the efforts put forth to lift of the name of Jesus Christ, and to spread the Gospel by living it out before others and glorifying God.

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