

TELLING OUR STORIES: PEOPLE IN A RURAL
COMMUNITY UNCOVERING SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

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ABSTRACT

TELLING OUR STORIES: PEOPLE IN A RURAL COMMUNITY UNCOVERING SPIRITUAL STRENGTH

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An ethnographic ministry research project was undertaken in the rural Damascus United Methodist Parish in Damascus, Pennsylvania to learn firsthand from long time residents in a rural faith community what the aspects of rural living were that helped them grow in spiritual strength, how this growth might happen and the ways their spiritual strengths help them and the community grow in wellness and Christian ministry. The project was conducted as a partnership among myself, the pastor, an Advisory Team recruited from the congregation and community, congregants and community members, and the Drew Theological School Doctor of Ministry Program.

Joy from living amid the beauty of the natural world in a rural setting as well as a sense of being an integral part of the natural order of birth, family and community, death and resurrection among the human community, the animal world and the seasonal rhythms of rural life are sources of spiritual strength. Pride in being able to give of one's self to support the well-being of family and community during tough times, the trust engendered when people live interdependently and each person's work is valued, and the strong sense of responsibility that comes from a life of hard work lived simply with honesty and generosity, added to the spiritual richness and faith of the project

participants, giving them assurance that no matter what came their way, God would remain a nurturing presence and life would be good.

The church can be a gateway to the larger world as well as a local source of great comfort during times of sorrow and grief. Participants said they appreciated the community building aspects of the church and found more interest in outreach ministries through the telling of their rural life stories. Building on the theological ideas of listening to one another to encourage and build spiritual strength, the project afforded an opportunity for the Damascus United Methodist faith community partners to grow in wellness by affirming their spiritual strengths born out of their experiences in rural living.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament Scriptures tell the story and bear witness of two rural residents, Amos, a sheep herder and a farmer, and Micah, who lived in Judah and Israel, respectively, in the eighth century before Christ. By that time these nations had changed from a confederation of tribal groups of Hebrew slaves, escaped from Egypt and seeking freedom in a new land, into great, imperial powers. Scholars are piecing together a portrait of the culture and message of these rural voices, in ongoing, collaborative work across many disciplines.

From Amos' and Micah's rural vantage point, the military and economic expansion of their nations were clearly having devastating effects on the life of the rural community and the land. The powerful elite ruling class was gaining in wealth and status at the expense of the small family farmer via their ability to co-op the justice system to oppress the peasant class. Amos and Micah were prophets (or messengers) who traveled from the country to the government centers of Judah and Israel to tell their cautionary tales of the impending disastrous consequences of unjust governmental policies and cultural practices.¹

Specifically, they spoke against the increasing stratification of society into the rich and poor with an ever widening gap between them. The Law of God, given to Moses, had

¹ Philip J. King, "Archeology and the Eight Century Prophets" and "Historical and Geographical Setting" in *Amos, Hosea, Micah – An Archaeological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 8-59.

called for an integrated community, where the playing field was level and fair for all people, even those disadvantaged. The luxury-loving society that had arisen, shunned these ancient ideas of fairness, compassion and neighborly help. Worship for many had become an empty ritual for shows of great wealth and status. Human trafficking and slavery had become a global business. Cheating the poor had become common commercial practice; and, reliance on military strength and economic power took precedence over trusting in the God who had led them to freedom long ago.

Amos, Micah, and their contemporaries announced that no society decaying from within would last. The prophets found that the religious establishment, the governing classes, and the rich challenged their announcements with ridicule, criticism and threats of violence. Their vindication came when by the end of the eighth century B.C.E., the northern kingdom, Israel, had been destroyed by the imperial powers around them. Only a century and a half later, the southern kingdom, Judah, was obliterated as well. These once great nations were annihilated and their people scattered in slavery to foreign lands or left behind to live under the rule of another culture and society.

Out of the country came the voices that told the truth about how we must live in relation to God, the land, and one another if we are to survive and thrive. Amos and Micah both prescribed a moral remedy to the political/agricultural/religious crises of their land and people:

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24);

He [God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)²

² These two biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Translation* (NRSV) of the Bible. Unless otherwise specified and noted, all subsequent biblical references are from the NRSV.

The messages of these country prophets indicated a community's strength lay in its faithfulness to God, its living out the divinely-inspired values in community, and its honor and respect for persons, land, animals and the world God created and loved. Wealth was not to be measured by the commodification of creation and unchecked economic and military expansion but rather by the ability of families and neighbors to work together, living as God's people, in justice and harmony.³

In later New Testament narratives, Jesus immersed himself in rural community life in another time of imperialism and oppression, that of the Roman Empire. His ministry was to transform people's understanding of God and God's presence in their lives so as to bring God's kingdom of wellness and justice to earth. In his teachings, recorded in the Gospels, Jesus often used stories and metaphors of rural living. Jesus' teachings and life example have been used over subsequent centuries by many for the transformation of oppressive social orders in ways that have brought wellness to people and communities under great economic and political disadvantage. Jesus' followers have journeyed to many different lands and cultures over the centuries to immerse themselves in communities and help people incorporate their spiritual gifts and wisdom into the life of faith, so that Christ's healing, reconciliation, spiritual growth, and wellness could prevail.

In the second half of the 20th century, a rural Kentucky farmer and country poet, Wendell Berry, announced a spiritual-political-cultural crisis in American society reminiscent of the call and witness of the ancient prophets. In his book, *The Unsettling of*

³ King, 1988, 8-20.

America, Culture and Agriculture, Berry observes a dynamic of exploitation versus settlement or nurture of land and community as opposing forces at work through American history. He warns that the current moral-ecological-agricultural-cultural crisis of runaway exploitation is leading us once again away from health and wellness on a national scale to tragic loss, illness and death. In the accelerated commodification of land, people, resources, and even the future since the time of World War II, Berry sees short-sighted, greed-based exploitative forces at work in our society in the ways agri-business, agri-politics, agri-technology, agri-engineering, and agri-economics devalue human relationships with other people, work, land, community and creation, to the mind-body-spirit detriment of all life, beginning with the life of the rural community.

Berry contrasts the model characteristics of nurturing and exploitative forces in culture, to illustrate this dynamic of the various movements of the nurturing force toward health and life versus the ways in which exploitative agri-business acts as a colonizing force in rural communities in the United States.⁴ Table 1 in Appendix 1 summarizes Berry's description of nurturing and exploitative agri-dynamics.

Berry says the solution to our troubled situation in rural America, is a moral solution. It is not one that can be solely implemented by institutional policies but rather it lies in the ways individual people and communities of people are empowered to respect and value life and choose to work and live responsibly and interdependently, resulting in their small scale "kindly use" of the land, people, community, and creation.⁵ For Berry as for the ancient prophets, Amos and Micah, agriculture and culture are intimately

⁴ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America, Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997), 7-8, 85-90, 102-137, 160-169.

⁵ Berry, 1997, 23-31, 97, 218-223.

intertwined with work and spirituality, the cycles of life and death, and wholeness and health. Berry espouses support of the nurturing dynamic (Table 1) as the way to bring restoration to the self, family, community, and creation, placing great hope in the restorative, healing power, he sees inherent in creation.

The telling and hearing of our stories and how we experience God can be an empowering vehicle for understanding God's presence in our life of faith for people who have been marginalized by the dominant culture as the rural community is today. We find that as we are listened to, we can gain an appreciation of our own voices, spiritual strength, and wisdom which can help us grow and become whole. The local church is uniquely positioned through its mission and presence to minister to the rural community. The local church provides opportunities for congregants and the rural community to speak and honestly share their perspectives. It encourages them to celebrate the spiritual richness of their experiences, to grow in spirit, and find the hope of wellness espoused in the life and example of Jesus, and promised through faith in Christ.

This project, *Telling Our Stories: People in a Rural Community Uncovering Spiritual Strength*, was undertaken to see how such a moral solution might unfold in a rural parish in Northeastern Pennsylvania. The theological foundations for the project are described in Chapter 2 through reflective explorations of United Methodist Social Principles, Nelle Morton's theology of "being heard into speech"⁶ and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of Christian Community⁷ and the ways these might be manifested in ethnographic, narrative research. The design of the research project as it relates to

⁶ Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 202.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).

other similar research projects and previous work, and local rural demographics and history is described in Chapter 3 and the project as it was implemented in the Winter and Spring of 2014 is described in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 provides an evaluation of the ministry research projects and its findings, including: its impact on the congregation and community; the value it brought to the church and community; and, what I learned about ministry as a result of this project. The project conclusions are presented in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

In the United Methodist faith community, interrelated social/political/agricultural crises similar to those spoken of by the ancient and modern prophets, are best examined to develop moral solutions, within the process historically referred to as “our theological task.” Our theological task is a dialogue between faith and world which includes dialectic reflection on Scripture, the traditions of the faith community, the examiner’s knowledge (scientific and other) and personal experience both of God's loving presence in the world and the situation of concern. Our theological task “is at once critical and constructive, individual and communal, contextual and incarnational, and essentially practical.”¹ Every generation of the faith community is called to discern what God's vision and will is for themselves, others, and all creation, in every context and especially in those bearing injustice or social need and where moral solutions are sought.

On a global scale, the work of the United Methodist faith community in performing its theological task is recorded in the quadrennial document, *Social Principles of the United Methodist Church*. In the 2013-2016 quadrennial version of the *Social Principles*, two paragraphs are of immediate interest to our rural region in Damascus, Pennsylvania: P162P *Rural Life* and P163H *Family Farms*.² In this chapter, we begin building the theological foundations of this project with these *Social Principles* and then

¹ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House), Paragraph 105.

² The United Methodist Church, 2012, Paragraphs 162P and 163H.

augment them through reflective explorations of the ideas of two 20th century theologians: feminist Nelle Morton's theology of "being heard into speech"³ and Nazi resistor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology of Christian Community⁴. The chapter concludes with reflections on how these theological foundations support the ethnographic, narrative research of this project.

United Methodist Social Principles

Paragraph 162P of the *Social Principles* speaks theologically about rural life. This theological reflection lies within the subheading of "The Social Community", P162, between principles concerning genetic engineering and sustainable agriculture, placing it in current times. It supports rural life as a way of life worth preserving and names the social injustice of governmental programs that penalize small farmers at the expense of agri-business. This social principle also recognizes the struggles associated with the changing nature of rural life, and calls the community of faith to live out biblical principles of healing, community-building, love and shalom in the rural setting:

We support the right of persons and families to live and prosper as farmers, farm workers, merchants, professionals, and others outside of the cities and metropolitan centers. We believe our culture is impoverished and our people deprived of a meaningful way of life when rural and small-town living becomes difficult or impossible.... We support governmental and private programs designed to benefit the resident farmer rather than the factory farm

We further recognize that increased mobility and technology have brought a mixture of people, religions, and philosophies to rural communities that were once homogeneous. While often this is seen as a threat to or loss of community life, we understand it as an opportunity to uphold the biblical call to community for all persons. Therefore, we encourage rural communities and individuals to maintain a strong connection to the earth and to be open to: offering mutual belonging, caring,

³ Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 202.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954).

healing, and growth; sharing and celebrating cooperative leadership and diverse gifts; supporting mutual trust; and affirming individuals as unique persons of worth, and thus to practice shalom.⁵

Social Principle P163H, *Family Farms*, is located within the subheading “The Economic Community”, P163, and intersects with and supports Wendell Berry's criticism of agri-business as an anti-democratic colonizing force (see Table 1) effectively marginalizing small family farmers socially, economically and politically. It calls upon the faith community to sound and heed the prophetic cry of today to re-establish the links between food and community for the mind-body-spirit health and well-being of the community.

The value of family farms has long been affirmed as a significant foundation for free and democratic societies. In recent years, the survival of independent farmers worldwide has been threatened by various factors, including the increasing concentration of all phases of agriculture into the hands of a limited number of transnational corporations. The concentration of the food supply for the many into the hands of the few raises global questions of justice that cry out for vigilance and action.

We call upon the agribusiness sector to conduct itself with respect for human rights primarily in the responsible stewardship of daily bread for the world, and secondarily in responsible corporate citizenship that respects the rights of all farmers, small and large, to receive a fair return for honest labor. We advocate for the rights of people to possess property and to earn a living by tilling the soil.

We call upon governments to revise support programs that disproportionately benefit wealthier agricultural producers, so that more support can be given to programs that benefit medium and smaller sized farming operations, including programs that build rural processing, storage, distribution, and other agricultural infrastructure; which link local farmers to local schools; and which promote other community food security measures.

We call upon our churches to do all in their power to speak prophetically to the matters of food supply and the people who grow the food for the world and to develop ministries that build food security in local communities.⁶

⁵ The United Methodist Church, 2012, Paragraph 162P.

⁶ The United Methodist Church, 2012, Paragraph 163H.

These principles provide a theological framework for the current situation within the rural Damascus, Pennsylvania region. Once characterized by numerous, prosperous, small family farms it is now disenfranchised due to institutional support of agri-business at the expense of small farms. This community becomes a good starting point for our theological understandings of how giving the marginalized a voice and learning to live in Christian community during difficult times can open up ways to live out the prophetic and incarnational mission of the rural church in challenging times of change.

Nelle Morton: Finding One's Voice on the Journey to Wholeness

Placing speaking and listening into political and wellness terms, feminist theologian Nelle Morton wrote, "Speaking first to be heard is power over. Hearing to bring forth speech [or hearing to speech] is empowering."⁷ Illustrating this with a story of Carl G. Jung's work with women in the Burgholzli hospital, Morton contrasts the uselessness of doctor-initiated 'power-over' speaking therapies in treating nonverbal, mute women with Jung's listening/imitative word and gesture therapy that invited the women into connection with themselves. Through his use of the women's own words in this therapeutic setting, they were able to make a deep connection with their life stories, and some became well enough to eventually leave the hospital, much to the amazement of the other doctors.

This truth has a spiritual application as well. As Morton points out, "John Calvin referred to hearing as the miracle of Pentecost and saw the reversal of hearing/speaking as crucial to the event."⁸ More recently, in his book, *The Wolf Shall Lie Down with The*

⁷ Morton, 1985, 210.

⁸ Morton, 1985, 209.

Lamb, theologian Eric Law sees the Pentecost miracle of hearing as essential for shalom and well-being in multicultural faith communities and groups, particularly because dominant groups used to speaking to be heard have power over the less dominant groups who must be listened to on a deep level in order to be heard into speaking. “Hearing to speech is never one-sided.”, Morton wrote, “Once a person is heard to speech she becomes a hearing person.”⁹ Called to be a prophetic voice for the rural community as well as other communities, the church and its pastor are called into speaking and listening for truth in a Pentecost dialectic with Holy Spirit in order to heal and energize the community.

Morton's work with physically and mentally impaired children in classroom settings showed her just how important it was to spend long periods listening to the insights of her students and the ways her listening empowered them into creative speech and new knowledge. Her later work with women seeking emotional and spiritual healing illustrated the power of community in helping a person give voice to the parts of the self hidden by deep pain and in doing so, healing and freeing the self for wellness and growth.

Morton observed this phenomenon in many instances and recorded that she had herself experienced it. Those heard into speech experience “a depth hearing that takes place before speaking – a hearing that is more than acute listening. A hearing that is a direct transitive verb that evokes speech – new speech that has never been spoken before.”¹⁰ This deep hearing comes from others listening in silence without interruption, without rushing to comfort, without cutting one's experience of being heard short. It

⁹ Morton, 1985, 210.

¹⁰ Morton, 1985, 205.

means sitting with someone in sacred silence as they go into the deepest part of their life, patiently waiting for them to emerge with a new story of who they are. Such listening, Morton cautions, requires love and endurance and bears with it pain. But it can be rewarded with miraculous sounds of new life for those who can suffer (hear/speak) it.¹¹ Bearing with others who are struggling to be whole puts the hearer in touch with their own struggle, confronts them with their own grief and pain, and encourages them into healing and wholeness. In this ministry research project, hearing members of the rural community into speech or into wholeness and sharing their personal truth is part of the moral solution we are seeking to the current farm and country crisis we are experiencing in the rural community.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Ministry in a Christian Community

Another theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reflected on this hearing/bearing ministry during the early days of his work with the Nazi-resisting confessing church movement. Called to help with an underground seminary, Bonhoeffer lived in a community of Nazi-resisting clergy when he wrote his work, *Life Together*, which has subsequently been called, *The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. In particular, Chapter 4, *Ministry*, discusses our human propensity to seek power over others, preferring to speak rather than listen when bearing with another in seeking to help them. First and foremost, Bonhoeffer states, attentively listening to another is the best way to imitate Christ in serving one another in the Pentecost community.

On the subject of our human propensity to seek power over another, even within the community of faith, Bonhoeffer says:

¹¹ Morton, 1985, 205-206.

But the important thing is that a Christian community should know that somewhere in it there will certainly be “a reasoning among them, which of them should be the greatest.” (Luke 9:46). It is the struggle of the natural man [*sic*] for self-justification. He finds it only in comparing himself with others, in condemning and judging others. Self-justification and judging go together, as justification by grace and serving others go together.¹²

Not only can it seem to those living in rural communities that secular and political powers ignore them as irrelevant but also that society as a whole, including the denominational church, does not listen to them or respect them, their country way of life, and their physical and spiritual needs. Bonhoeffer continues:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to Him. Christians ... so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

Many people are looking for an ear that will listen....

But Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great listener and whose work they share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.¹³

For Bonhoeffer, life together in fellowship or Christian community also brings a Scriptural call, “Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2). For him, as for Morton, Christ's law of love is a law of a loving, listening presence that affirms, supports, sustains and finds joy a person's very being: “To bear the burden of the other person means involvement with the created reality of the other, to accept and affirm it, and, in bearing with it, to break through to the point where we take joy in it.”¹⁴ Both Morton and Bonhoeffer find a sacredness in the ministry of

¹² Bonhoeffer, 1954, 91.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, 1954, 97-99.

¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, 1954, 101.

listening, helping and bearing with another. Although Bonhoeffer focuses primarily on the process and Morton's analysis includes the holy result - a human being heard into a new story and a new self and made well - both theological analyses of this ministry process are compelling for our reflection and this ministry project: "Then where the ministry of listening, active helpfulness, and bearing with others is faithfully performed, the ultimate and highest service can also be rendered, namely, the ministry of the Word of God."¹⁵

Narrative Research and Ethnography as Pastoral Practice

As pastor of a small rural parish in Northeastern Pennsylvania, I have come to appreciate the spiritual strength of the people in my congregations and community as they face many losses, changes, and the ongoing socioeconomic stresses on rural communities which negatively impact their physical, mental, and emotional wellness. When I hear people's stories of local history, family relationships and experiences, community relationships and events, faith development and their deep appreciation of the natural beauty around them and making a living from the land, I cannot help but see that these stories provide rich and compelling spiritual resources. I believe that when celebrated, these stories can open up new avenues of healing, wellness, and growth in Christian ministry for me, individuals, the parish congregations, and the community.

Ethnography is a qualitative narrative research method in which the study of the life of people is done through immersing yourself in their midst, and learning about their culture both as a participant in it and a firsthand observer of it. Ethnography in this project refers to a deep pastoral listening to life stories and theological reflections to

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, 1954, 103.

understand the life and context of the congregation and community and direct it toward a vision for ministry, while at the same time learning more about oneself as pastor and person through reflection on the understanding gained through listening to the stories, wisdom and vision of others.¹⁶ The idea of ethnography in this project is akin to Savage and Presnell's term, "Proactive Research Method", using ecological and materialistic ethnographic methods,¹⁷ while maintaining Stone and others' life-giving "not knowing" stance,¹⁸ i.e, leading the story-tellers to a positive outcome using both open-ended and directive questions while allowing them to be the experts in the creation of their own stories in which they can find hope and joy.

As both a participant observer and a leader in the life of a rural community, my pastoral role immerses and invites me to be an example of mind-body-spirit health and transformation for that community. Using principles of ethnography for pastoral care and narrative research the pastoral leader can invite the community to wholeness and health. As disciples of Jesus Christ tell the stories of their lives and faith they can encourage the congregation to uncover the ways God is equipping them to live as Christ's incarnation in the rural community. Perhaps they will be a prophetic voice from the rural perspective to the larger community.

¹⁶ Mary C. Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland, OH: the Pilgrim Press, 2008), 4-45.

¹⁷ Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, KY: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 108-114.

¹⁸ Howard E. Stone, Editor, *Strategies for Brief Pastoral Counseling* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH BACKGROUND, COMPONENTS AND REFLECTIONS

This ministry research project sought to invite inter-generational groups and families of congregants and local residents of our rural community to tell their stories of faith and rural living and share their spiritual wealth. In doing so, persons were invited to make connections between their spiritual strengths and current needs in the rural community, gain insight and understanding, find avenues to resolve grief and gain trust, and reflect theologically on ways they might be change agents to bring God's healing and wholeness to their lives and the lives of their families, churches, and community. The Damascus United Methodist Parish, in northern Wayne County, Pennsylvania, is comprised of two small congregations, the Abrahamsville United Methodist Church (UMC) and the Damascus Manor UMC. By inviting people to tell and celebrate their stories, the Damascus UM Parish, hopes to enrich the rural community by offering a "witness to hope beyond decline ... and a vision that can lift spirits"¹.

This chapter seeks to compare the project briefly described above with other rural listening and ethnographic endeavors, reflect on the demographic background of rural life in the Damascus, Pennsylvania region, and evaluate how these have shaped this ministry project.

¹ Shannon Jung and others, *Rural Ministry, The Shape of the Renewal to Come* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 21.

Other Projects: Sustaining Heart in the Heartland Project

The results of a dialogue formed between clergy and laity about rural spirituality and church ministry in response to the farm crisis of the 1980's by the Churches' Center for Land and People (CCLP) and its ecumenical partners² were published in 2005 in *Sustaining Heart in the Heartland, Exploring Rural Spirituality*, edited by Miriam Brown, OP, the co-coordinator of the project and its lead writer. Up to forty-two people from varied theological and agricultural walks of life met bimonthly in small and large groups over fifteen years to learn about spiritual growth in rural churches and communities in Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois. The project goals were to celebrate rural spirituality, give voice to rural people facing great challenges to faith and community because of the changing nature of farming and rural life, and to capture the values and nature of rural life and its faith communities. One question considered by this project was how the church might be effective in ministry, sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in disenfranchised rural regions.

The authors of the project used the metaphor of heart to describe the way spirituality enlivens rural life and examined many facets of rural spirituality in their summary of conversations and reflections. Noting the varieties of religious expressions, theological viewpoints, and experiences of church, the authors cataloged rural values, hopes, and struggles, as well as positive ways that churches could engage and minister to rural residents in changing and increasingly difficult times. The relationships of people to God, family, community, and the land form the framework of this project's analysis. This book is rich with the voices of many faithful rural Americans struggling to grow

² Miriam Brown, OP, Editor, *Sustaining Heart in the Heartland, Exploring Rural Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, NJ, 2005), vii-xii.

spiritually within this framework as they cope with the stresses of family farm disenfranchisement and social change. Spiritual themes of seeking wholeness and empowerment are woven throughout CCLP's exploration of rural spirituality, and these and other theological themes of the project are meaningfully summarized in the epilogue which is an open letter, by the editor, to the rural community as well as a call to a prophetic country faith:

We know what it is to be Eucharistic people at the bountiful table of our God. We know the kitchen tables of our homes where we eat, plan, worry into the night, welcome kin and neighbors. We enjoy tables at the truck stop cafe, and set up tables for church and community commemorations and festivals. And today when the stakes are so high, we know we must be at other tables too, tables of influence, tables where decisions are being made about “how things will be in this world.” We need to be there to speak our truth from the spiritual places of our hearts.

We must be there. It is about our hearts and souls as people who care for the earth and each other. The questions of sustainability, dignity, and justice are urgent. Where we place our lives is of great importance. We must take back our right to describe “the real world in the language of love, relationships, and spirit. It will make a difference. . . .

We are the people whose first holy words are “and God saw that it was good.” That is the basis of our lives. The world is good and given to all. It is urgent that this vision of the world – as everyone's abundant gift – be the basis of our life choices and the ground from which we speak in our every sphere of influence.³

Echoing Wendell Berry and the ancient prophets, Amos and Micah, in a prophetic call for a moral and political solution to the farm crisis, this *Sustaining Heart* project sees rural people as change agents because of the integration of their daily lives with land, neighbor and faith and the nurturing spiritual life force such integration can support. It provides a comprehensive range of rural voices, summarizes rural life values and issues, and gives helpful ideas and insights for those working in rural ministry.

³ Brown, (2005), 148-149.

The Rural Church Project

The Rural Church Project, conducted in 1998-2000 involved six ethnographers studying six rural churches in six townships in Missouri. The project was performed as part of a larger body of research titled, *Strategies of Well-Being: The Viability of the Rural Church in a Changing Landscape*.⁴ This study observed how the complexities of shifting demographics in a rural region interplay with traditional relationships within the faith community and people's sense of God and spirituality in nature and the land. The project leaders worked to de-mythologize and de-romanticize images of rural life to allow it to be what it is: a place where people work within their relationships with God, nature, community and faith to struggle for well-being amid rapidly changing philosophical, socio-political and cultural changes.

Of particular interest in this study was a close up view of three small rural Methodist churches in a parish, in which negative denominational labels and even the generalizing sociological labels of the research project indicated possible non-viability of the parish due to declining population within the community and church. One researcher observed how the strengths of faith in rural life and community were working toward well-being amid the great socio-economic stresses placed on rural living by huge shifts in farm policies that occurred in the 20th century. “But when we visited the congregations the decline was uneven, and experienced in different ways in each place. In two of the three congregations it was accompanied by strengths that reflected the particular circumstances of the congregation and the environment.”⁵

⁴ Mary Jo Neitz, *Reflections on Religion and Place: Rural Churches and American Religion* (in *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2005) Vol 44, No 3), 243-247.

⁵ Neitz, (2005), 244.

Each of the three rural churches, even though only a few miles apart and some with only a few members, served as sustaining symbols for the struggles of the faith communities they served in different ways. One church was the only remaining building in a rural community that had once been thriving and provided a place of safety and belonging to its few members. Another small membership church in the parish decided to build a large new, high-visibility building to provide space for the vision of the faith community for ministries to children and youth of the new generations and new populations moving into this once predominantly agricultural area. Their vision also included a desire to include much of the stained glass of the old church which the church members felt they needed to continue in worship. The third church in the parish, remote in the beautiful countryside, remained strong in faith tradition in the face of declining population by capitalizing on its strength in family ties. “Members have shared all the significant phases of their lives together, including, now, growing old.”⁶

Each church in the parish sought to retain its individual identity as a religious center for faith, life and sacred spaces for the people living near to them. Author and sociologist Mary Jo Neitz reflects, “Rural life is grounded in the experience of place”⁷ and community. She warns, however, that it is a disservice to lift up a mythic image of the white-steepled church building as a nostalgic symbol of vanishing communal values and American way of life, because it “prevents us from seeing what is really there – both the challenges and possibilities.”⁸ The least among these challenges is integrating different experiences of place and spirituality into the faith community as the population

⁶ Neitz, (2005), 244.

⁷ Neitz, (2005), 245

⁸ Neitz, (2005), 245.

demographics change with the influx of non-agricultural people into rural areas. Rural congregations meet these challenges in a sometimes surprising variety of ways as they seek well-being.

Narrative Research: Reflections and Comparison of Research Projects

Both of the above studies listen to rural residents to investigate rural spirituality and honor it in different ways. *Sustaining Heart in the Heartland* paints the rural spirituality landscape with a wide brush and captures the range, color and depth of many rural voices over a large region speaking to be heard amid the noise of our changing culture. The framework of the study is spirituality as the heart of rural life as it plays out in the interrelationship of the individuals with God, neighbors and land. It is descriptive in nature, and attempts to categorize and summarize the realities of change that place great stress on rural communities today. Providing a helpful spiritual context for understanding these, the study also highlights some of the ways faith and church support individual and communities in their struggles.

The *Rural Church Project* is more specifically an ethnographic research project performed by visiting sociologists who do not frame the realities of rural life within any metaphor but seek to let them speak on their own, working to escape any nostalgic, mythologizing cultural perspective on country life. This study listened to individuals and families speak of their life's experiences of faith and land in times of shifting demographics. Its research area is at the scale of a rural township, a smaller area to observe than the *Heartland* project. The *Rural Project* researchers report and share detailed, in depth observations about the variety of ways individual rural Methodist faith communities help individuals in times of great social change.

Over the past six years, I have observed how important history and heritage is both in the Damascus, Pennsylvania faith community and to the identity of our small parish congregations in Abrahamsville and Damascus Manor. Our churches are seven miles apart and are the two remaining churches in a parish that once boasted four churches in an eleven mile circuit in Damascus Township. Several “Family Stories” skits and programs have been included in worship in our parish on Heritage and Rural Life Sundays, highlighting the spiritual strength of rural ancestors in founding and building the faith community and these events have been enthusiastically received. Our two small congregations have also embraced rural outreach in their ministries through the formation of the PEARL⁹ Center for Rural Ministry, which provides opportunities for rural community members to come together over meals, and for fitness, wellness, affordable food, social justice, mission, and celebrations of rural life.

Like the people interviewed and listened to in the *Rural Project*, the Damascus Area residents are experiencing shifting demographics and fast-paced social change. And like the rural people listened to in *Sustaining the Heart of the Heartland*, their way of life is changing in large part because of unjust governmental policies that favor agri-business over family farming. I have learned through my role as pastor and listener that the people in our Damascus United Methodist Parish are seeking ways to work through and be healed of the grief of loss. It is the loss of people due to their moving away to find work. It is the loss of death and diminished life from poor health. It is also the loss of traditional lifestyles due to detrimental political-economic policies imposed on sparsely-populated rural communities.

⁹ PEARL is an acronym which stands for: Preserving, Enriching and Appreciating Rural Life.

At the same time they are also enthusiastic about growing in ministry and spirit and wish to welcome new generations and new residents, with all their gifts and graces and new economic opportunities into the rural community while preserving the best faith values of the traditional rural ways of life.

Additionally, the residents of Damascus and its United Methodist congregations find the cultural perspectives of traditional rural and newcomer residents in conflict at times. Many people move to the area from more suburban and urban regions for retirement and recreation and have different expectations for the amenities and practices of life in a rural community. Conflicts have recently arisen over the economic development currently promised by deep well fracking extraction¹⁰ methods for natural gas in the region. Newcomers fear it will compromise the natural beauty of the region, while longtime residents feel it will provide economic relief and opportunity to the depressed farming economy. This conflict strains at the ties of community so painstakingly built over time.

This ministry research project, titled, *Telling Our Stories: People in a Rural Community Uncovering Spiritual Strength*, examines two fundamental questions, one developmental and one causative, and investigated them, through small family group interviews and narrative surveys within the context of one small United Methodist rural parish and its surrounding community:

- What are the aspects of rural living that help a person grow in spiritual strength and how does this happen? and,

¹⁰ Deep well fracking extraction is a relatively new mining technique for natural gas located thousands of feet below the earth's surface. It involves injecting fluids under high pressure into the ground to fracture rocks at depth. This process releases the natural gas contained in deep rock to the surface to be mined.

- In what ways can one's spiritual strength help a person and the community grow in wellness and Christian ministry?

The details of the methodology and how the project unfolded as it was implemented are described in the following chapter. The answers to these research questions, to the extent they are uncovered, are described in Chapter 5, which describes the project evaluations and findings.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT PLAN AND IMPLEMENTATION

As discussed in Chapter 3, the idea for this ministry project arose out of observations made in the Damascus, Pennsylvania area about interactions between the socio-economic stresses of rural life in Northeastern Pennsylvania and spiritual strengths within a long-standing United Methodist faith community. It sought to invite rural residents to tell their stories of life and faith and grow from the experience. The project was designed to explore the aspects of rural living that help people grow in spiritual strength and the ways this happens, and find the ways a person's spiritual strength can help them and their community grow in wellness and Christian ministry. This chapter describes the details of the ministry project plan, its methodology and timetable, and how it was implemented at the Damascus United Methodist Charge in the Winter and Spring of 2014.

Project Plan

A prospectus, including project design, timetable and annotated bibliography for this ministry project was developed in conjunction with a colloquium peer group at Drew Theological School following classwork in methods for ministry research. Before beginning the project, the prospectus was reviewed and approved on October 26, 2013. On November 17, 2013, I completed an online training pertaining to research with human subjects provided through the National Institute of Health (Certificate No. 1325670) and

on December 10, 2014, received approval to conduct research for this project from Drew University's Institutional Review Board.

An Advisory Team, consisting of six parish laity, one community member, and one community clergy person, was recruited in the Fall of 2013 by invitation. Members of the Advisory Team were solicited to provide expertise on rural living, rural history, interviewing, scholarly community outreach, and graphic art including videography. Two of the Team members had grown up within the local farm community and the remaining six had moved to the area from more urbanized regions and had lived in the area for ten or more years.

The Advisory Team was invited to help flesh out the project design and take on specific project tasks during its implementation. These tasks included: developing interview questions, determining the appropriate cross-section of the community to be interviewed; recruiting six inter-generational family groups to tell their stories and share their reflections; participating in the interview process with me; analyzing and reflecting on the stories we heard and their meaning; helping to put together a video record of stories; and, assisting with editing written project materials.

After fleshing out the project, the Advisory Team was presented with the approved project design to review and use as our project work plan. In the plan was a timetable for all the project elements which included an initial Advisory Team start-up planning meeting before the project began and a project evaluation meeting (Site Visit) at the project conclusion. At the project planning meeting, we reviewed the project plan in detail and the Advisory Team considered the specifics of the project elements and discussed how we would best carry them out as a Team. If additional meetings were

needed, we could conduct them. As it turned out, my communications with the Advisory Team members during the project implementation were conducted in person, by phone and email as we worked together on the project elements and various areas of expertise came into play in it. Provisions for changes in the project timetable due to weather conditions and other extenuating circumstances were planned in advance by the Advisory Team members at the initial start-up planning meeting, January 2014.

After reviewing the project plan, the Advisory Team members and I discussed who might be good participants for the research study. We decided to partner together in recruiting six intergenerational family groups to be interviewed. Later we discovered, one of the family groups we had recruited was unable to participate due to illness, and after my consultation with my faculty advisor, the Advisory Team agreed we had enough material for the project goals to be met and so we could conclude the project without their input.

Project Methodology

The project interviews took place in participants' homes in inter-generational family groupings and were designed to invite people to describe the ways in which their experiences of rural life relate to their faith and religious practice, first generally, and then in more detail as the generalities of the family group emerged. All participants were to be given opportunities to speak for as long as they desired and the interviewees were invited to reflect theologically and to dream out loud about what God's Spirit might be calling them to envision in the faith community and/or in their personal lives.

The interviews were to be conducted over one to three sessions, over a course of a few weeks, depending on the depth of reflection, the relevance of the story-telling, and

the desire for visioning within the family group. The sessions were envisioned to be one to two hours in length and were to be recorded in video and/or audio format with prior permissions received for use in the research analysis, project write-up, and in a worship setting in our parish. After each interview session, the research material was to be informally evaluated by myself and Advisory Team members present for the interview to see how well the research questions had been addressed and answered and plans were to be made for any additional session (s) and follow-up interview(s). The very first interview of the first family group was treated as trial interview, to test the position and angles of the cameras, the seating of the participants, and lighting so as to guide the remaining interviews. The interview and story-telling material provided by this trial interview was treated as real research material and included with that from the remaining interviews for the project.

As the interviews were completed and the research material evaluated, a video presentation was to be put together using Scriptural elements; interview footage of participants sharing stories, vision, and theological reflections; music; and, photographs of the rural setting contributed by church members. This video presentation was to be shown in a worship setting, celebrating the spiritual strengths gained through rural life and encouraging the larger congregation to recall their own stories and dreams for future growth and ministry in our community.

After an Easter Season worship event, initially planned for April 27, 2014, but later changed to May 11, 2014, a follow-up survey was to be conducted so the family group interview participants could evaluate how they experienced the interview process, the story-telling, reflection, and visioning, and how they felt they might have grown or

changed because of it. A survey was also given to invite all other congregants to evaluate their worship event experience and to glean additional material for assessing rural life spiritual strengths, its potential for spiritual growth, and perceived areas of fruitful future ministries in our rural community.

My own self-evaluation as project leader was envisioned to include a summary of key points from a reflective journal I kept throughout the project of my experiences. As both participant and observer, I recorded my reflections on how the project unfolded and the joys and challenges I encountered and worked through in the project. The journal included my personal observations of the ways I was transformed through the hearing of people's stories of spiritual strength, visions, and hopes in the rural faith community, and what I learned about ministry as a result of the project.

Project Implementation

Throughout 2013, I kept the Pastor-Parish Relations Committee (Human Resources and Ministerial Support) informed about my participation in the Doctor of Ministry Program, classwork, and ideas for the project. They reviewed the prospectus in its draft form in the Fall of 2013. The final prospectus and outline of the project was presented to the Parish Council at their January 2014 administrative meeting in which they were invited to participate in the project and share ideas. Soon after, the congregation was told about the project and invited to participate in a number of ways, supporting it through prayer, answering invitations to be interviewed, collaborating as they could, and watching the video in worship in the spring. These invitations were conveyed through an insert in the weekly worship bulletin, verbal announcements in church, conversations, and emails. Congregants helped set up and participated in interviews and gave feedback through a

survey to the worship experience in which they saw the composite video of stories of rural living and faith. This section describes the work of the Advisory Team in the ministry project, the ways the congregation was invited into the project, the interview process and other aspects of the implementation of the *Telling Our Stories* ministry project.

Advisory Team

In the Fall of 2013, I began recruiting members of an Advisory Team from our congregations and community. Using guidelines in the 2013 Doctor of Ministry Manual and advice given in colloquium as to the need for the team to collaboratively work on the project, I looked for people who appreciated what the project goals were, had ability to participate in meaningful ways in different aspects of the ministry project, and had particular interests in the work of the project from a heritage and history perspective, a community building perspective, an artistic perspective, and a liberatory faith perspective. By Mid-January, we were on schedule with leadership recruitment both in terms of members for the Advisory Team and assigning tasks.

As the team formed, an initial list was drawn-up based on my knowledge of people, interests, and talents. Of the ten people invited to be on the Advisory Team for this project, two indicated they would not have the time. Below is a list of the Advisory Team members and what they brought to the project:

Advisory Team Members

1. Videographer, video assembly, projection – church member
2. Artist and photographer – associate church member

3. Graphic artist and photographer – associate church member
4. All around computer technical know-how – associate church member
5. Community activist and retired professor – helped with background research and demographics – community member
6. Clergyperson in the rural area – editor and reviewer for all written products
7. Local Historian and life-long local rural resident – church member
8. Church historian and longtime rural community member and advocate, videographer – church member

Advisory Team members read the draft prospectus (one team member was in Florida over the winter months) and made suggestions before it was finalized. Some preliminary and additional work done by Advisory Team members was:

Local Historian – Early review of prospectus, developed interview questions

Community Activist – Provided regional and local rural life demographics, provided prospectus overview/vision/deliverable questions, provided a Community Development Book to be added to the Prospectus Bibliography

Clergyperson - Editing of prospectus, and all written project materials, assisted with making the final project

Our work together evolved naturally over the course of the project; we had good communication throughout the project and no major changes to leadership were made after the initial team meeting January 9, 2014. This meeting was our start-up planning meeting and well attended. At this meeting, we reviewed the prospectus again, evaluated the timetable in detail, reviewed the project questions, assigned and re-assigned tasks, and discussed how best to perform the project tasks, including: videography, recruiting

family groups and communicating with the congregation. The Advisory Team recommended using two or three video cameras, if possible, during the interviews, recording at different angles and distances. We discussed the importance of respecting people's desire for privacy in permission requests for using close-up, emotion filled shots, protecting the privacy of children and youth who might be present for the interviews, and the ways we would discuss all this with participants before the interviews commenced.

There was an air of excitement and positivity about the project and one team member passionately expressed how important it was for all of us to hear the stories of longtime rural folks in our communities, whose stories might soon be lost. We briefly discussed the Sacramental and Incarnational nature of the project: listening to people share their life and faith experiences and make connections between the two, appreciating the holiness in the ways God is present in our lives and made present for others when we tell our stories and grow spiritually in the process. Most of our communications and work together, before and after the project start-up meeting, was done via group and individual emails, conversations, and on-project discussions.

Soliciting Congregational Interest and Selecting Family Groups

In the late part of 2013 and early part of 2014, announcements were made in church via preaching, bulletin announcements and emails describing the *Telling Our Stories* Project. The Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, our parish ministry leadership group, was asked to help support it within the congregation and community. Additionally, the information presented below was disseminated in a bulletin/newsletter format and discussed among the Damascus United Methodist Charge congregations:

Upcoming Project: Telling Our Stories: Our Rural Community's Spiritual Strengths

Listening to people's stories of local history, family relationships and experiences, community relationships and events, faith development, their deep appreciation of the natural beauty around them and the ways they have learned to make their living from the land, provides us with rich and compelling spiritual resources to help us grow in faith.

Telling our stories about all these opens us to appreciating the ways God has worked in our community and lives to bless us, and guides us into the future both as individuals, families, a church, and a community.

This February and March you will have an opportunity to tell your story – This April our congregations will have a chance to listen.

You, your family and ministry or community group are invited to participate in a series of video-interviews to share your stories of rural life and faith. The interviews are part of a project to gather the spiritual wisdom and resources present among us and celebrate them.

For more information, please contact Pastor Jean Blackie, 570-224-4637, jeanblackie@att.net, or Denise Wood, 570-224-4113, sticher9@verizon.net. Sponsored by the Damascus United Methodist Charge PEARL Center for Rural Ministry: **P**reserving, **E**nriching and **A**ppreciating **R**ural **L**ife and supported by Drew Theological School, Madison, NJ

What's involved? Gathering in small groups to sit around a table to discuss a series of questions designed to explore stories of rural life and faith.

- One to three interviews this February and March
- Each interview is one to two hours and scheduled at a convenient time and place
- Giving your permission to video-tape the interview and use selected video clips in a worship setting
- Giving permission to use the interview discussion material in a written project for Drew Theological School
- Careful consideration and reflection of the interview questions
- Remembering what is enriching about rural life
- A willingness to share what you think about country living
- Answer a brief follow-up survey to see how you enjoyed this experience and what you learned.

The team worked within the churches and community to solicit multi-generational family groups for interviews. We wanted to include people who might not be part of a multi-generational family group presently living in our area, but whose stories would enhance the project goals to broaden our pool of participants and gain more valuable insights into rural living and faith. In order to achieve this, we developed this definition

of family group for this project: an inter-generational biological family group of two to eight people or a group of two to eight individuals who may not be related biologically but are comfortable enough with one another so that they could be asked the research questions and provide authentic, meaningful responses. In this way, people who were widowed, whose family members had moved away, and whose biological family members were not able to or interested in being interviewed, could share their stories of spiritual strength and visions for God's work in our rural faith community. Additionally, we looked for family groups that had some historic ties to making a living on the land and/or traditional rural ways of life.

The six groups that resulted from our inquiries were:

1. A group of five people, one man and three women, not biologically related. Four were widowed and all had adult children who lived outside of the immediate area. These people, four female and one male, had all spent significant amounts of their childhoods on a farm. Two of the five had farmed as their livelihood for much of their adult life. The other three had adult professions as a nurse in the county hospital, a postmaster, and a lawyer and were now retired. This group consisted of devout church members, all of whom had grown up in a church and expressed a strong faith. They were interviewed in three sessions.
2. A group of six people in three generations, consisting of a mother, daughter and son, daughter-in-law and two adult grandchildren. In this family group the mother had farmed for a livelihood. Her children grew up farming but as adults worked in excavation and construction (the son) and as a chef (daughter) and her grandchildren had never worked in farming. This group consisted of a mixture of devout, long-time church members and

sometime church goers, all of whom expressed deep faith in God. They were interviewed in three sessions.

3. A group of four people in three generations, biologically related, consisting of a 93 year old father, his son, a grandson and a grandniece. The father and son had farmed for their livelihood (dairy) but now the son had an automotive tire business. The grandson worked in farming (horse) and farm related businesses and the grandniece worked as an aide at a nearby nursing home. All in this group were devoted church members (our church and a nearby Seventh Day Adventists Church) who expressed a deep faith in God. They were interviewed in two sessions.

4. A group of two people, a mother and daughter, who were part of an intergenerational farm family. The mother had been raised on a farm and worked in farming all her life, and her son (who unfortunately declined being interviewed) and his children were continuing farming. In addition to traditional dairy farming they now operated an artisan cheese creamery and specialty meat businesses. The daughter had left farming as a young adult to become a teacher. This group consisted of devoted church members (local and in North Carolina) who expressed a deep faith in God. They were interviewed in one session.

5. A group of three biologically related people, consisting of two sisters almost a generation apart in age and their niece. The two sisters had grown up on a farm but as adults had other professions in banking and real estate. The niece worked in the family trucking business which her parents had started to transport milk from nearby dairy farmers to processing plants. This family had recently purchased an old farm so that younger generations could learn and work in various farming practices. All three in this

group were devoted, long-time church members who expressed a strong faith in God. They were interviewed in one session.

6. A family group of six people, biologically related, consisting of a father, his two sons, his daughter and son-in-law and their teenage daughter, who were ultimately unable to participate in the interviews during the project timeframe due to a variety of health and other reasons.

Developing the Interview Questions and Evaluation Forms

Our project began with a review of regional and local rural ethnographic studies provided in part by one of the Advisory Team, intense reading of theological works on rural ministry and pastoral ethnography gathered for the annotated bibliography in the prospectus, and a review of works on the power of narrative in mind-body-spirit health and spiritual growth, both practically and theologically. Interview questions were initially designed by a life-long rural resident, who advised us to keep the questions simple. Both the interview questions and the follow-up survey questions for interview participants and congregants were evaluated in relationship to and consideration of the project goals, background reading, and responses in early interviews. They were then revised as needed to improve the quality of storytelling and spiritual reflection they were designed to elicit. The final interview questions and participant and congregational evaluation surveys are provided in Appendix 3.

Interviews and Processing Video Footage

As participants expressed interest in the project, the project was explained to them and a copy of the interview questions (Appendix 3) were given to them to think about

before the interviews. Also before the participants were interviewed, the project expectations were reviewed (see above) and a permission request form was presented to them, read through with them and their signature noted on it. No one refused to sign it and all the participants said they were comfortable with this consent process. The contents of the permission form are listed here:

Participant Informed Consent for “Telling Our Stories: Our Rural Community’s Spiritual Strengths”:

- I give permission to the “*Telling Our Stories*” Project Team to ask questions relevant to the project goals of exploring rural life and faith, and video-taping my responses for use in gaining knowledge for ministry in our rural community.
- I understand that all video-tape responses will be kept confidential and not shared without my permission.
- I give permission for short video-clips and photos from the video-tape to be used in a worship presentation during the Spring of 2014 and material from the interviews to be used in a written project for Drew Theological School.
- I agree to answer a brief survey after the Easter season as to how this interview experience helped me understand and express my faith and gain insight into rural life and Christian discipleship.
- I understand that at any time I can withdraw my permissions, simply by informing one of the project team and amending this permission form.
- I certify that I am over 18 years of age.

Name _____ Date _____

Additionally, at the beginning of each interview session, the family group number, date and participants present were recorded and the following information was reviewed with all the participants in the family group present for the interview:

Thank you for coming today for our ____ session together. And thank you in advance for your willingness to share your life and faith in this way.

The interview questions we’ll follow, as a rough outline, are a way for us to get into a discussion about - What the aspects of rural living are that help a person grow in spiritual strength and how that growth happens.

You are the experts, so it is your experiences, stories, thoughts and reflections, that will help others understand more about what is so precious about rural life for our faith, both as individuals, and as a culture, really, because

our country rose up out of rural living but now the majority of people in it live in urban areas.

Also, by listening to you, as your pastor, I learn about the ways a person's spiritual strengths can help a person and the community grow in wellness and Christian ministry, and that helps me to grow more effective in my work as minister.

Let's (go over) or (review) what's involved and the informed consent form briefly.

The video camera equipment, usually two or three cameras, was set-up and positioned as the family group gathered around a table at their home or at the church (Group 1). An initial brief video test was done to ensure coverage and optimal positioning of each camera. The interviews of the family groups were conducted and the interview material reviewed, saved and labeled, backed-up, and assessed as the project proceeded. Two Advisory Team members were the main videographers, and I also assisted with operating the video cameras. We used the following cameras over the course of the project:

- A SONY Video Camera Recorder which broke and was later replaced by a new SONY digital HD Video Camera Recorder and tripod
- An Apple iPhone 4S Video Camera
- An Apple iPad Video Camera

Interview Timetable: Weather, Video Camera and Health Issues

In addition to several difficult weather weeks with snow and ice in late January, February, and early March which slowed us down in our interviews, we encountered several problems over the course of the project. As mentioned previously, two people, a couple could not participate on the Advisory Team due to new job stresses and long travel times for work. We decided to go with the group that had already been coalescing and

adjusted our Advisory Team workload and schedules. Although not enlisted to be part of the formal Advisory Team, we looked for others in the congregation (lay leaders) and community to collaborate with us where needed.

In one family group, there was an initial fear about being interviewed in that they interpreted the interview questions as a test of their faith. The interview questions were re-evaluated. The other groups were not having this issue, so we made only minor adjustments in the questions but spent more time with them at the beginning of the sessions answering questions and assuring them that we were interested in their stories and reflection for their own merits, not on judging them. Once the initial interview proceeded and this group saw how the questions were truly, as stated, only a guideline for the conversation, they relaxed and more of the family participated.

Mid-way through the interviews, our main video-camera broke and could not be repaired within the timeframe of the project, so a new one was purchased. Additional problems were encountered in working with the video software, Windows Movie Maker, which was not as easy to work with as we had anticipated and required hours of technical support from the software manufacturer, in order for us to finish the video by the project end date.

These events resulted in a slower beginning to the project in January and February with a fuller workload in March and April as we completed the project. With the encouragement of my faculty advisor and the approval of the Advisory Team, we extended the interview and worship presentation. We were then able to complete the project within the allowable timeframe in spite of the time setbacks. The interviews were able to be completed on May 2, 2014 and the worship presentation took place on May 11,

2014. In order to show the video in a worship setting within the allowable timeframe we decided to go with a simpler presentation software format, *Apple iMovie*, which actually turned out to be better for the congregation's viewing, given the technology available in the churches.

Celebrating the Project

In order to access key insights and important stories told in the interviews, I watched all the video footage after each interview and roughly outlined the content. From this outline, I was able to pull video footage from the interview videos and put together a 30 minute film to be used in worship to celebrate the spiritual strengths of the rural community. The film was divided into three parts titled, "Country Life", "Country Values" and "Country Faith" and each part was introduced with a country scene photograph donated by an artist on the Advisory Team.

Of course, in a thirty minutes film, only a small portion of the interview footage could be shown and many hours of splicing and editing was done to get it into this timeframe. Most of this work was done by the Advisory Team members and me. The film, that was shown in worship on May 11, 2014, was only a small portion of the project. Its purpose was to let the congregation in on some of the riches uncovered when the rural people of our congregations and community told their stories and uncovered spiritual strengths and encourage other congregation members to reflect on their own spiritual strengths. After the worship video, the project participants were asked to evaluate their experience in being interviewed. The congregation was then asked to comment on their experience of seeing the worship video. The results of these evaluations are presented in Chapter 5. To maintain the confidentiality of the

participants, the worship video and all interview video footage is currently kept only on the church office computers. At present, I am the only person with access to these video files and when the project has been written up, I will remove the video footage to a DVD to keep with my personal school and research files or destroy.

On May 13, 2014 a Site Visit was conducted at the Abrahamsville United Methodist Church in Damascus, PA, one of the two small churches in the Damascus United Methodist Parish, with myself (the project investigator), the Advisory Team, and Rev. Dr. David Lawrence, the project faculty advisor, present to conclude and evaluate the project. The project was discussed and evaluated by all and both the project and the spiritual strength of the rural community were celebrated. The results of this project evaluation are presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION AND FINDINGS

This chapter explores the impact of the *Telling Our Stories* project on people in the Damascus United Methodist Parish and surrounding community, both during the implementation of the project in the Winter and Spring of 2014 and since then to the present. It includes: theological themes that emerged from the project, celebratory aspects and, areas found needing growth and healing. In this chapter, I seek to shine light on what the value of this project, *Telling Our Stories*, has been from the viewpoints of the Advisory Team, the project participants, the congregants, myself, and our parish and community. In it I also reflect on and evaluate what I have learned as a researcher, and the ways in which the faith community and I have experienced spiritual growth and healing in this ministry setting as a consequence of implementing this project.

Advisory Team, Participant and Congregational Evaluations

The Advisory Team members evaluated the project formally for the May 13, 2014 Site Visit at the project's completion. The project participants evaluated the project after their interviews were completed and upon viewing a short composite film of the interviews shown during our May 11, 2014 Sunday worship service, and submitted within a month of the viewing. The congregation was also invited to share their evaluations of the project after viewing the film. This section describes and discusses the overall enjoyment and celebration of rural life and faith this project generated in the

parish and community, as well as some of the valuable spiritual insights and reflections that were shared with us in the evaluations.

Advisory Team Evaluations

The talents and interests of the Advisory Team both inspired and made this ministry project possible. Two local historians brought a deep interest in history and family stories to the team. Another lifted up the belief in the deep connection between faith and community health. Two artists expressed their sense that the faithful country community has a beauty that can contribute to the mind-body-spirit health of the community and wider world. All the Advisory Team members held a lively interest in the ministries of our rural parish which enhanced my own desire to work with my congregations for mutual wellness and growth in our ministry and life together. The thoughtful responses of the Advisory Team in the project evaluations at the conclusion of the research portion of the ministry project were invaluable to this assessment of the project's effectiveness and to my self- evaluation as well. The Advisory Team evaluations are all dated May 13, 2014, the date of our project conclusion (Site Visit).

In their evaluations, all Advisory Team members reported that they had been given and read the project prospectus; understood the purposes, goals and ministries proposed for the project; been trained in their duties and made aware of the nature and scope of the project; either attended the initial start-up Advisory Team meeting or were informed of its results; and through previous and ongoing communications, in person or via telephone or email, felt they had input to and access to project communications. All but one Advisory Team member attended the concluding Site Visit.

Except for two project adjustments made by the Advisory Team, to accommodate timeline changes due to difficult winter weather and one family group being unable to participate due to illness, the Advisory Team felt we followed the project Prospectus in the implementation of the Project and completed all the actions required.

The videographers on the Advisory Team reported that they personally found the interviewing phase to be interesting and rewarding not only from a historical point of view but also in connecting them to their own family stories, histories and values. One local historian noted the project resulted in enrichment in relationships among the congregants and between the congregations and the church ministries. The artists on the Advisory Team expressed how working on the project helped them personally in their own deepening of faith, understanding of the value the faith community holds for the wider community, and gaining encouragement in learning and reaching out in spiritual matters and ministries. Advisory Team member, No 3. Wrote: “I’ve ... personally experienced greater dedication to our church and ... its members because of ... shared life experiences and a reaffirmation of how much our church community means to us. It’s [*our church community*] proven to be a greater anchor and oasis than I imagined....”¹

The two Advisory Team members who were not members of the congregations, noted that as community residents, they heard from people participating in the project that they enjoyed telling their stories and felt the project was beneficial to them, the congregations and the community. Some concrete examples of this were the embracing

¹ Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7th Ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 261, Guidance for citing interview material and personal communications

of a new community garden developed by our parish and the idea for a future arts and spirituality workshop for our community.

The Site Visit Evaluation asked the Advisory Team members to consider the overall effects of the project on the Advisory Team, the congregation and myself as researcher. The responses to these questions indicated the Advisory Team members saw and experienced many positive, even joyful impacts during implementation of the project. Two of the Advisory Team members noted they saw growth in my understanding of and insight into the rural community, its members, and its life of faith through readings and discussions which inspired and gladdened them. Advisory Team member, No. 2, wrote:

We all learned along with Pastor Jean, ..., we all grew from reaching out beyond our comfort zone to ... [do] what was needed. Seeing the positive results in Advisory Team members and interview participants. Witnessing their gifts of personal spirituality [and] important stories of strength ... gave us all the feeling that any project we would undertake in the future would also have this faith and support to succeed.

Advisory Team member, No. 8, was both a videographer for one family group interview and a participant in another family group interview and shared this reflection: "I like how this project brought together several generations and we could ... learn from one another. My 94 year old neighbor shared some fascinating memories of growing up here His views on the community pulling together during WWII were wonderful and I still believe it would be the same today."

Advisory Team member, No. 7, a local historian and life-long member of our rural community, shared the following reflection:

... I am deeply moved and delighted that the efforts of those involved have produced such a loving tribute to our way of life. The sincerity of those interviewed drew me closer to them with an understanding I have not (to now)

known of them. This reaffirmed ... values of hard work, shared strife and joy, caring for one another, being good solid neighbors – always lending a hand when needed...and all with thanks to God; the way life should be lived.

This comment from Advisory Team member, No. 1, our videographer, showed some of the positive effects felt by someone who experienced many of the interviews from behind the camera lens:

[Coming from] New York City, no one knew I spent about half my life in the country with my grandfather who was a farmer... While I was videotaping all the interviews, I was taken back to my childhood in Puerto Rico. I would listen to a story and I could relate to it because of my grandfather. Many times people were surprised and moved that a city boy could have so much in common with country living. From my grandfather I learned many things like living off the land, working hard, family values, friendship, and most important of all, God! I learned that with faith in God, all things are possible.

Reflections offered by Advisory Team member, No. 2 were:

Witnessing the very personally deep expressions of spirituality in the interviewed participants gives us more faith, hope and strength that God has always been present and will be in the future to help us weather through the difficulties life sends. Hearing the different families tell such similar stories of appreciation of being given gifts, of stewardship of the land, to grow food and raise farm animals, of the comfort of the support of family and neighbors through crises and need, and the respect for each other's work, no matter what job or salary or age was amazing. Especially in this fast-paced modern age of competitiveness, I feel the importance of using these stories to educate others who don't give a thought to where their daily bread originates other than from the supermarket. I think the families involved in the interviews feel confirmation and valued since their interview of importance of their choice in living in faith and the rural community.

The Advisory Team was also asked to evaluate my leadership on the project. Generally, they agreed in their evaluations that I had taken initiative to educate the Advisory Team, church leaders, and the congregation about the project through invitations, meetings, emails, phone calls, bulletin inserts, parts of sermons and in both formal discussions and casual conversations, which explained project objectives and expectations and kept them, church leaders (Pastor-Parish Relations Committee and

Church Councils) and congregants informed of our progress. In these ways, the Advisory Team reported, I had demonstrated to the congregation the potential benefits of the project for the life and ministry of the congregation. One Advisory Team member declined to comment on this because they were not a part of the congregation and did not think they had the knowledge to do so. The following comments were given by various Team members in response to the question about the strengths and weaknesses of my leadership:

Pastor Jean's strengths are demonstrating consistency in getting done what we set out to do, tending to parish responsibilities and demands on time with unexpected emergencies, honest and strong desire to give of her time tenderly to help the community, calmness and flexibility with weather issues.

Pastor Jean was always open to suggestions about how to improve our efforts. Her leadership qualities enabled her to gently steer committee members to take on tasks that utilized their strengths.

Strengths are: Pastor Blackie's ability to describe in detail the goals of the project; recruit helpers which gladly participate; and make all (even those who did not get involved) feel a part of the project.

In their evaluations, the Advisory Team agreed that I guided the Team's work sufficiently and stayed engaged with their work progress, sharing the results of the research, involving the Advisory Team in its interpretation, and also demonstrating effective and appropriate communications skills in my leadership. Another helpful consideration of my work in the project stated:

Over the course of the project, I observed Jean become more adept and less stressed when problems arose, i.e. rescheduling of interview sessions in bad weather. This was due to a change in her style of handling things. Prior to starting the project she was a procrastinator and shortly after starting the project she became proactive, not allowing things to pile up on her plate and not being rushed and hurried when problems arose. This was an extremely positive change in character.

Interview Participant Evaluations

Those people who participated in the family group interviews in this *Telling Our Stories* ministry project completed participant surveys at the end of the research phase, in which they were asked to evaluate their experiences. The participants generally said that the interviews were an enjoyable experience. A few noted that they had initially been nervous or reluctant but were glad they overcame these feelings because telling their stories was meaningful to them. Together, the Advisory Team and I worked with those who expressed these feelings to see how we might put them at ease in the interviews.

Two participants expressed how honored they felt to be listened to in the project and thanked us. All participants agreed it was interesting to hear other family and group members share their experiences. They indicated it was eye-opening to uncover how important living in the country was to them as well as to others in their family groups who participated. The similarity of their experiences within each group and also among the groups, which became more apparent during the worship video showing, was very affirming to them. Several talked about the importance of the rest of world hearing what rural people had to say about country life and faith. One older participant learned that because of her age, she had a lot to share and found the experience positive and beneficial, allowing her not only to appreciate rural life anew but to access how much it has changed over the course of her lifetime.

The theme of family, and church and community as extended family, came up in a few participant evaluations. More than one participant expressed how being interviewed was a wonderful experience, because it gave an opportunity to be with family members, hear their stories and learn from them. The learning was in hearing and understanding

what loved ones thought, held dear, found meaningful to them, and what their hopes and prayers were. One young adult wrote, "I enjoyed the interviews because in today's fast paced world I never get to sit and talk with anyone, so it was fun to hear everyone's opinions about things." Another in the same Family group wrote that this experience had brought learning, healing and wholeness to him because, "...Every time I talk with my family, friends, and neighbors I come away refreshed....I am constantly amazed by how composed and thoughtful my mother and siblings can be." This participant also recorded pride in his family members because of the interview. Another participant indicated a deeper respect for her family members after hearing their stories of faith and country life. One young adult found healing in talking about her feelings of rural living, faith, and family.

Another theme that emerged in the interviews was the richness of life in simplicity and the many values gained by country living. When asked to evaluate why the rural perspective is important for people to hear and if being listened to in the interviews was helpful to them as a rural resident, participants responded with these comments:

Rural people need to be better understood.

It is important because others who don't have the privilege of growing up here may not know how wonderful and blessed our simpler life is here in the country which God made.

It is important for people to hear that rural life is very precious in that what comes from the land is good, nutritious and satisfying; that what we learn from each other is invaluable; that the respect we have for one another cannot be matched; and that God has provided for us, we just need to reap the harvest.

Rural folks have more hands on experience with life. When someone has an accident, we are a part of it and we help them through the tragedy and recovery.

In the city, I believe people assume someone else will help out. Here, we feel their pain and reach out to make it better.

I think people should listen to rural people more because they tend to have a better sense of community than city people. Not everyone is just out there doing their own thing. People around here think about the area as a whole, more.

I think we have a more settled, less frantic grasp on life. The interview showed me that we rural folks have the same or similar views, morals and hopes for our future. We all know change is inevitable but we do not want this area's values and flavor to change.

Just because we are country people doesn't mean we are not good stewards in managing the land. Country people have been successfully managing the land for a much longer time compared to the ways the city people have introduced. It is helpful to be listened to because you find out that others have the same concerns as yourself.

Rural people have learned how to survive on less and live off the land, they know how to improvise.

The community strength, support and help of neighbors in times of trouble mentioned in the evaluation comments above was another major theme in the interview stories and several additional comments were made about the importance of community to rural living in the participants' evaluations. One participant noted that by participating in the project he learned that our community was stronger than he had thought and that the church is more a center for our community than he had previously thought. Another participant said, "I am 60 years old and can honestly say I can't remember ever hearing anyone in the community say "no" to a request for help. ... Our fast paced lives today seem to prevent us from coming together but the church can be a central gathering place we should use more." One participant felt that by hosting this project, our church was trying to be more relevant to the rural community.

The evaluations expressed ways participants learned about their faith by being listened to and hearing others. Several shared how telling stories about faith affirmed

their belief in God and enhanced it, and also impressed upon them the importance of faith to life, as they considered how God has helped them in times of great loss and provided them with so much beauty in creation, family, and rural living. One participant expressed that she was still learning about the ways her faith and life intersect and that this project has helped her realize how good God has been to her and her family and strengthened for her the connection between God and rural life. “By thinking more deeply of all God has given to us”, another participant reflected, “and to put it to use in life makes me want to give back ... thinking these deeper thoughts about faith, and love of my neighbors, brings wholeness to my life, gives me greater devotion to God and reminds me to lay my trials and tribulation on God.”

Upon seeing the worship video, one participant found her faith growing through the realization that God has touched and helped all people in all sorts of life events – good and bad – and found her faith re-enforced by the learning that God's presence is with all people and God helps us in every need. All of the participant evaluations agreed that the worship video was good to watch and helped them see themselves as a vital part of our rural community and its shared experiences, values and dreams.

Congregational Evaluations

When asked to respond after watching the thirty minute summary video of the *Telling Our Stories* project interviews in Sunday worship on May 11, 2014, seeing and hearing their church friends and neighbors sharing their stories, twenty-four congregants responded with written comments. Several of these congregant responses also expressed feelings of blessing and gratitude for the spiritual richness of country living. One

congregant wrote, “Friends and neighbors are a greater wealth than any monetary amount... [This] is a real community family.” Another observed, “We are united in love and Christian fellowship!”

Some congregational responses focused more on expressions of faith and spirituality and their relationships to the community:

It reminded me how the shared values of these people bind them together so that in times of need they are there for each other.

I'm impressed by neighbors respect for the land, each other's privacy, each other's needs, and desire to preserve this rich way of life.

Everyone has a story to tell. We can never know what anyone is going through without walking in their shoes.

This confirmed the value of what we are blessed to have: a faith community that helps us lead a meaningful, good life.

Some congregants responded to the questions about the ways they were enriched in their view of rural life, their faith, and in healing and wholeness by seeing this video in worship. They reflected:

I love the way of life with all kinds of animals to raise. It has definitely enriched my faith and sense of wholeness.

My faith is enriched by having realized we are all part of one body, with Christ as the head.

Traveling by the beautiful farms I experience a gift of such peace, wonder and thankfulness. Now knowing the strength of these families, confirming what I had heard before and experienced myself in their being there for others in times of need, I have happiness added to the gift of beauty.

These stories of faith have given me momentum to grow in my own faith, letting God into more hours in my day to guide me through good times and with the help of this rural community, through bad times in life's ups and downs.

Self-Evaluation

In order to evaluate my work in this project and see how I was affected by the stories, I recorded my experiences and evaluations from design phase through completion in a reflective journal. In this section, I first share how I followed the structure and process for the project as designed for timetable, meetings, research, leadership recruitment, and collaborative work. Then I take a critical look at how well I fulfilled the project design and the ways I interpreted and dealt with the problems that arose in carrying out the project (misunderstandings, failures of communication, negative feedback, obstructions to its progress). Finally, I give my assessment of my leadership in the project, evaluating strengths and weaknesses in my leadership and describe some of my learnings about ministry as a result of this project.

My interest in and valuing of the voices of my rural parishioners, as well as the health of the congregation and my own, were motivations for pursuing this project. I appreciated the inspiring confidence gained from working with both my Doctor of Ministry colloquium as well as the Advisory Team, who confirmed my feeling that this project was worthwhile in the face of denominational disinterest in small rural churches and their voice and health, as well as initial academic discouragement of a narrative research project. This confidence and support was instrumental in the inception, design, development and implementation of this project.

The main part of research for background, interviews, and theological reflections consisted of a review of regional and local rural ethnographic studies, intense reading of theological works on rural ministry and pastoral ethnography, and a review of works on the power of narrative in mind-body-spirit health and spiritual growth. This gave a solid

basis for the project work to stand on when I began leadership recruitment by gathering together a well-rounded Advisory Team and assigning project tasks. I was pleased with the varying ages, spiritual gifts and graces, faith levels, talents and skills, and good relationships among the Advisory Team members, which included a family group of parents and young adult son. Frequent communications among Advisory Team members and me, as well as congregants and our parish administration, led to a smooth start to the project.

With completion of research and collection of materials, plus evaluation of the narrative material in the *Telling Our Stories: People in a Rural Community Uncovering Spiritual Strength* project, I can see I have been able to gain a deeper understanding of the socio-economic stresses and strengths facing rural communities, both regionally and locally. In assessing my leadership in the project, I can see some strengths and weaknesses, areas I excelled and areas where I need to grow.

I believe my leadership style in general is a collaborative style, which invites creativity and includes the gifts and contributions of others and that this style worked well for the project. As the project unfolded, I found a tension between joy and apprehension inherent in this leadership style. I first noticed this tension in the project colloquium during the design phase, when working collaboratively with my cohorts, I understood that to achieve my research goals, I needed to revamp almost every aspect of my hypothesis testing project design and develop a narrative research design for the project. Although fraught with apprehension, my cohorts encouraged me and I gained confidence in my own voice in the research planning process. This led to a much improved prospectus and project design and joy because it was the project I really wanted

to do and not the one I had thought I should do based on a previous understanding of allowable research methods.

Additionally, the narrative research aspect of this project was a new area of learning for me. The collaborative nature of the project and the hands-on role of the Advisory Team in it meant we were all learning together and I was not as much in control as I might have been in other research ventures. In the beginning stages of the project, I noted in my reflective journal how the collaborative work with the Advisory Team was so enjoyable. As we moved into the project implementation I began to experience increased apprehension.

Although all of the Advisory Team members were enthusiastic, had significant skills to offer to the project and were very dedicated throughout it, ultimately, I was the one who would be held responsible for the implementation and outcome. The changes in timetable due to bad weather and illnesses increased my apprehension and I was grateful for calm reassurance from my faculty advisor on two occasions as he listened and made helpful suggestions for accommodating to the difficulties we ran into on the project within the allowable timeframe for it.

A few times over the course of the project, apprehension about project implementation led to discussions with members of the Advisory Team. One event occurred when I felt a videographer was talking too much about himself during the interview process, and another time when we were struggling through the video editing process. Both times, I was glad I did, because speaking of my apprehensions seemed to invite those I spoke with to offer more help and advice, which they did, ultimately

improving the project. I also learned (in the case of the videographer) that other viewpoints on the project processes could be as valid, or more so, than my own.

Acknowledging my apprehension and sitting with it over the course of the project has been very helpful in that, since the project has ended, I have felt better equipped to deal with time crunches and manage time in a less stressful manner. I have also become empowered to work more collaboratively in every aspect of my ministry here in Damascus and even to insist on it. I can remember a seminary professor saying, “Don't ever do ministry by yourself; always do it with a parishioner.” This advice made sense to me but when appointed to the Damascus United Methodist parish, a combination of my own chafing at sharing control of my pastoral efforts and the tendency of some folks here who wished to not participate in ministry but to let the pastor do it resulted in a less than ideal collaborative atmosphere. I feel now that this aspect of collaborative ministry overall is more balanced.

There was both joy and apprehension in the interview listening process. Like collaboration in ministry, I felt I had a certain skill level in listening as pastoral care going into this project which was deepened through its implementation. However, beginning the interviews with each family group was like entering into a new relationship with them. Although over the years, many of those interviewed had church relationships and some even a friendship with a clergy person, especially in times of sickness, death, and tragedy, a pastor had never asked to come into their homes and interview them in depth about their stories of rural life and faith.

Although I had spent many hours visiting some of these folks in such times of intense pastoral care, this was a different type of listening. It was more than a validation

of a spiritual crisis or need; it was an intentional, planned out, and academically rigorous validation of a way of life and believing. This listening had a powerful effect on me and as they shared their stories of spiritual wisdom and strengths, I came to view my parishioners in new ways of mutual blessing, so that through my own emotional responses to their stories, I could learn about myself as much as I did of them and their faith journey in our rural setting.

Listening to participants before, during, and after the interview process helped to overcome the distrust parishioners feel many times for clergy. My listening to people tell their stories seemed to remind people how I had been there for them in times of personal and family sickness, death, and even great tragedy. The interview became an extension of previous pastoral care experiences with them in that I became aware of a depth of appreciation in the church and community for my pastoral care in times of trouble. The project allowed people to talk not only about their faith in historical terms but also the ways I as pastor, and the current congregation, have impacted them. As one interview participant expressed it: the telling and listening resulted in our increased respect for one another.

As Nelle Morton observed, listening to people in such a way that they can be heard into being helps the hearer as well.² This aspect of pastoral care happens when the emotions of those cared for evoke one's own emotions and the spiritual reflections of those listened to inspire spiritual reflection in the listener. The interviews in this project initiated a time of emotionally and spiritually intense examination for me, in which I was

² Morton, 1985, 210.

able to come to terms with some of my unresolved life issues around failure, faith, and family and make progress in resolving and reconciliation.

Listening to participants speak of the value of family relationships invited me to attend to my family relationships with renewed enthusiasm and joy, and to grow within them to greater emotional and spiritual maturity (self-differentiation). Listening to the honest pride in the hard work of rural life, and the ways faith helped so many living honestly to find fulfillment in living with the land, propelled me into a time of reflection on my life's work, celebrating its successes and working through sorrow and remorse for its failures. The process leading to ordination for me was one that distanced me from the community of faith to embrace the community of clergy colleagues. Listening to the project participants tell their compelling stories of faith and community reset the balance for me of my dual role as pastor within these two communities, the congregation I serve and the community of clergy colleagues. It brought me a renewed sense of humility around the role of pastor as servant and learner in the local church and a renewed sensitivity for the ways the larger denomination needs to support the local church, bringing it to the center of bureaucratic purpose.

I think my ability to understand when to ask for help is a communication strength in my leadership of this project. It emerged first in seeking assistance through the Drew Theological School Doctor of Ministry program to develop the project, and subsequently receiving assistance from colleagues and faculty in clarifying project goals and designing the prospectus, and then seeking help and assistance from the Advisory Team and congregation in times of stress during the project and other ministry work.

Near the end of the project, a tragedy occurred for me, when I went to visit a church member and found her dead or near death. Upon calling 911, I was urged by the dispatcher to administer CPR until the EMTs arrived – all to no avail in reviving her. I felt so overwhelmed and depressed by this experience, I sought family and professional help to recover. Having recently heard the many stories of volunteers helping in time of crisis, this tragic event helped me experience some of our community servant stresses first hand and both appreciate and enter more fully into the long-standing commitment of those in this rural community to give much of oneself in helping others.

Project Findings

My role as Team leader in this collaborative ministry project afforded me opportunities for spiritual growth and leadership development in ministry which resulted in deepened faith, and increased personal well-being in emotions, in relationships with family, friends, and congregants. Some personal growth experiences that happened while the project was being implemented which were a direct result of my interactions with the project Advisory Team and the interview participants were:

- Increased courage to check perspectives out with congregants, team members, and family members; more enjoyment from collaborative work
- The blessing of a renewed sense of the importance of my own family. This empowered to prioritize my family relationships, past and present, as a minister. I find I have been able to achieve increased self-differentiation and healthier detachment from ministry work. This has helped me in both ministerial leadership and personal well-being.

- Ability to deepen my understanding of the power of affirmation, see its positive effect among the interview participants and congregants, use it to promote spiritual growth and relate it to many other areas of life, resulting in self-forgiveness, self-affirmation, more joy in life, and improved personal relationships.

With my increased trust in the healing work of the congregation, detachment from unnecessary control, and encouragement and support of people in using their gifts, I find people are much more willing to engage in deeper ministerial interactions with me. I sense they trust me more and feel empowered to ask questions of me more.

Looking back over the past year, I find my collaboration with the Drew Theological school colloquium, the project Advisory Team and the participants helped me to enjoy this ministry project more than I had imagined I could, trusting and inviting others to share their gifts and graces for mission and ministry. I find myself freed from having to do it all, trusting the Scriptural truth that we are all gifted and graced in the Body of Christ. Although I had known this before through my pastoral training and experiences of the ups and downs of providing pastoral care and working in parish ministry, I experienced a deeper and more emotionally relevant affirmation of it and was able to trust it more through this project. A result of this project is that as pastor, I am different, and have a more joyful, calmer, non-anxious presence in the parish, more able to sense and help empower the Spirit's rising in people and within the community. New collaborations are beginning and flourishing in worship, mission, and ministry throughout our parish. At a recent administrative meeting, we set aside time for people to speak out their big heartfelt dreams and vision for future ministries in our rural setting.

Before this project, I think my rural congregation felt their stories were being lost in the shuffle of changes taking place in rural communities like ours. They appreciated this project which valued their stories and their spiritual insights and celebrated them. They appreciated the ways this project has helped to strengthen their common bonds in Christian community and provided a new way for some of seeing the church as a leader in building community and supporting it. Our Holy Week services were the best attended ever and Bible study participation during Lent when the project took place was very high as well. Our monthly community meals have better and richer participation and our new organic community garden ministry has generated much enthusiasm and joyous participation both in the congregation and in the wider community. People are sharing new ideas and their dreams and visions for the future of our congregations.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The concept for this project organically arose from my work with the rural United Methodist congregations in Damascus, Pennsylvania. During my five plus years as their pastor, I came to appreciate the spiritual strength of the people I worked with in the face of loss, change, and difficult circumstances which negatively impacted their lives. As I listened to them, in many different ministry settings and events: worship; baptisms; hospital, nursing home, and home visits; funerals; administrative meetings; mission trips; and more, I formulated the following questions:

- What were the aspects of rural living that helped these persons grow in spiritual strength and how did this happen? And,
- In what ways can one's spiritual strength not only help an individual person but also their community to grow in wellness and Christian ministry?

Overall, this project, *Telling Our Stories: People in a Rural Community Uncovering Spiritual Strength*, has been very effective, I believe, in beginning to answer these questions. The project has also promoted spiritual growth and well-being in both myself and the faith community, through the uncovering and celebration of our spiritual strengths. This chapter provides some concluding reflections on the project described in detail in previous chapters, and looks ahead to see what some of the next steps might be for wellness and continued spiritual growth in our faith community.

The Natural Environment

In the project interviews some participants told of the ways their relationships with nature, the land and growing season helped them gain important spiritual truth for their lives. One interview participant told the story of how when he was a boy many years before, he felt a strong need for reassurance of God's presence in his life and found it in a large tree in the woods behind his home. He could hug the tree, he explained, and feel the strength of it, the solidness of its life, and find a peace-filled security which for him translated into the strength and solidness of God's presence in the world. One woman told the story of her father's coming home from the hospital to die from pancreatic cancer. What impressed her was when he arrived home on a stretcher, his immediate request was to be placed outside on the ground. A life-long farmer, he wanted to feel the land beneath him, the land he knew so well and which had given him so much. He wanted to touch it, and he stayed outside lying on the ground for a long time, she said, finding peace.

The project took place during the liturgical season of Lent and there were several Lenten insights into resurrection, not only of earth in spring but also seeing one's loved ones again in eternity. One woman spoke of her amazement of God's care of tiny birds throughout the harsh winter months and the way seeds bring forth life. Through these observations of nature, she felt God was teaching her that he was present and this helped her grow in faith. She had lost her adult son to brain cancer and he had suffered terribly and died in the winter two years before. As we talked more, she told how the cycles of seasonal life and growth, and tiny seeds growing into sunflowers, reminded her of the

Biblical passage of 1 Corinthians 15: 37-38, 42-44, 51-58 (NRSV) and how she drew great comfort from the sting of her son's death in these verses and hope in the image of new life they speak of:

What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.... then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

.... But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Several interview participants believe a great blessing in country living is its closeness to nature and God. They find faith in the beauty and power of new life and the constant beauty of the environment around them as they observed birds, sunsets and sunrises, star-filled night skies, the ascetics of the colors in every season - including those of white snow on tawny grasses and brown limbs, the amazing mountain vistas where you can see for miles into other states, the smells and sounds of animals all around, the smells and sights of flowers and leaves - and feel the warmth of sun and taste fresh milk and home-grown canned vegetables and fruits. All these evoke a depth and dimension to the landscape and life that fills people with a sense of God's presence and providence.

One man movingly told of an experience he had one day as he was tracking down a calf who had wandered off and lost its way. He recalled walking through the woods and as he came upon the calf, the sun broke through the green overhang of trees and leaves so that he imagined and felt it was shining through a stained glass window in a cathedral. He felt God's presence so closely that decades later he could remember the beauty of that moment so vividly and how it touched his heart and mind.

The Social and Economic Environment

During the interviews, participants spoke of the challenges and rewards of family farming and other family businesses that are land-based. The aspects that participants indicated helped them spiritually were: increased trust, respect and interdependence; valuing each person's work from young to old; living without much discretionary cash but feeling rich in relationships and shared good times; and supporting one another and suffering alongside one another through the shared bad times. One rural resident who had passed away before the project started, had shared her story and pride at being able to support her family members living in New York City during the Great Depression because as bad as things were, on the farm they had plenty of food.

Several who no longer worked in farming, pointed out how the early sense of learning responsibility and the necessity of hard work, stayed with them, and is now lost to later generations who did not grow up farming with their families. A few participants observed that the demise of family farming has a lot to do with our culture's promotion of leisure and discretionary spending. One participant observed that in order to stay in the area, young adults have to work at jobs beneath their educational level or at less pay than

they might receive elsewhere, or they do not find fulfilling, and this was the sacrifice required to stay in the same area as one's family in order to enjoy rural life. Participants looked to future economic growth to sustain the quality of rural life, through tourism, niche and organic farming, cooperative economic structures, technology, and natural gas mining.

In the eyes of the participants, some aspects of rural living that promoted their spiritual health were the sense of interdependence and responsibility in caring for animals, and learning not to waste anything but to reuse, recycle, and remake as much as possible. One interview participant remembered her grandmother teaching her that it didn't matter how worn something looked, like their house which badly needed a coat of paint. What mattered was how you cared for it – that's what was important. She also reflected how everyone in the family worked together and so they had more of an investment in how each other was doing and feeling and the interdependence of family farming made her more considerate of others' feelings and more compassionate to others and resonated with the Scriptures which teach us to help one another, be honest, and love each other.

These spiritual riches extend to neighbors and to the larger rural community. Two participants noted how terrible fires turned out to be their most spiritually rewarding time because of the unquestioning and abundant help and assistance of their neighbors. In times of need, the volunteer fire companies, ambulance and emergency agencies go all out to help in every way imaginable. Amazing outpourings of community generosity abound when someone has to pay medical bills or cannot work due to illness. Two

participants spoke of ways people with mental illnesses were included in the community and people found ways to use their gifts and talents.

Likewise, homelessness is cared for, people offering shelter whenever they can to the one or two who find themselves from time to time without a home and in need of care. One participant spoke of how people in the country are valued for how well they do a job rather than what job they do, so that a ditch-digger might be as highly valued as the community doctor. In the rural region there are less people but because of community interdependence each person is important and valued. Shared good and bad times and helping one another create a sense of community identity. A person's reputation is important and in community, people learn to be accountable. One participant recalled how her brother who was a prankster found how the community pulled together to hold him accountable for reparations for a vulnerable person whose property was damaged in one of his pranks. In the rural community everybody knows everybody and a favorite past time among residents is figuring out who everyone is by relating them to someone, some situation or some location that is familiar. Like an extended family, the rural community is a source of identity, purpose, nurture, history and knowledge.

The Faith Community

Faith for many interview participants, is an important part of rural life and traditionally finds its expression in the faith community, the church. One participant told a story of how her mother went on a church sponsored mission trip to rural Kentucky and came back and reported to her family, church and community about the poverty she saw there, of a magnitude beyond what any of them could imagine. The church community

began helping the Red Bird Mission in Kentucky and still does to this day. In this way the rural church works to extend the values and spirituality of the rural community to connect to, learn from and offer compassion to the larger world. In recent years, a volunteer in mission group, of eight to ten people, has been organized in our Damascus United Methodist Parish and larger community carrying on this same spirit of looking beyond themselves to the human need around them. This group travels twice a year to areas near and far that have been hit by disasters, to help out, continuing this expression of community faith and love beyond our small area.

One participant told of how the church family sustained her with prayer during the devastating illness of her son, offering her the reality of hope in their physical presence with her in worship and prayer. One day she stood up in church and publicly thanked her son's mother-in-law for raising such a wonderful wife to her son who in her care for him, she felt, extended his life several years. For some participants, church is a community center, a place to share faith and worship, Bible study and learning. The spiritual community links a person to their family, it becomes the practical everyday family when an actual biological family is gone. Memories of sharing time with one's family in church are precious to many participants. One person interviewed saw how they could become a part of the community in a very special way by becoming part of the church family. New to the area, with gifts and graces to share in community, they could find new friends in the church and ways to express their faith and grow spirituality even far away from their biological family and long-time church community.

Overall many participants commented that everyone should have a chance to

experience rural life – in spite of its hardships, and sometimes because of its hardships, it was a wonderful way of life for all these reasons reflected on and more. The ministry of the Damascus United Methodist Parish has embraced its rural culture in developing the PEARL Center for Rural Ministry, an outreach arm of the church which seeks to help preserve, enrich and appreciate rural life. The idea for this outreach center came from the church's listening to the spiritual needs of the disenfranchised community and building the ministry of the church around them while looking outward to the community. Community meals, wellness programs in partnership with the county hospital and local YMCA, a yearly local mission camp for youth and families, and most recently, an organic community garden in partnership with one of the few remaining farmers' grange, are ways the faith community seeks to engage the community, longtime residents and newcomers, celebrating its rural values and spirituality, focusing on healing connection and authentic coherence, encouraging agency in these changing times, and bringing blessing and hope in new life to this very special community.¹

Looking Ahead

The spiritual maturity and wisdom, or wellness and self-differentiation², which I and all who participated gained through sharing and listening might be continued and increased through additional sharing and listening, both with those who have already been interviewed and others who have not yet had a chance to tell their stories. This would expand our understanding of God's presence and work in our rural faith

¹Gary Gunderson, "Life Together" in *Leading Causes of Life* (Memphis, TN: The Center for Excellence in Faith and Health, Methodist LeBonheur Healthcare, 2006), 147-168.

² Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church, Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis, MN Fortress Press, 1996), 85-89.

community and help it to continue its theological task of finding its voice and agency in the work toward a moral solution to the exploitative and destructive forces that threaten it. By uncovering its spiritual strengths, our rural community can find healing and value. Over the past few months, I've come to learn that a youth in the Family Group who could not be interviewed in the project due to illness, has taken up video making. I think it would be wonderfully fitting if she could work with me in interviewing her own family so we might include their faith stories in our expanding spiritual life.

The stories we've heard in this project give us important knowledge with which we can continue and deepen our outreach ministries. Our parish's PEARL Center for Rural Ministry continues to improve and invite people into a celebration of rural life in ways that bless the community. Since the project, we have seen growth in all of its aspects. The PEARL Cafe has different groups hosting it well into the new year; our Wellness and Fitness programs are addressing serious issues like cancer awareness and encouraging more and more people in our community to become proactive in wellness; and our Organic Community Garden and Harvest Festival are providing visible ways for community residents to enter into the richness of rural life and be blessed by it. Our new knowledge helps us better tailor what we do as the faith community to bring hope to the wider community amid changing, stressful times.

Perhaps the most important way we continue and deepen our work together in ministry is to realize the great value of who we are in the rural community and continue to listen to and love one another. The past six months have brought many examples of how high cancer and accident death rates, and increasing heroin availability, use and

addiction, continue to pose threats to the well-being of our community. Tenderly listening to one another, bearing with one another during stressful and difficult times and opening ourselves to God's redeeming power, we find confidence in knowing our faith heritage as rural people. We have renewed our commitment, through this project, to value who we are as rural people and what we have to offer in rich spirituality and strength from the simple, rural life.

APPENDIX 1

Wendell Berry's Dynamic of Exploitative versus Nurturing Forces in United States History¹

	<u>Exploiter</u>	<u>Nurturer</u>
<u>Vision:</u>	Unlimited resources for the taking	A piece of land to support one's family
<u>Mode:</u>	Specialist and expert	Generalist and can do many different tasks
<u>Standard:</u>	Efficiency	Care for long term production
<u>Goals:</u>	Money, profit	Health for land, self, family, community, country
<u>Question:</u>	How much/quickly can this land produce for me?	What is the carrying capacity of this land with no diminishment?
<u>Dream:</u>	Earn as much as possible with as little work as possible	Have decent earnings by working as well as possible
<u>Competence:</u>	Organization	Human Social Order including others and divine
<u>Serves:</u>	Institutions or organizations	Land, household, community, place
<u>Thinks:</u>	Numbers, quantities, hard facts	Character, condition, quality, kind
<u>Energy:</u>	Production-consumption-waste	Production-consumption-return
<u>Agricultural Metaphor:</u>	Economic Machine	Biological Lifecycle
<u>Health:</u>	Defined as the absence of disease; The body is partitioned/separate from soul (mind and spirit)	Mind-Body-Spirit Wholeness & Wellness is interdependent with community and world
<u>Accounting:</u>	Internalize benefits and externalize costs (to taxpayers/underclasses)	Internalize costs and externalize benefits
<u>Political theory:</u>	Economic Colonialism	Jeffersonian Democracy

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America, Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997), 7-8, 85-90, 102-137, 160-169.

APPENDIX 2

SELECTED UNITED METHODIST SOCIAL PRINCIPLESⁱ

160 I. The Natural World

All creation is the Lord's, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it. Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God's creation and not solely because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect. Economic, political, social, and technological developments have increased our human numbers, and lengthened and enriched our lives. However, these developments have led to regional defoliation, dramatic extinction of species, massive human suffering, overpopulation, and misuse and overconsumption of natural and nonrenewable resources, particularly by industrialized societies. This continued course of action jeopardizes the natural heritage that God has entrusted to all generations. Therefore, let us recognize the responsibility of the church and its members to place a high priority on changes in economic, political, social, and technological lifestyles to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world leading to a higher quality of life for all of God's creation.

161 II. The Nurturing Community

The community provides the potential for nurturing human beings into the fullness of their humanity. We believe we have a responsibility to innovate, sponsor, and evaluate new forms of community that will encourage development of the fullest potential in individuals. Primary for us is the gospel understanding that all persons are important—because they are human beings created by God and loved through and by Jesus Christ and not because they have merited significance. We therefore support social climates in which human communities are maintained and strengthened for the sake of all persons and their growth.

162 III. The Social Community

The rights and privileges a society bestows upon or withholds from those who comprise it indicate the relative esteem in which that society holds particular persons and groups of persons. We affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person's value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened. We support the basic rights of all persons to equal access to housing, education, communication, employment, medical care, legal redress for grievances, and physical protection.

162.P Rural Life

We support the right of persons and families to live and prosper as farmers, farm workers, merchants, professionals, and others outside of the cities and metropolitan

centers. We believe our culture is impoverished and our people deprived of a meaningful way of life when rural and small-town living becomes difficult or impossible. We recognize that the improvement of this way of life may sometimes necessitate the use of some lands for non agricultural purposes. We oppose the indiscriminate diversion of agricultural land for non agricultural uses when non agricultural land is available. Further, we encourage the preservation of appropriate lands for agriculture and open space uses through thoughtful land use programs. We support governmental and private programs designed to benefit the resident farmer rather than the factory farm and programs that encourage industry to locate in nonurban areas.

We further recognize that increased mobility and technology have brought a mixture of people, religions, and philosophies to rural communities that were once homogeneous. While often this is seen as a threat to or loss of community life, we understand it as an opportunity to uphold the biblical call to community for all persons. Therefore, we encourage rural communities and individuals to maintain a strong connection to the earth and to be open to: offering mutual belonging, caring, healing, and growth; sharing and celebrating cooperative leadership and diverse gifts; supporting mutual trust; and affirming individuals as unique persons of worth, and thus to practice shalom.

162.Q Sustainable Agriculture

A prerequisite for meeting the nutritional needs of the world's population is an agricultural system that uses sustainable methods, respects ecosystems, and promotes a livelihood for people that work the land.

We support a sustainable agricultural system that will maintain and support the natural fertility of agricultural soil, promote the diversity of flora and fauna, and adapt to regional conditions and structures—a system where agricultural animals are treated humanely and where their living conditions are as close to natural systems as possible. We aspire to an effective agricultural system where plant, livestock, and poultry production maintains the natural ecological cycles, conserves energy, and reduces chemical input to a minimum.

Sustainable agriculture requires a global evaluation of the impact of agriculture on food and raw material production, the preservation of animal breeds and plant varieties, and the preservation and development of the cultivated landscape.

World trade of agricultural products needs to be based on fair trade and prices, based on the costs of sustainable production methods, and must consider the real costs of ecological damage. The needed technological and biological developments are those that support sustainability and consider ecological consequences.

163 IV. The Economic Community

We claim all economic systems to be under the judgment of God no less than other facets of the created order. Therefore, we recognize the responsibility of governments to develop and implement sound fiscal and monetary policies that provide for the economic

life of individuals and corporate entities and that ensure full employment and adequate incomes with a minimum of inflation. We believe private and public economic enterprises are responsible for the social costs of doing business, such as employment and environmental pollution, and that they should be held accountable for these costs. We support measures that would reduce the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. We further support efforts to revise tax structures and to eliminate governmental support programs that now benefit the wealthy at the expense of other persons.

163.H Family Farms

The value of family farms has long been affirmed as a significant foundation for free and democratic societies. In recent years, the survival of independent farmers worldwide has been threatened by various factors, including the increasing concentration of all phases of agriculture into the hands of a limited number of transnational corporations. The concentration of the food supply for the many into the hands of the few raises global questions of justice that cry out for vigilance and action.

We call upon the agribusiness sector to conduct itself with respect for human rights primarily in the responsible stewardship of daily bread for the world, and secondarily in responsible corporate citizenship that respects the rights of all farmers, small and large, to receive a fair return for honest labor. We advocate for the rights of people to possess property and to earn a living by tilling the soil.

We call upon governments to revise support programs that disproportionately benefit wealthier agricultural producers, so that more support can be given to programs that benefit medium and smaller sized farming operations, including programs that build rural processing, storage, distribution, and other agricultural infrastructure; which link local farmers to local schools; and which promote other community food security measures.

We call upon our churches to do all in their power to speak prophetically to the matters of food supply and the people who grow the food for the world and to develop ministries that build food security in local communities.

ⁱ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House), Paragraphs 162 and 163.

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND SURVEYS

Interview Questions: “Telling Our Stories: Our Rural Community’s Spiritual Strengths”

These questions are designed to evoke thoughts about your life and faith in our rural area so you can share your life’s experience and wisdom. Please take some time to think about them and answer those you feel comfortable answering or wish to share information about. There are two parts to the questions: Part 1 asks for information about your life and faith; and, Part 2 asks for your thoughts and experiences of rural living.

Part 1: You – Your Past and Present

- Tell us a little bit about yourself and your history in rural living? In what ways have you experienced God as present in your life?
- What is/was your line of work? What is/was your employment/support for you/your family?
- God has given each of us many talents, gifts, and skills. What ones do you see that God has given you? How have these helped you to sustain the family/yourself?
- What are the religious practices you engage in that help you know God’s presence in your life during difficult times? How do these practices help you? What role does the church play in your religious practices?
- What hardships have you faced in life? How much/often did you call on God to help? In what ways?
- When life’s struggles became stronger/more difficult, did you find your faith in God growing stronger? In what manner? What Scriptures, hymns, prayers, and spiritual experiences have helped you?
- When you look to the future, what strengths/resources will you rely on to meet the challenges of everyday living? Health issues? Financial cares? In what ways will you continue to look to God for guidance, while using the talents, and skills God has given you? What will the role of the faith community be in this?

Part 2: Rural Living – Past, Present and Future

- What values does rural living teach? How are these lived out in your life? In the life of the community? In the life of the church?
- Looking back over your life and those lives you have heard about, what are the most significant changes in rural living you have experienced or are experiencing? In these changes, what has been gained and what has been lost? What are your thoughts and feelings about these changes?
- What has the role of the Christian Church been in your faith journey and in appreciating the joys of rural life and coping with its challenges?

- What are the stories, examples, experiences, thoughts you know and have that best express the strengths and character of rural living?
- What do you think are common hardships in the community right now? In what ways have they changed over time? What are the ways God is calling people of faith to respond and help with these challenges?
- What is your vision for healthy rural life?

Participant Follow-up Survey for “Telling Our Stories: People in a Rural Community Uncovering Spiritual Strength”

Please take a few moments to answer the following questions:

1. When you saw the interview video(s) or reflect on your interview(s) about rural life and faith, what was it like being interviewed and what sort of experience did you have?
2. Was there anything that surprised you about the interview? If so, what was it?
3. What did you find yourself learning about: Your family or group? Yourself? Your community? Church? Faith? Pastor?
4. Did you enjoy interacting with the other members of the interview group? Please describe your experience?
5. Why is it important, in your view, for people to listen to what rural people have to say? Was it helpful to be listened to in this interview? If so, in what ways?

After you see the interview video “*Telling Our Stories*” in worship, please answer these questions:

- When you saw the worship video with a composite of clips of everyone interviewed, what were your thoughts and feelings?
- In what ways has this experience: enriched your view of rural life? Enriched your faith? Brought healing or wholeness?

Congregational Survey for “Telling Our Stories: Our Rural Community’s Spiritual Strengths”

Listening to people’s stories of local history, family relationships and experiences, community relationships and events, faith development, their deep appreciation of the natural beauty around them, and the ways they have learned to make their living from the land, provides us with rich and compelling spiritual resources to help us grow in faith.

Telling our stories about all these opens us to appreciating the ways God has worked in our community and lives to bless us, and guides us into the future both as individuals, families, a church, and a community.

This past February through May [2013], five families told their stories about rural life and faith. Today, our congregations have a chance to listen to their

stories. The interviews are part of a project to gather the spiritual wisdom and resources present among us and celebrate them.

After viewing the video in worship, please fill out the survey on the other side of the form to help us understand what these stories mean to you. This project was sponsored by the Damascus United Methodist Charge PEARL Center for Rural Ministry and supported by Drew Theological School, Madison, NJ.

After you see the interview video "*Telling Our Stories*" in worship, please answer these questions:

1. When you saw the worship video with church friends and neighbors sharing their stories, what were your thoughts and feelings?
2. In what ways this worship experience has: Enriched your view of rural life? Enriched your faith? Brought healing or wholeness?

Name (Optional) _____ Phone _____

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