

Alive and Kicking
Revitalizing Rural Ministries
Study Paper

Written by Marvin L. Anderson, Ph.D.
for the Congregational, Educational, and Community Ministries Unit
General Council Office
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Foreword

The church's ministry unfolds in various contexts. In a rapidly urbanizing world, rural contexts get short shrift in comparison to the surfeit of messages about life in the world's cities. Rural depopulation is a fact to take seriously, but it does not justify the pervasive neglect of the important social, economic, and institutional challenges and opportunities in rural areas.

The United Church of Canada is well-represented in the country's vast rural areas. The majority of congregations are found in towns and villages characterized by agriculture, fishing, recreation, mining, forestry, and other resource development activities. Some congregations involve several hundred families, others only a handful. But all are caring faith communities gathered in the presence of Christ and led by the Spirit to worship, learn, and incarnate Christ's presence in their context. We give thanks to God for these diverse and persistent ministries in rural settings.

To support this Spirit-work, CECM asked Marvin Anderson to gather some of his vast experience, his care-filled thoughts, and the fruits of his labours in the General Council Office in this "Alive & Kicking" study paper. No one resource can inform every aspect of ministry in the various rural contexts of the church. But this document and its bibliography serve as another resource to strengthen leaders in rural ministries. Our hope is that it will aid in addressing the challenges and embracing the opportunities of God's mission to bless creation.

Thanks to all who have shared their wisdom, experience, and hopes for the development of this paper, and to Marvin Anderson for his passion and commitment to honour, appreciate, and renew the fruitful ministries being sustained in diverse communities of faith from coast to coast to coast.

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Introduction

The visual image of the traditional rural church can still be spotted amidst the sprawl of urban and suburban development in what were formerly farming communities. Its nostalgic sight manages to tug at our hearts, no matter where we come from. Whether in town or in “the country,” these rural churches seem strangely out of place now, surrounded by new strip malls and monster homes. If the villages and hamlets of these rural United Church congregations have not conceded defeat to the swollen population growth of metropolitan sprawl, they have nonetheless surrendered lots of good ground. For traditional farming communities in particular, more and more prime farmland is lost daily at the very moment when buying fresh food locally is the consumer rage.

Many of these historic, often century-old rural United Church congregations across Canada date back to Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist congregations prior to the basis of United Church union in 1925. Some of them have long since disappeared from sight; even more alarming, some have vanished from local and communal memory. Meanwhile, others are struggling to survive despite the literal and commercial inroads made by encroaching suburban development and by increasing metropolitan amalgamations of what were until very recently, autonomous, locally run, rural municipalities and towns.

The stark historic contrast above also signals the inevitable collision course between different populations and cultures. It often appears in the festering or open conflict between quarreling factions within declining rural and small town United Church congregations located on the margins of suburban sprawl. It may be the tensions and disparity between the traditional language and values of the remaining “faithful” members, and those of the “newcomers” who have recently joined these congregations and live in the newly-built developments with names like Deer Brook and Sunny Corners.

Like the blinding image of a deer suddenly bolting out onto a country road at night, neither group is prepared to be blindsided. Neither of them recognizes that their inherent assumptions and cultural differences obscure their vision of what lies ahead—until it is too late. Their blindspots distract them from the path that God has in mind for them, because they assume they already know where they’re going. It could be as different as the bright, sunny daylight and the tar-black canopy of night-time on either a prairie or coastal sky. Neither the remaining members nor the newer ones in such conflicted congregations *see* their differences enough to respect them and each other. Even worse, there are no more farmers around anymore, and at best only a handful of capable interim ministers or ministry personnel who have the requisite pastoral skills and conflict-resolution equipment to pull these congregations out of the proverbial ditch.

The default setting in most of our minds is fixed on frozen-images-in-time of what rural communities and country churches *once were*. A handful of older church buildings long since closed have been purchased as residential homes, or converted into arts and crafts storefronts. Like the thriving business in antique furniture, the strong nostalgic appeal to what the predominantly rural United Church *was* in the “old days” lingers on—sometimes to the detriment of how alive and well our largely rural and small town United Church still is.

Many of these rural United Church pastoral charges are located in resource-based rural communities that depend on logging, fishing, mining, oil, etc., as well as on tourism and cottagers. Marathon, Ontario, comes to mind—a mining community where our present Moderator David Giuliano served in ministry for nearly 20 years. While the pastoral charges in well-established rural communities are trying to hold onto who they have been, those in “new rural” communities are trying to ascertain who they will become. Both of them, however, are trying to discern a sense of *their* missional purpose and rural identity in the wake of “globalization.”

The newfound energy and inspiration that drives the leadership of these pastoral charges is reminiscent of those “spiritual ancestors” who responded so courageously to God’s calling over a century ago. Margaret Laurence once said it is possible for us to adopt ancestors; even though we may not be their literal descendents, they are nonetheless our ancestors spiritually. The exemplary faith and fortitude of this great “cloud of witnesses” is palpable among today’s lay leaders and ministry personnel who remain open to the same movement of the Spirit of generations past.

For some of them, their faithfulness is more focused on maintaining the present physical edifice of their historic building for the benefit of future generations. Facing every rural congregation, however, is the more demanding biblical challenge than the looming capital campaign to restore the church building: God’s call to build the rural church on the very hope and faith to which the 11th and 12th chapters of the book of Hebrews calls all of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ.

All these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. HEBREWS 11:13–16

For those “faithful” congregations who respond to this greater calling, they know that in order to run the race before them, they need to determine their stride and keep the right pace. They will need to think, pray and listen to each other, and most importantly, to the Spirit. It will take more than one Council meeting to truly discern the Spirit’s direction. In order to go the distance for this race, the discipline of faith requires that they know how to patiently weather the often adverse conditions that go with it. The hundreds of rural United Church congregations that have endured that race are a shining testimony to the remarkable legacy of the rural church.

This print resource is produced by the General Council Office of The United Church of Canada. It is inspired by the recent *Alive & Well* resource, which testifies to the resurgence of the Spirit in United Church congregational and community ministries across Canada. This resurgence flies in the face of the fatalism felt upon hearing news of our declining membership and additional church closures among both rural and urban congregations. Jesus never suggested that numerical growth was the same as spiritual growth, or superior to it. This is especially true in most rural places where the local population is either relatively stable or in gradual decline. In some cases, congregational renewal actually comes as a consequence of closure or amalgamation.

The extent of spiritual renewal in many of our rural and small town congregations refutes the cynical pessimism of declining numbers. The Spirit of God is not only alive and well, but alive and kicking! In the same spirit as *Alive & Well*, this new *Alive & Kicking* resource shares poignant testimonies and stories celebrating the presence of Christ in the ordinary lives, worship services, and numerous congregational, educational and community ministries of the United Church of Canada—locally, at the presbytery level, in Conference offices and in workshops and conferences on ministry.

Indeed, this resource was born *Alive & Kicking* in order to celebrate the incarnation of God in and through the hundreds of ministries in rural and small town United Church pastoral charges. Furthermore, these rural congregations offer ongoing leadership in their respective communities through their ministries to the community at large. Given the trend of increasing consolidation of traditional institutions in rural communities, the only remaining pool of competent and informed local leaders is often found among rural ministry personnel and lay leaders. In light of the historic legacy of the local United Church as one of the community churches, this beacon of genuine Christian witness is all the more significant since so many of the other lights in town have gone out.

We leave it to the readers of this resource to listen and discern where, how and in what ways the “kicking” metaphor applies—and who is doing the kicking! (For those who have milked cows, that may be the first thing that comes to mind.) Contrary to the stereotype of “dying” and virtually existing on life supports, many rural congregations are lively and thriving places of worship. They are sacred places and sanctuaries where many people are experiencing spiritual growth for the first time in years, and are sharing in God’s mission to heal each other and all of Creation.

We hope and pray that as you read about what the Spirit of God is doing in the rural United Church churches and communities profiled here, you and your own congregation will be inspired to share your own stories of spiritual and congregational renewal with us and others in your own presbytery, Conference, and across our vast country. “Remember your leaders,” the apostle Paul wrote, and “those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:7–8).

Seven Lenses for Congregational Assessment

We are usually too invested in the local congregation to which we belong and in which we worship to see the proverbial forest for the trees. For this reason, the same formula used in *Alive & Well* resource is used in *Alive & Kicking*. The following seven lenses are by no means definitive and exhaustive; they are suggested themes and areas through which we can look at the same thing: the presence of the Spirit in rural congregational and community life. All of the stories and examples included in the lenses are drawn from the diverse rural contexts that comprise the range of ministry in the United Church of Canada.

1. Purpose and Identity: What is it in this congregation that ties everyone together? What are the specific ways in which this congregation is called to participate in God’s mission? How do they see themselves carrying and living out that mission within their local rural community or small town? How do they explicitly understand their missional purpose in relationship to their *rural* identity and context for ministry?

2. Context: How does the uniquely rural and small town milieu inform the nature of ministry in this congregation and in this rural community? What does “rural” really mean in this particular place? What makes its context and resource base distinctive—sociologically, culturally, economically, and geographically? What kind of ministries does this context cry out for, in order to carry out the missional purpose identified above?

3. Worship: How does this congregation express and experience the intimate, pervasive presence of God in its Sunday morning services? In other services, whether performed in the sanctuary of the church as well as in nursing homes, community centres, and public places? How is liturgy conceived and conducted by ministry personnel in collaboration with lay leaders and congregants? How is genuine transformation experienced in worship?

4. Caring and Generosity: How is the love of God in Jesus Christ practised? How is the “social gospel” ethos of rural United Church congregations lived out in our respective communities? Is our rural congregation a truly welcoming one, and if so, what are the trademarks of our hospitality? If we think we are friendly, what does that mean? Who in our community is really not welcome in our church, and why not?

5. Learning: In what ways and through what venues does lifelong learning take place *locally*? How does this rural or small town congregation foster opportunities for learning and for theological reflection for all ages? How do they collaborate with learning centres and theological colleges in the critical work of forming future ministry personnel as well as lay leaders called to rural ministry?

6. Healing and Transformation: How is genuine healing taking place, particularly among those in our Aboriginal congregations and communities who were victimized by the residential schools and other assimilationist policies? What can rural congregations learn from our First Nations’ healing rituals and stories to effect their own healing? How are alternative models of ministry altering the face of rural ministry and isolated congregations in decline? How is God

changing the lives of both the people in the pews and those unchurched who live and work in small towns and rural communities across Canada?

7. Sustainability: Using the language of assets and gifts, what kind of financial and spiritual resources does our rural congregation have? How do those relate to the economic resources and livelihoods of our respective rural communities? How can our congregation critically and prayerfully reflect on our stewardship of those resources that would sustain our Christian witness and ministries into the future? What kind of pastoral strategies and visioning would contribute to participating in God's transformative mission in our world?

Applying the Lenses

Each of the lenses is described more fully in the following pages. The questions posed above are reiterated in each section to stimulate more reflection on how that theme is manifested among rural congregations and United Church pastoral charges in small towns. These questions can be used in a variety of ways to help you and members of your congregation or community discern God's presence in your rural context. They could be used in any kind of format you want, so use your imagination. They could be incorporated into a meeting of your church session or council, used as part of a congregational workshop or retreat, or used as the basis of a thematic series for a Bible study or a series of Sunday morning sermons coordinated with the lectionary.

There are two important things to keep in mind. First, it is less important that you try and find the right answers, and more important that you ask the *right* questions! Remember that questions are a wonderful means of clarifying what it is that we need to see. As lenses, they are designed and framed to help us assess the vitality and health of our congregations. These questions and the ones that come to you will not only enable you to see better; they will help you to intentionally live out your faith with more depth and meaning. This is what is often understood as “spirituality,” and it certainly corresponds to the traditional of meaning of Christian spirituality in the history of the church and spiritual practice.

Despite our own ages, the “pastoral” advice that the poet Rainer Maria Rilke offered to an aspiring writer in his classic book, *Letters to a Young Poet*, bears following with respect to the questions for each lens: “. . . be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now.”¹

Second, remember to look for the biblical story that your congregation is living with now. It may well coincide with other questions that surface. Like the questions Rilke reminds us to live with and live out, what is the biblical story that speaks poignantly to us at this moment in time? Like the metaphor of lenses for seeing, this exercise is a metaphorical approach to Scripture, not a literal or historically critical approach to Scripture. “The usefulness of a metaphor for rereading our own context is that it is not claimed as a one-on-one match to reality,” suggests Gil Rendle and Alice Mann in their book, *Holy Conversations*. “Rather, a metaphor proceeds by having an odd, playful, and ill-fitting match to its reality, the purpose of which is to illuminate and evoke dimensions of reality that will otherwise go unnoticed and therefore unexperienced.”²

In the process of identifying the biblical story that corresponds to our present situation as a congregation, the metaphor of the mirror complements that of the lenses with which we are looking. Since the Middle Ages, in particular, the literary image of the mirror has implied the concept of self-reflection and self-knowledge. Based on his devotional exegesis of James 1:22–

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton, 1934), p. 35.

² Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2003), p. 212.

24, the famous Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, held up scripture as a mirror in which we can see ourselves for who we are, if we so choose: “For if to thee God’s Word is merely a doctrine, an impersonal, objective something, then there is no mirror.... No, in reading God’s Word thou must continually say to thyself, ‘It is to me this is addressed, it is about me it speaks.’”³ Maybe then we can hear God’s Word!

³ “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like” (James 1:22–24). Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves! and Three Discourses (1851)*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 68.

Lens 1: Purpose and Identity

It is clear that the United Church is now undergoing a decisive transition between its peak years of crowded sanctuaries and the new church buildings that accommodated them in the late 40s, 50s and 60s, and the present trend of diminishing membership in urban as well as rural United Church congregations. This historic transition posits the tension between the basis of United Church union in 1925 and its history since then, with growing apprehension about the uncertain future of our denomination. One of our former moderators, Marion Best, acknowledged this concern in her book, *Will Our Church Disappear?* (1994).⁴ Now that we are in the third generation of United Church membership, former moderator Peter Short recently raised the question of how the torch will be passed on to succeeding generations within and outside of the current membership of our United Church.

In light of the challenge named by both former moderators, it is imperative that we not only recognize the rich history of our denomination since 1925, but that we understand the wealth of history surrounding the basis of United Church union in 1925. Unless we understand the distinct contribution and character of our historic legacy as The United Church of Canada, how can we expect to pass it on to future generations? Unless we know who we *have* been, how can we conceivably discern our purpose and identity?

In his book, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches*, David R. Ray reiterates what we all know about the small church, that it “is likely to be rooted in its history and nervous about its future.”⁵ Though rural is often assumed to be synonymous with small and smaller, rural is a completely different category than small. Rural congregations do, however, reflect this same attitude, time and time again. We might be tempted to read into Ray’s insight that rural congregations are nervous about their future because they are *too* rooted in their history.

While a congregation often fears for its future, Ray quotes Carl S. Dudley, the well-known author on the small church, who notes that a church’s history is the solid foundation on which to build the church’s future. Dudley wrote: “To appreciate the past is not to be bound by it, but to build on it.... The small church will die if it loses touch with its history.... When the future is constructed from pride in the past, then the richest energy of the small church is released and activated.”⁶

The same can be said about the future promise of each and every congregation among the hundreds of rural and small town pastoral charges of our United Church of Canada. Despite the frequent lament about church closures and declining membership, the nearly ubiquitous presence of the United Church across our country is further evidence that the Spirit is still alive and kicking! Did you know that 53 percent of our total congregations in The United Church of Canada are designated “rural” (i.e., in communities with a population under 2,000)? In addition,

⁴ Marion Best, *Will Our Church Disappear?* (Kelowna, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1994).

⁵ David R. Ray, *The Indispensable Guide for Smaller Churches* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), p. 92.

⁶ Cited in *ibid.*

23 percent are located in “towns” (i.e., in communities with a population between 2,000 and 30,000).

In total, 76 percent of the total congregations in the United Church are rural and small town congregations. Did you know that rural and small town congregations make up three-quarters of our denomination? Despite the increasing urban population of Canada, the total membership of The United Church of Canada equals 30 percent rural and 26 percent town respectively, meaning that over half (56 percent of our members still live and worship in rural and small town congregations).

But Dudley’s astute observation also rings true for the future promise of our national church. Recovering the history around the United Church basis of union is as important as retrieving the faith stories of our spiritual ancestors in the rural church movement at the time of church union. That’s right—there was a rural church movement! While we are generally more familiar with the favorable reception of the “social gospel” among *urban* Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist congregations during this time, the largely untold story of our interdenominational “amalgamation” in 1925 is the integral relationship of the “rural church movement” to the thriving social gospel movement.

Do most of us even know how and why the “social gospel” came about? The social gospel emerged from the social and theological analysis among leading Protestant theologians and ministers prior to World War I. Mainline Protestant denominations in Canada were intrigued by the emergence of the social gospel from their British and American counterparts. Social gospel proponents believed evil was so endemic throughout society that the traditional doctrinal emphasis on personal salvation was considered impossible *without* social salvation. The activism of a broad coalition of progressive Christians, some of them conservative and others more radical in their politics, was motivated by their conviction that an immanent God was definitely at work in the process of social change. The realization of the kingdom of God was thus contingent on social change.⁷

At the turn of the 20th century the total membership of the United Church was predominantly rural, dispersed in rural communities and small towns across Canada. “Rural” usually referred to more remote villages as well as isolated farms and farming communities. In this cultural milieu, dependence on one’s neighbour and one’s community often meant survival. The biblical injunction to love your neighbour as yourself had concrete, practical socio-economic advantages that helped ensure the *collective* survival of one’s family and one’s community.

The rural church movement coincided with the “country life movement” that was officially endorsed by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt and the Report of the Country Life Commission in 1909. Many of the explicit criticisms voiced in the Report lamented the contemporary ways in which the health and well-being of rural communities were being undermined. The Report was the first comprehensive attempt in US public policy to analyze the status of farming—the traditional occupation of the US at that time—in the wake of industrialism.

⁷ Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914–28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

Long before Free Trade, there was an analogous “free trade” of ideas that circulated between the United States and Canada.⁸ Many of the criticisms levelled by the Report of the Country Life Commission found a receptive and sympathetic audience north of the border among several prominent Canadian rural church leaders. Foremost among them was the Presbyterian minister, Rev. John MacDougall. The Presbyterian Church in Canada had become so worried about the growing degradation of rural life and the particular problems faced by rural communities across Canada that it commissioned Rev. MacDougall to give a series of lectures on the subject at Lake Couchiching, Ontario, in the summer of 1912. The lectures were so well received that the Presbyterian Church’s Board of Social Service and Evangelism finally decided to publish the lecture series in 1913 under the title, *Rural Life in Canada*.⁹

Meanwhile, Canadian Methodism became one of the primary pools of congregational leadership for progressive and radical reform. The Methodist Board of Social Services and Evangelism endorsed the principle that “it is the business of the Church to set up on earth the Kingdom of God as a social organization based on the Golden rule of Christ.”¹⁰ Canadian clergy, including rural clergy, were challenged by the relevance of the social gospel in the Canadian social context. In fact, the practical application of the social gospel for the *rural* context, in particular, permeates the rural church literature of the early twentieth century. The overriding emphasis on “social service” in both movements gave moral and theological substance to the biblical conviction underpinning both movements: **that the gospel message of Jesus Christ must be lived out in social practice and community service.**

Is it any wonder, in light of this history, that the United Church is respected for its historic commitment to the “social gospel” and social justice? Does not our international reputation and prophetic legacy, however, warrant a comparable commitment to social justice in Canadian small towns and rural communities—as much as it does in Canadian cities and suburbs? Are we doing justice *in* those rural communities and rural United Church congregations when we fail to see the continuing relevance of our social gospel heritage at the heart of rural ministry today? Are we doing justice *to* those rural communities and rural United Church congregations when we fail to see and celebrate the divine epiphanies where we least expect them—in country churches and in remote, rural places?

Questions for Reflection

1. What is it in this congregation that ties everyone together?

⁸ Adapted from my chapter, “Crossing Borders, Crossing Boundaries: The ‘Free Trade’ in Religious Ideas in the Theoretical Formation of Prairie Populism 1900–1920,” in *Gleaning the Stories of Resilience and Hope*, pending publication, written in collaboration with colleagues Dr. Gary Goreham, Dr. Gilson A.C. Waldkoenig, and Dr. John H. Young.

⁹ John MacDougall, *Rural Life in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

¹⁰ Cited in Ted Reeve, *Claiming the Social Passion: The Role of The United Church of Canada in Creating a Culture of Social Well-Being in Canadian Society* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1999), p. 20.

2. What are the specific ways in which this congregation is called to participate in God’s mission? How do they see themselves carrying and living out that mission within their local rural community or small town?
3. How do they explicitly understand their missional purpose in relationship to their rural identity and context for ministry?

In posing the above series of questions for this lens on purpose and identity, are we only referring to local United Church pastoral charges in rural communities and small towns? Are we including community-based ministries? Are we including the representation and voice of *all* of our rural constituencies at the level of presbyteries, conferences, and the national office?

In response to the first two questions: **What is it in this congregation that ties everyone together? What are the specific ways in which this congregation is called to participate in God’s mission?** The short answer may be contained in Dudley’s warning and promise that the “small [rural] church will die if it loses touch with its history.... When the future is constructed from pride in the past, then the richest energy of the small [rural] church is released and activated.” Is this not true of the national church as well?

The recent though controversial Emerging Spirit campaign by our General Council Office is aimed at wooing unchurched people to our United Church. Regardless of its outcome and cost, it may be the convergence of our proud past and the creative energy it can release as Dudley identifies that attracts newcomers to rural and small membership United Church congregations. Indeed, it may be the convergence of our rural purpose and identity that grounds longstanding as well as newer United Church members in our historic social gospel tradition, and re-roots us in the rural church movement then *and* now. It may be the “cross-fertilization” of our rural purpose and identity that holds the greatest promise for regenerating local United Church congregations in rural communities throughout Canada.

According to Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, authors of *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*: “The missional-incarnational church adopts a stance totally different from the attractional one. Rather than investing time in the creation and development of sacred religious spaces for people to meet God, this mode recognizes that church is a much more organic, dynamic, and noninstitutional set of relationships than the old Christendom mode allows for. If the attractional mode sees the world divided into two zones, the ‘in’ and the ‘out,’ the incarnational model sees it more as a web, a series of intersecting lines symbolizing the networks of relationships, friendships, and acquaintances of which church members are a part.”¹¹

This stance sure sounds like the ways in which most people in villages, hamlets and small towns see themselves vis-à-vis each other. A lot of ministry in rural communities takes place through conversations and “visiting” in the local cafes and coffee shops. Talking like the locals and with them about the weather and their daily concerns reflects this “missional-incarnational” model:

¹¹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), pp. 43–44. Used with permission.

It was Jesus who, in calling the first members of his faith community, the disciples, invited them to become fishers of people (Mark 1:16–18). By calling fishermen and inviting them to fish for humans, he used language that made sense to his hearers. But he did more than that. He used an image or a metaphor that conveyed a great deal more than some simple ideas that he was concerned with “catching” people. He made reference to an activity that fishermen engaged in regularly, and by doing so created a sense of the missional community that was to come.¹²

Each congregation and pastoral charge needs to discern its own response to the above questions. As we have seen in this lens, our purpose includes our commitment to loving God through caring for our neighbours in the rapidly-changing and often deteriorating social context, or social dislocation, of today’s rural communities in Canada. Meanwhile, our rural identity radiates from a renewed pride in our “rural roots” and cultural identity, including the places we call home.

The merging of our historic purpose and cultural identity could be the missing link. Without this integral fusion of purpose and identity in rural ministry, rural congregations unwittingly succumb to confusion. Without clarifying both their purpose and identity, a congregation either risks losing its sense of calling or direction, or becomes distracted or blindsided and ends up in the ditch. The yearning for reclaiming our rural roots is a prerequisite for the next lens: the *context* of ministry in the uniquely rural and small town milieu.

¹² Ibid., p. 44. Used with permission.

Lens 2: Context

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. REVELATION 3:22

Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches. REVELATION 3:22, *THE MESSAGE*

The yearning for understanding and reclaiming our rural roots implies learning more about them. Learning about our rural roots is imperative for discerning the future routes to which God is calling the rural church. As we have seen from the 11th and 12th chapters of Hebrews and from other books in the Bible, God's chosen people are always being called by faith to leave behind their former country in search of a new homeland, "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16). Hardly a vacation, God is calling us in hope and faith to embark on new and often uncharted routes to strange and unfamiliar places. "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?" (Romans 8:24).

The metaphor of "routes" is akin to the traditional motif of being on the road in traditional Christian spirituality, i.e., on the move, as on a spiritual journey or a pilgrimage. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, for example, may be the most popular Christian devotional manual of all time. The title of the bestselling book by M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, is a more recent example of this potent image that has driven Christians for centuries towards a final destination at the end of our life's journey.

Yet, metaphorically speaking, the spiritual discernment of future routes and the symbolic search for rural roots are not mutually exclusive. Rather, we could say in a rather playful way that they are "mutantly inclusive," simply meaning that the capacity for any change, mutation, or even transformation, is contained within/on the roots/routes themselves. As we know from Jesus' parables, roots can only come from the germinal seed that has to die in order to give life. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (John 12:25–26).

This symbolic yearning for reclaiming our rural roots was particularly highlighted in two separately planned educational events held in 2006: (1) a spring conference on rural ministry entitled "Your Roots Are Showing: Celebrating and Creating Rural Roots/Routes," hosted by the Kemble Pastoral Charge near Owen Sound, Ontario; and (2) The R. Alex Sim Rural Ministry Symposium in the fall entitled "Digging around the Roots: Bringing New Life to Rural Congregations," sponsored by Queen's Theological College.

Shortly after the Rural Ministry Symposium, the emphasis on discerning future routes was the focus of the 2006 National Consultation on Rural Ministry. It was sponsored by the General Council Office and convened at the Calling Lakes Centre (formerly PCTC) near Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, in November 2006. The title of the 2006 Rural Consultation was "Discerning God's Call for the Rural Church Now." In view of the widespread changes facing

rural pastoral charges within our United Church, this title was epitomized in the biblical text chosen for the Rural Consultation (Revelation 3:22).¹³

Each of the 13 Conferences of the United Church, including the All Native Circle Conference, selected and sent representatives to the Rural Consultation. It also included rural ministry personnel representing French Ministries and Ethnic Ministries as well as the Canadian Rural Church Network. Several General Council Office staff also attended in order to listen to and network with those delegates or representatives, bringing the total number of participants to 60.

The purpose of the 2006 Rural Consultation itself was twofold: (1) It convened this group of representative rural church leaders in order to identify the specific challenges currently facing rural pastoral charges and congregations in their respective geographical regions and Conferences across Canada; and (2) It highlighted the *diverse* nature of Canadian small towns and rural communities in which those United Church congregations are located.

The Rural Consultation provided representative rural church leaders with an intentional forum to thereby focus on the final two questions in the lens on purpose and identity: How do they see themselves carrying and living out that mission within their local rural community or small town? How do they explicitly understand their missional purpose in relationship to their *rural* identity and context for ministry?

Questions for Reflection

1. How does the uniquely rural and small town milieu inform the nature of ministry in this congregation and in this rural community?
2. What does “rural” really mean in this particular place?
3. What makes its context and resource base distinctive—sociologically, culturally, economically, and geographically?
4. What kind of ministries does this context cry out for, in order to carry out the missional purpose identified above?

The recognition of diversity in the rural context is a segue to answering two of the above questions: **What does “rural” really mean in this particular place? What makes its context and resource base distinctive?** One of the key findings from the National Consultation on Rural Ministry is that “rural” is inherently *diverse* in Canada—sociologically, culturally, economically, and geographically.¹⁴ This diversity coincides with the recent emphasis at the General Council Office on the “intercultural” nature of our church. Despite what small towns and rural communities have in common, “rural” does in fact differ, depending on its *context*. We can no

¹³ Marvin L. Anderson, Ph.D., “Executive Report,” National Consultation on Rural Ministry, The United Church of Canada, November 6–8, 2006, PCTC—Calling Lakes Centre, Fort Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan, March 30, 2007, pp. 1–2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

longer assume that “rural” is solely equated with farming or with long-established communities of predominantly white Anglophones.

This rural diversity was recognized by the late farmer, sociologist and lifelong member of the United Church, R. Alex Sim, after whom the biennial Rural Ministry Symposium is named at Queen’s Theological College. In his landmark book, *Land and Community: Crisis in Canada’s Countryside* (1988),¹⁵ Alex Sim challenged Canadians to critically re-examine their images and assumptions about what “rural” really is. Sim coined four types in describing *different* kinds of rural communities: Agraville, Fairview, Ribbonville, and Mighthavebeenville. They can be summarized by the following descriptions:

1. **Agraville:** Represents a community based on a rich, productive land resource, e.g., agriculture, mining, forestry, or fishing. Often functions as a service center for a local economy based on any one or more of the above extractive resources of a primary sector economy.
2. **Fairview:** Represents a community that boasts scenic landscapes and alternative lifestyle values which make it attractive to new residents. Characterized by small towns serving as ideal locations for retirement communities, recreational centers, universities, artist colonies, military base, etc.
3. **Ribbonville:** Represents a community that is dominated by one or more large cities or towns. As the name suggests, a town that may have been once independent from a metropolitan area that is becoming increasingly intertwined with and encircled by a city’s sphere of influence through urban and suburban sprawl.
4. **Mighthavebeenville:** Represents a community whose dominant self-image of independence and self-sufficiency belies a loss of control to other, more robust rural communities, like the Agravilles. Former hopes for growth and greatness have yielded to the stark reality of community decline and out-migration.

So-called “new rural” communities may include aspects of more than one of the above types. The main sources of revenue and employment for some of these communities may come from meat-packing and processing plants, correctional facilities, waste recycling and storage, and other industries that would never be allocated zoning or licences in metropolitan and suburban areas. They may be the places where many of you live and work.

Alex Sim also warned against the vulnerability of rural communities in the face of rapid, unprecedented social and economic change, largely from globalization. All of our rural communities are susceptible to the economic downturns of their particular industry; witness the current crisis for the logging and manufacturing sectors in rural communities in both northern and southern Ontario, British Columbia, and elsewhere throughout Canada. The loss of the cod industry and the decline of other key fisheries in the Maritimes and Newfoundland is a classic example of this phenomenon.

¹⁵ R. Alex Sim, *Land and Community: Crisis in Canada’s Countryside* (Guelph, ON: University of Guelph, 1988).

In addition to the deplorable condition of most of our reserves and the poverty that hounds First Nations communities, their rural neighbours, usually non-Aboriginal, struggle with poverty and economic inequities that rarely attract media attention. Too often we don't hear about and *see* the extent of rural poverty throughout Canada. For a copy of the Interim Report for the Standing Senate Committee on Agriculture and Forestry: "Understanding Freefall: The Challenge of the Rural Poor," December 2006, visit the Parliamentary website: www.parl.gc.ca.

Furthermore, the relative invisibility of rural poverty in Canada in the dim light of the public media eclipses the historic and cultural diversity that exists in rural communities. Take rural Nova Scotia, for example. Like rural parts of most other provinces, Nova Scotia contains concentrations of some of the most historically disadvantaged groups in the province. Mi'Kmaq, African Nova Scotian, and resource industry-based working class people are living around and in rural communities. Acadian communities are a further example of a historically marginalized group that was shunted onto particular bits of unwanted land.¹⁶

This economic vulnerability raises the perennial conundrum for rural communities: their questioned viability and sustainability in the wake of globalization. It is a timely topic taken up by Jennifer Sumner in her more recent Canadian study, *Sustainability and the Civil Commons: Rural Communities in the Age of Globalization* (2005).¹⁷ Sumner poses the question:

Why are rural communities even worth preserving in this fast-changing world? In the web of Canadian life, rural communities are an integral component—a link to the past and a hope for the future. For a myriad of reasons, many people dream of rural life as an alternative to the troubles they face today, and that dream is worth keeping alive, in spite of its shortcomings. In addition, the wealth of knowledge, range of skills, and diversity of people that make up our rural communities are a heritage and a way of life that should not be lost through our failure to understand the nature and challenge of their sustainability.

"If rural communities are worth preserving," Sumner then asks, "how can we ensure their future?"¹⁸ Conversely, if both rural communities *and* rural congregations are indeed worth preserving, how then can we secure their future? First of all, we need to recognize the virtual interdependence between rural United Church congregations and their local rural communities. Local residents are frequently members of both, and consider both "home." Second, no viable future is even possible without explicitly drawing on "the wealth of knowledge, range of skills, and diversity of people that make up our rural communities." Third, a secure and promising future requires critical leadership among lay leaders and ministry personnel in knowing how to respond to the problems facing rural pastoral charges across this huge country of ours.

¹⁶ Mike Corbett, "What I might have said: Rural education and globalization," in *Our Schools Our Selves: The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives* (vol. 1, no. 16), p. 116.

¹⁷ Dr. Sumner teaches in the Adult Education and Community Development Program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.

¹⁸ Jennifer Sumner, *Sustainability and the Civil Commons: Rural Communities in the Age of Globalization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 6. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

This core group of community and congregational leaders will need to avail themselves of the same pool of inner, spiritual resources and intra-community innovation as exemplified by their spiritual ancestors, in order to meet the formidable challenges of today. They must be attentive to the unique ground and ecology of the ministry context in which each of them are working and worshipping. After all, each of us tend and cultivate different garden plots and fields in diverse kinds of soil and ecosystems. The prevalent yet problematic paradigm of *monoculture*, enshrined by the reigning orthodoxy of industrialized agriculture, will not help us here.

In the words of one of the delegates to the Rural Consultation from Newfoundland and Labrador Conference, the challenge of doing rural ministry in those diverse plural and rural *contexts* is loud and clear:

Our guest speakers spoke powerfully of the potential future for rural communities. Both Cameron Harder and Cynthia Patterson questioned the assumed inevitability of rural decline, pointing to government policies and economic strategies which are designed to hasten rural out-migration. They emphasized moments of renewal where communities have returned to life through adaptation to new markets and commitment to core values. Perhaps rural Newfoundland and Labrador and its churches can be born again.

It soon became clear, however, that it will be impossible to discover and implement a “one-size-fits-all” solution for the challenges faced by rural churches across Canada. We heard so many different voices and experiences that it seems likely that each church and community will need to work out its own course of action. What we gained through coming together was a sense of solidarity in the struggle to continue as rural church, an awareness of some of the larger economic and political issues which are affecting rural communities across the country, and an opportunity to rejoice in the rich diversity of rural life.

Rural churches are not all the same: we are a mixed farm, a potluck, a crazy quilt, a variety of colours and flavours worth celebrating. God is calling us to carry on as a vital part of rural life.

Lens 3: Worship

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. JOHN 10:10

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. JOHN 14:12

Many of our rural churches are at a crossroads. They are virtually paralyzed by two fears: (1) that the financial burden of staying open will inevitably, if not imminently, overcome them and force them to close; and (2) that their young people will lose interest in matters of faith and leave their home congregation and home town altogether. When congregations succumb to these fears, its numbing effect is often felt in the pale and stale mood of worship. Any sincere expectation of being moved by the presence of God in worship is dashed by the nervous head count looking about to see how many, or rather how few people, have showed up in church on Sunday morning. We frequently worship numbers more than God, or apparently mistake God for the numbers!

The fear of “surviving” in these insular congregations confirms their apparent “death wish.” Ironically, they become good and faithful stewards of the gospel of scarcity. If and when, however, congregations can trust the biblical gospel of abundance, God does provide, and provides abundantly when they turn their eyes to Christ in faith. As with the spiritual race depicted in the book of Hebrews, going the distance requires the stretching and walking in faith that comes with the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit to carry us forward—one mindful step at a time, stride by stride in step with God and with each other—images of a marathon in anticipation of “Maranatha.”

The term “Maranatha” was cited by Paul at the end of his First Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:22), as a farewell. It was also used by the first generation of persecuted Christians as a warm greeting of hope and encouragement. It can be translated either as: “Our Lord, come!” or as: “Our Lord has come!” How true! Genuine worship is the reciprocal gesture of divine hospitality to which we are called: we invite the Spirit to be present in our midst, while recognizing that the Spirit is already present among us.

The ways in which liturgy and worship are understood and carried out in rural ministries—congregational and community-based—should reflect the ever-present presence of the Spirit in that particular place and context. Hence, as reiterated by Frost and Hirsch in their book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, “the church should be missional rather than institutional. The church should define itself in terms of its mission—to take the gospel to and incarnate the gospel within a specific cultural context.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003): xi. Used with permission.

Frost and Hirsch quote from David Bosch, who wrote in his magisterial book on mission: **“The mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and reconceived.”**²⁰ Without necessarily having Einstein’s axiom in mind, “If you can’t imagine it, you can’t do it,” Bosch nonetheless refers to the same dynamic process by which the people of God are called to reimagine their fundamental tasks in the world. “It seems so obvious, doesn’t it? Without first being able to imagine something, be it a task, object, or whatever, one would not be able to create it or do it. But alas the fundamental task of conceptualizing or reconceptualizing the basic elements of mission, ministry, or even church is so lacking in our ecclesiastical and missional practice in the West that it is alarming.”²¹

Though many rural communities and rural pastoral charges are no strangers to poverty and the lack of adequate financial resources, there is no scarcity of resourcefulness, imagination and creativity. As with the contrasting formula of abundance and scarcity, so the apparent signs corresponding to wealth and poverty are at best deceptive:

One of the best working definitions of poverty is not just the lack of money but the lack of a dream, a vision, hope. Darryl Gardiner, the director of Youth for Christ in New Zealand, believes that one of the core missional tasks when working with the poor is to help them to begin to dream again. The poor, in Darryl’s view, are people without a dream. It is the missionary’s task to rouse the imaginative abilities that lie at the base of the human soul in order to awaken the possibilities for a new gospel future and to access the deepest sources of human motivation—faith, love, pleasure, and hope. It is to awaken a sense of purpose, of mission, in life. No less is needed to birth and nurture the missional church in the West. We need to dream again, and to do this we must cultivate a love for imagination. Before we can do it, we need to dream it.²²

Instead of the frequent worry about running out of steam and closing our church doors, what would happen if congregations dreamed? What would happen if they believed in the God they proclaim and claimed the imagination and creativity that God has given them? Here is how one dream took shape in a rural pastoral charge:

Cardinal-Johnstown Pastoral Charge is a rural two-point pastoral charge in Montreal and Ottawa Conference in eastern Ontario. Johnstown United Church is nestled beside the international bridge between Canada and the USA. It has a regular attendance of approximately 35–40 people. They are intimately connected and like most rural congregations, they know each other’s name and identity through family relationships. Regular attendance at St. Johns’ United Church in Cardinal, the larger of the two points, ranges between 60 to 70. Typical of many people whose names do not appear on the membership roll, when anyone in the community is in need, the local United Church *becomes* their church.

²⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), p. 519.

²¹ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, p. 187. Used with permission.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 187–188. Used with permission.

Urged by their minister, the Cardinal-Johnstown Pastoral Charge dreamed and the dream became a reality! The dream-teaming up of human and divine Spirit SPEWed out a new incarnation of Christ's palpable presence among them—an intergenerational presence at that! What is SPEW? Spirit, Prayer, Enthusiasm, and Worship. SPEW began as a conversation between ministers, lay people, and youth. Their goal was to *play* with their place in the rural church. They met once a month on a Sunday evening in four churches at the western end of Seaway Valley Presbytery. A good time was had by all, a hall filled with laughter, food, and fellowship. The budding of new friendships and a newfound confidence in play and in spirit led to a weekend retreat.

Everyone was taking turns, respectfully listening, laughing, and sharing jokes. Meals were shared at a community table. Stories were shared and questions were posed—hard questions. What does God have to do with it? They struggled with the reality of life, and their lives in particular, i.e., their anger, angst, frustration, and need for finding their voice—versus the bigger-than-life faith stories of people in the Bible. They then asked the difficult questions: “Why do the kids at high school ignore or exclude kids who are different? Do we worship a God who seems to ignore our cries and does not rescue us? Who are the people not here, and what are the stories we might miss?”

A beautiful and awesome worship service came out of those conversations and prayers. People who were interested and supportive of SPEW attended their worship as closure for the weekend retreat. The youth planned it, using a PowerPoint presentation of their activities. Everyone was invited to sing the songs of hope. People prayed, clapped, smiled, laughed, and cried. The songs were great! Worship was breathtaking! Probably the most gratifying outcome for the leadership team was what came out of the mouths of the youth themselves. During the prayers of the people, children and young people expressed their gratitude of God. They were simple words, yet words of great depth: “This weekend I met my best friends for the first time ever. I do not want it to end.”

Our Wonderful Counsellor gives each of us the opportunity—and the grace—to be human angels to each other, as we freely offer the work of our hands and the desire of our hearts to our God. Why do we *still* faithfully (i.e., according to the gospel of scarcity) doubt God's abundance? In a similar vein to the young people at Cardinal-Johnstown: How do we miss the beauty of *imago dei* in those who are not here and who are not with us? At the same time, how do we overlook God's real presence among us and underestimate God's designs for us?

The following testimony from a United Church minister called to rural ministry illustrates the missional character of rural culture—through the powerful and universal language of music. It describes what happened in worship in two different rural contexts, using the traditional power of vernacular, “downhome” Newfoundland music:

Upon ordination I was sent to a six-point charge on the north coast of Newfoundland. I also supervised the four-point charge next to mine for over a year. I probably learned more about ministry there than I could have if I had been sent elsewhere. The shortage of musicians led me to utilize a button accordion player for two of the churches. His hymns

always sounded more like a jig or reel! I then took up playing the concertina in order to accompany him. Our duets were really popular with the outport fishing communities. But knowing how to play the concertina also allowed me to play at the local nursing homes. Many of the elderly residents told me that they had not heard or seen a concertina playing minister for 50 years or more. The last one was a Salvation Army officer. In fact, the history of the concertina can be traced back to Scotland as well as to its formative influence on sacred music.

Upon my transfer to Arthur United Church in Arthur, Ontario, in Hamilton Conference, I started a small group of harmonica players that eventually turned into button accordion players. Now I even have a student minister from the neighbouring pastoral charge playing the concertina with us! The harmonica can be learned in 10 lessons found on the Internet. Hymns scored with numbers instead of musical notes are there as well. That's how I first learned how to play; I use a similar format for the button accordion and concertina.

There are always plenty of guitar players around; already you have an instant worship and praise team in the making. Back in Newfoundland I had two groups on my charge to help cover the geography. Recently, our Arthur Button Accordion Group played at the ecumenical "Coffee Hour" in Arthur at the Presbyterian Church. It was a hit! We played old-time gospel tunes and a couple of Newfoundland favourites. Song sheets were handed out and everyone joined in.

We in congregations just work better if we stick together. Our spiritual development grows better if it is shared with others. Back in the "olden times," the churches in Newfoundland would have an "after service" that occurred "after" the regular evening service. There, churchgoers would pray for one another and witness to the blessings and abundance of God in their lives. They would sing the old gospel tunes that inspired the singer to walk the Christian path throughout the next week. Most of my outport congregations fondly remembered these days as the peak of their church lives. Regrettably, today's spiritual individualism pales in comparison.

May we prayerfully and playfully greet each other in worship with Maranatha: "Our Lord, come!" "Our Lord has come!"

Questions for Reflection

1. How does this congregation express and experience the intimate, pervasive presence of God in its Sunday morning services?
2. In other services, whether performed in the sanctuary of the church as well as in nursing homes, community centres, and public places?
3. How is liturgy conceived and conducted by ministry personnel in collaboration with lay leaders and congregants?
4. How is genuine transformation experienced in worship?

Lens 4: Caring and Generosity

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us.... Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. 2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–7

Here the apostle Paul recalls the generosity with which the Macedonian Christians had helped Gentile congregations and Paul amass a collection on behalf of poor believers in the church at Jerusalem.²³ In writing to the Corinthians, Paul holds up the exemplary acts of caring and generosity among some of his most faithful supporters.

We should not skip over the apparent contradictions in the very conditions under which such generosity happens, and which spawned such generosity from the Macedonian Christians in the first place. It is in the midst of, and from their experience of “a severe ordeal of affliction” that “their abundant joy *and* their extreme poverty have *overflowed* in a wealth of generosity” on behalf of others in need.

This poignant biblical passage on caring and generosity does not sound like the kind of calculated giving and philanthropic “charity” to which we are accustomed. It does evoke the love of God and neighbour that Jesus expects of his followers. What may be most perplexing for us postmodern, materialistic consumers, though, is its unusual motivation for giving: the unlikely combination of “abundant joy *and* extreme poverty.”

Each of the following three stories illustrate the calibre of generosity and caring that often emanate from the hearts of rural United Church congregations. Each of them exemplifies Paul’s admonition “to excel also in this generous undertaking,” for they have clearly excelled in their respective ministries in the same spirit that Paul attributed to the Macedonian Christians. These stories of hospitality and stewardship may seem modest and ordinary. In God’s eyes, however, they show how the Spirit is truly at work and play in a most extraordinary way.

Cassburn United Church is a two-point rural pastoral charge located in eastern Ontario. It belongs to Seaway Valley Presbytery in Montreal and Ottawa Conference. Most of its members are from a farming, rural background, but there are also educators, researchers, and local business people. This church is supported by about 50–60 households and the average attendance on Sunday morning is 30–45, not including the 12-member choir and organist. This church is considered the liveliest United Church in the area. As a result of generous bequests and active fundraising, the members of Cassburn recently made the

²³ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 72–73.

church wheelchair-accessible and renovated the kitchen to meet new health standards. The church also has an inclusive marriage policy, and all are welcome to attend.

Several community groups use the hall (regular senior group on Wednesdays, a knitting group, Prescott County 4-H, as well as those who rent it for parties, weddings, and other events). There is a small youth group and small Sunday school, as well as a very dedicated and talented choir. The pastoral charge currently funds a part-time student minister, a professional choir director, and an organist (recently celebrating 25 years of service).

In the words of a recent new member (within the last year and a half) of this church, Cassburn is not just a congregation of people gathered together to worship; they are a *community* of worshippers who care and support the members of their church and beyond. When someone in the congregation requests support for a project, for Christian education, for their high school fundraiser, etc., the people are always there to help. They offer words of encouragement, they buy the latest fundraiser item, etc. When an event is held in the Cassburn hall, everyone from the congregation who can attend does. The same people probably bring a baked good, or cook a turkey, cut turnips, or serve coffee in order to help out.

When people from the congregation come to a supper, for instance, they don't just eat and leave. A lot of them will stay and help clean up, or do the dishes. And they spread the word, about our events, about coming to church. In our immediate, geographical community people come to our events because they know that they will be welcomed and well fed. People talk freely to each other about all the things that go on in the church; therefore, opinions are expressed, heard, and taken into consideration. No idea is a bad idea, and all of them get discussed.

I was a member of another congregation for about 15 years, and in all that time, with everything that I was involved in—the choir, newsletter, Session—I never felt I was part of the church community. In the first week that I attended Cassburn, however, I was welcomed in and I have never felt like I was looking in from the outside, like I did before. There is no “hierarchy” in Cassburn. Everyone has an opportunity to serve on a committee, and no committee is more important than the other. The success of Cassburn is the caring, welcoming people that attend.

Some of the new ideas we have tried in the past few years include:

- Spiritual, musical evenings with guest singers
- Halloween parties and haunted houses
- Float in the Christmas parade
- Celebration for 25 years service for the organist—standing room only that evening!
- Dean Martin-style “roast” for the outgoing minister
- Dinner theatre in conjunction with the local Prescott Players amateur theatre group
- Special services revolving around music with our great choir
- Spaghetti dinners, Palm Sunday breakfast, a chili cook-off

In the testimony of another recent member who joined Cassburn about three years ago, there is a similar note of feeling that Cassburn is a more celebratory and welcoming church than the previous downtown United Church that person had left north of Toronto. The congregation as a whole does not have the “divisive” nature which can be fairly common within congregations. When there is an issue at hand, people generally speak their minds, but ultimately pull together in the end. It really is wonderful to be a part of this kind of process.

The music worship at Cassburn is also strong, lively, powerful, and joyful. Although my former church is larger and has many more people in both the choir and congregation, it does not begin to compare to the music, joy, enthusiasm, and overall sound at Cassburn.

The Churchill-Gilford Pastoral Charge in Simcoe Presbytery of Toronto Conference is located in two hamlets by the same name, just south of Barrie, Ontario. Both churches were built in the 1800s and have occupied a central place in the life of both villages since that time. In recent years, urban sprawl has come out from Toronto to meet them. There are “new” subdivisions in each hamlet and the promise of more to come in the near future. Both congregations have the potential to grow in these new towns if they can respond effectively to the challenges of welcoming new people who are definitely “other,” and who bring with them a more urban outlook on life and church.

These typical rural congregations had organized their church life along family lines, with the descendants of original families taking the lead positions. Many of them can trace their family’s lineage and history in the area back to the 1830s. By the late 1990s, however, the sanctuary of Churchill United Church was accessible only by climbing a narrow, winding staircase of about 15 steps. The only alternative was to climb about 10 crumbling cement steps with no handrail at the rear of the church and enter at the chancel end of the sanctuary.

The congregation had discussed an accessibility project for many years. In fact, drawings existed of an extensive renovation at the front of the church which would be the only way to have everyone come in the “front” door. It was still far beyond the reach of the financial resources of the congregation, however, and others were worried that renovations would greatly alter the historical character of the front of the church.

One summer there were two weddings in a row where accessibility was a major issue. At the first wedding, the mother of the bride had great difficulty walking, even with the aid of two crutches. On the day of the wedding, she arrived at the top of the stairs bathed in perspiration and completely exhausted from climbing the 15 stairs. The very next weekend, a paraplegic guest in a wheelchair arrived for the other wedding. He could not climb the stairs and the only option was to have four people lift him up the crumbling cement stairs at the back of the church. It was a hair-raising operation which left the minister feeling frightened and embarrassed. Once he was in his place in the sanctuary, she spoke to him and pledged to him that by the next summer, the sanctuary would be accessible to him. She had no idea how this would happen.

When the stewards met in the fall, they talked about the whole idea of “shut-ins” and how the congregation in the past had been content to exclude people no longer able to climb stairs by calling them shut-ins and visiting them in their homes (or not!). They talked about how society has a different view now of the place of people with mobility issues, and that anyone who wished to come to the church should be able to enter it. Slowly, over the winter, a plan for renovations began to take shape, though all the questions, like how the congregation could afford this, were far from answered.

Then, in the spring, a terrible tragedy happened that shocked everyone to the core. The Chief Steward, who had struggled for many years with bipolar disorder, found he could no longer go on living. The whole congregation was deeply shocked by his death. In addition to everything else, he had been a big supporter of the accessibility plans. He had been employed for many years by a demolition company, and following his death, his supervisor asked if there was anything his company could do for the church. In fact, there was. Plans went into high gear, drawings were finalized, township approval was received, and fundraising events were carried out. The demolition company donated a great deal of time, expertise, and materials, and in a very short time, the ramp was completed.

This project was a great builder of spirit in the congregation. The old worries about having people stigmatized by coming in the back door never materialized. Instead, many (if not most) started coming in that door, since they parked their cars close to that entrance. At the official opening of the ramp, the company supervisor who had taken such an interest in the project returned, as did family members of the man who had died. Everyone felt proud when a specially carved wooden plaque was unveiled honouring the beloved member. In addition to this memorial plaque, the faith, work, and commitment of the Chief Steward who had died resulted in a more memorable and useful legacy: now anyone can enter the church with relative ease and dignity.

For a Christmas present in 2001, a farmer told his wife that they should set aside 40 acres on their farm in the Castleford area of Renfrew County, Ontario, for a Foodgrains project. The Clerk of Session for the Castleford congregation asked for the support of Castleford United Church in forming a Foodgrains Committee. They agreed, and a committee was formed. Additional members were sought from two of the other congregations that comprise the Braeside Pastoral Charge, Glasgow and Braeside United Churches. Other members joined from St. Andrews and Lochwinnoch Presbyterian Churches and Renfrew Christian Reformed Church.

The committee met throughout the late winter and early spring of 2002 and finally named itself The Riverview Foodgrains Project. In late April of 2002 wheat was sown on the 40 acres and the project was well underway. In the six years that the project has functioned, three different crops have been sown with varying degrees of success. In total, the project has raised over \$42,000 for food relief in developing countries. A sign of confidence in the effectiveness of the Canadian Food Grains Bank distribution program, Canadian International Development Agency matches member donations 4:1 up to a maximum of

\$20 million. With the matching grant it means that The Riverview Foodgrains Project has helped to raise over \$210,000 for developing countries food relief. Needless to say, the members of Castleford United Church and other local congregations in this small town are proud to be part of the Canadian response to today's hungry world.

Questions for Reflection

1. How is the love of God in Jesus Christ practised?
2. How is the “social gospel” ethos of rural United Church congregations lived out in our respective communities?
3. Is our rural congregation a truly welcoming one, and if so, what are the trademarks of our hospitality?
4. If we think we are friendly, what does that mean?
5. Who in our community is really not welcome in our church, and why not?

Lens 5: Learning

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. ROMANS 12:4–8

From the stories in the previous lens we have seen concrete examples of rural ministries of some of the spiritual gifts that the apostle Paul highlights in his letter to the Romans. Besides Paul's emphasis on justification by faith, we can imagine why Martin Luther considered this letter "the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest Gospel."²⁴ Now we turn our attention to the gifts of ministry and teaching, which includes teaching lay and ordered ministers how to minister as much as it does supporting those called to teaching ministries in the church. While both offer leadership in congregational and community ministry settings, Paul also makes a point of singling out the gift of leadership.

Among other traits, congregational leadership entails a relationship between a local's "church culture and its *ability to learn*." Leadership, in the words of George B. Thompson, Jr., author of *How to Get Along with Your Church*, "is not simply about some strong-minded, attractive, charismatic figure who leads the charge for an inviting cause. For pastors, many of whom, over the years, move in and out of several congregations, the challenges to leadership often call for a less dramatic strategy."

With relevance to the often precarious situation facing United Church ministry personnel and rural pastoral charges in various geographical contexts, Thompson continues: "Especially in the rapidly changing environment of the twenty-first century, churches need to be able to respond. They need to learn how to learn, how to pay attention to what is going on around them, how to adjust their focus on the future, and how to let their shared assumptions change as a result. This set of tasks takes plenty of energy and can release lots of apprehension within the congregation, especially among the longtime members."²⁵

In addition to how local congregations can develop their capacity for learning and become engaged in theological reflection on their spiritual journey, the question remains: where and how does one learn about the unique and distinct rural context for ministry? Contrary to the widespread assumption that both formal theological education and lifelong education occurs most often in cities, it only takes a little "digging around the roots" of rural pastoral charges to uncover the number of ways in which learning has taken place in the diverse rural contexts for ministry across our land.

²⁴ From Martin Luther's "Preface to the Epistle to the Romans," 1522.

²⁵ George B. Thompson, Jr., *How to Get Along with Your Church: Creating Cultural Capital for Doing Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), pp. 77–78.

It makes sense that prospective ministry personnel could learn more about those specific contexts for rural ministry while staying in a rural pastoral charge and small town, and by meeting with lay and ordered people who work and minister in that same community. This was in fact the intentional rationale of the Diploma Program in Rural Ministry at Queen's Theological College in Kingston, Ontario, in its initial years. Designed for Master of Divinity students as well as for lay leaders already serving in rural pastoral charges, this program featured week-long courses through on-site learning opportunities held in different kinds of rural communities within the province of Ontario, as well as occasional forays in comparable rural communities in upper New York state. Although Bay of Quinte Conference is where most of Queen's graduates serve in ministry, this initial stage of the Rural Ministry program offered courses in adjoining Conferences such as Toronto and London.

With a combination of full-time and adjunct Queen's Theology faculty acting as facilitators, those in attendance were able to contextualize their advance assigned readings in the specific cultural milieu in which they were staying. Local ministry personnel, store managers, local farmers, and entrepreneurs were invited as guest speakers and local resources to inform students about that particular, local context for rural ministry. Billeted with member families of local United Church congregations, students were able to get acquainted with these pastoral charges through staying and visiting with their hosts who worship in them and support them. Like the mundane spiritual practice of monastic communities within our Christian tradition, learning together is probably best done while eating together. Breaking bread with each other in a bed-and-breakfast venue allows rural congregations and communities to do what they do best: offer hospitality in the spirit of Christ.

The following stories reiterate the above rationale for the *location* of M.Div.-related theological education course offerings as well as lifelong education courses and workshops *in rural places and spaces*. Besides recognizing the key role of local residents and resources in augmenting the learning process, it pays respect to the local hosts whose generous sharing of hospitality and knowledge make such events a rich and memorable learning experience. In addition to investing more of our financial resources in supporting rural ministries, we need to invest our future in supporting locally-managed educational programs and centres in rural areas that promote theological education and reflection for the broader United Church constituencies.

Each of the following three examples demonstrates some of the distinct advantages of programming learning opportunities in collaboration with rural pastoral charges and rural presbyteries:

In 2000 a report was commissioned by Muskoka Presbytery in Toronto Conference on alternative models of mission strategy for small and rural congregations in decline.²⁶ In her enthusiastic response to the report, the acting minister at the Lake of Bays Pastoral Charge welcomed the promising role of the laity it emphasized for the future leadership of the church. "Would it not be amazing," in her words, "if the final recommendation is that we form a trained group of lay leaders, well versed in the polity of The United

²⁶ Marvin L. Anderson, "Alternative Models of Mission Strategy for Small and Rural Congregations," Final Report for Muskoka Presbytery, The United Church of Canada (May 2000, copyright by Marvin L. Anderson).

Church of Canada, familiar with the history of the church, having solid studies in scripture and theology and able to preach and conduct worship? Would it not be even more amazing to realize that Muskoka Presbytery has been quietly preparing such a skilled group of lay people, over the last five or six years? Would it not be wonderful to realize that the five lay preachers now licensed and the nine who are now two thirds through their training (four of whom are under 40 years of age) are just waiting eagerly for their skills to be recognized and utilized more fully?²⁷

In the candid observation of a prominent lay member of Muskoka Presbytery, the program of lay education available through the Lay Preaching Course taught by the above minister and several other ministry personnel in Muskoka Presbytery is “one of the best in the whole country.” It was clear that this largely rural presbytery had already been engaged for some time in providing exemplary models of lay education that encourage and train laity to develop their own skills at ministry. Furthermore, one can easily infer from these comments that the local context has not only been the most accessible and convenient place in which lay ministers are taught skills in ministry; it is also the most practical and economical place to provide lay education. On-site local learning is usually preferable to folks because of the formidable distances and driving time required if workshops are held in Toronto or at Five Oaks. In addition to the hazards posed by winter driving, travelling to Toronto or even Barrie is still a full day’s effort for most people.²⁸

In the spring of 2006, the Kemble Pastoral Charge in Grey Presbytery of Toronto Conference hosted a conference on rural ministry entitled “Your Roots Are Showing: Celebrating and Creating Rural Roots/Routes.” Located near the Niagara Escarpment north of Owen Sound, Ontario, this conference addressed some of the dramatic changes facing both well-established and “new rural” communities like those comprising this pastoral charge of three points: Kemble, Sarawak, and Zion-Keppel. It focused on the implications of such changes on rural United Church congregations like Kemble, which is anticipating a new recreation and housing development that could potentially house up to 4,000 people.

Characterized by the best of rural hospitality, the conference provided free trade organic coffee roasted and sold locally, fresh locally produced organic food, traditional home cooking, and local tours and billeting. One of the keynote presenters and a member of Sarawak shared her exciting research on the energy-saving innovations of green roof technology for high-rise buildings in Toronto and other cities. The conference chair and another Sarawak member not only received enthusiastic evaluations from those who attended but also unsolicited thank you notes from participants afterwards.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 29–30.

²⁸ Ibid.

As one of the keynote speakers noted, this was one of the best-organized and most inspiring rural ministry conferences in which he had participated over the past 20 years. The success of this conference is not surprising, given the amount of volunteer work and grassroots organization by their minister and local planning committee: Kemble Pastoral Charge was recently voted one of the top 10 “lively and faithful” pastoral charges in Toronto Conference. It is also one of the dozen ministry sites chosen by a Toronto Conference staff person in her Doctor of Ministry work research study of best practices of congregational ministry.

Two of the frequent challenges rural congregations face are their low self-esteem and worry about their future, and the fact that often when settled to a new rural pastoral charge, ministry personnel do not stay very long. This situation describes the ministry context for several small, struggling English-language congregations that belonged to a five-point pastoral charge in the Eastern Townships of Quebec from 1976 to 1984. This pastoral charge was about 1,000 square miles in size, in a predominantly rural francophone and Roman Catholic area.

In order to afford a full-time minister, more congregations were combined to make a viable pastoral charge; thus, ministry personnel were being stretched to serve larger and larger areas. Hence, there was an obvious need for lay theological education to prepare and train lay people for ministry in their own rural context. There was a need for lay people to assist in conducting worship and preaching, to do some of the pastoral visiting, to provide Christian education opportunities in the congregation, and to learn how to witness to their faith in the community.

A Recognized Lay Workers program was started, bringing together 15 lay people for a Saturday each month, with two overnight weekend events at the beginning and the end of each program. The participants were introduced to biblical and theological studies, training in ministry skills, and theological reflection. Each lay person was invited to choose an area of ministry for themselves and was supervised by their local minister in that ministry activity over the course of the year-long program. At the end of the program, the participants were invited to consider whether they would like to be designated a Recognized Lay Worker by the presbytery and continue in a ministry accountable to the presbytery and to the local congregation.

Through this innovative program many lay people gained more self-confidence, learned more about ministry and theology, and had opportunities to serve in local congregations or throughout the presbytery. This program is still being run by Quebec-Sherbrooke Presbytery 25 years later and continues to have a significant impact on the lay education of people in the presbytery. Given the alarmingly brief tenure of ministry personnel in many United Church pastoral charges in rural presbyteries across Canada, it may be one of the most effective pastoral strategies for resolving the “revolving door syndrome.”

Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways and through what venues does lifelong learning take place *locally*?
2. How does this rural or small town congregation foster opportunities for learning and for theological reflection for all ages?
3. How do we collaborate with learning centres and theological colleges in the critical work of forming future ministry personnel as well as lay leaders called to rural ministry?

Lens 6: Healing and Transformation

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. 1 CORINTHIANS 12:18–26

“The goal is world transformation. ‘See, I am making all things new’ (Rev. 21:5).” The church, filled with the Spirit, in the words of Canadian theologian, Clark Pinnock, “is agent of God’s coming kingdom and sacrament for the world. God touches the world when the church speaks the truth, proclaims good news, performs Jesus-actions, identifies with pain, builds community, shares and forgives. The mission is holistic, and has broad parameters. Spiritual ecstasy is not meant to be an end in itself—the goal is transformation.”²⁹

This lens enables us to see how the work that God calls us to do in the world is about both healing and transformation. We are God’s hands and fingers, and we leave our human fingerprints on the work we do in the name and Spirit of Jesus. “The purpose of the outpouring of the Spirit,” Pinnock reminds us, “is to bring the kingdom near and change real-life situations. Mission is an activity that initiates people into the kingdom and promotes the reality of the new order.”

As we noted in the first lens on purpose and identity, the historic mandate and legacy of the United Church is one that commands respect because of its historical incarnation of the social gospel. The explicit emphasis on “Christianizing the Social Order” was endorsed by commissioners to the General Council of the United Church in 1932. Subsequently, the enthusiastic and engaged mission activity for changing the “real-life situations” of that time was formalized in the Commission on Christianizing the Social Order (1934). The dire social and economic woes of this turbulent period in Canada, including the Depression, warranted a *social* gospel response in order to alleviate the pain and suffering of people in the cities as well as in the country. We are immensely proud of the considerable gains advanced then by the social gospel movement and our United Church in particular.

We are not proud, however, of the “sins of our fathers and mothers” associated with the Indian residential schools. We are not proud of the criminal actions committed against Aboriginal children under the auspices of “Christian mission” by the United Church and other mainline Canadian denominations. The pernicious and ethnocentric campaign to “Christianize” Aboriginal

²⁹ Taken from *Flame of Love* by Clark H. Pinnock (p. 143). Copyright © 1996 by Clark H. Pinnock. Used with permission of InterVarsity Press, PO Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515.

children and adults was a horrific episode in both Canadian and United Church history. Yet we cannot forget that the scandalous abuse perpetrated in the residential schools was a by-product of the systemic, racist attitudes and policies perpetuated by the Canadian government and churches on Aboriginal people and First Nations communities.

This shameful chapter of our history regarding the victims of the Indian residential schools as well as other assimilationist policies still haunts the church and Canadian society—as it should. Even worse, it still haunts its victims. Neither the actions themselves nor the irreparable harm inflicted on the schoolchildren can be forgotten. For many of the victims, it remains a toxic and painful legacy from which healing seems distant, if not impossible. The sins committed by the administrators, priests, and staff of the former residential schools—under the guise of Christian mission—can no longer be concealed or censored from our collective memory, and neither should they.

The following Aboriginal story, however, suggests that such sins of previous generations can and ought to be forgiven. Only then can the Creator's healing take root in the wounded souls of Aboriginal women and men scarred by the residential schools; only then can the Creator's healing from this lethal residue of abuse commence for the victims and their offspring:

It is the custom and tradition of Aboriginal people to feed the spirits of our deceased loved ones. We always do this after we lose a loved one in death. For our great grandparents and grandparents up until the mid-1960s, this ritual used to take four days after the burial. We almost lost this custom because 90 percent of our particular Aboriginal community was alcoholic. Thanks to the perseverance and faith of four strong Elders, though, we have managed to hold onto this tradition of celebrating the four-day feast a month later. Most everyone still holds a traditional feast feeding the spirits on the anniversary date of the deceased for the next four years. There are a few families who still keep the four-day feast after the burial.

Every year on Father's Day we go to our cemetery and clean in and around the graves, putting new flowers on the graves. A big feast is held there. We have our traditional spiritual man in charge of the ceremonies. In feeding the spirits a month after the death of the deceased, the family invites the community to come and eat with them, thanking all the people who supported them at the time of their loved one's death. The women cook the feast food. We were taught by our mothers, aunts, and grandmothers to pray and smudge the food and ourselves before we start to cook. We never taste the food while cooking because we are told this is for a sacred feast to feed the spirits first. After the ceremony is over, four designated people serve everyone who is sitting in a big circle. The servers cannot pass another server. At the end of the feast, the family of the deceased pass out gifts to the people who came, thanking them again for their help and support to the immediate family in mourning.

In the fall of October 1993, a group of survivors returned to the Indian residential school near Brandon, Manitoba, where all of them had attended as children. A traditional spiritual woman Elder from the neighbouring Sioux Valley First Nation was asked to do the ceremonies of prayers and blessings of the feast food. The Sioux Valley First Nation

now owns the land after the residential school was closed down. Following their arrival, the survivors toured the school grounds and the surrounding area while the feast food was being cooked on camp stoves. When they finally assembled for the ceremony, the Elder spoke first and asked everyone to pray with her and with all those who had attended the residential school.

First of all, she asked the survivors to forgive those who harmed them there, and to leave behind all the pain and suffering they had carried for all these years. Second, she told them they need to let go of the pain and suffering because it has trapped them emotionally, mentally, physically, *and* spiritually. It has numbed their body from any kind of healing. She reminded them that they need to find healing today so that their children and grandchildren can come to them for that same kind of help when they need it. The healing process cannot start until they stop carrying this garbage around with them.

The Elder then began her prayers of healing and blessing of the feast food. As she prayed we heard the moans of dying children down in the kitchen. As she prayed, these audible cries turned into laughter and the voices of the children were happy. She continued to pray for the blessing of the food and for feeding the hungry spirits of the young children who died at the residential school. Little did we know that our Native ritual of faithfully feeding the starved and suffering spirits of our deceased schoolchildren would bring them such healing, but now we know.

At the Annual United Church Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario held in Brandon in 2002, Bernice Saulteaux was invited to lead a workshop on the residential schools. She escorted the group to the site of the school, which by then had been torn down, leaving only a heap of bricks. The apple tree and other trees at the front entrance of the school were still there, though, and were still growing. The apple tree is the same one that had been forbidden the Aboriginal schoolchildren by the principal and staff to take and eat from. Many of the survivors remembered that when they returned to the school on the same trip in the fall of October 1993 in order to feed the spirits. The survivors backed a truck up to the tree and picked apples from it. The first apple they picked they threw against the remaining building and said that was for the principal. They cleaned the tree of its apples that day. They packed them up in the truck and brought them home, and cooked and ate them later.

The above reference to Paul's letter to the Corinthian church is a poignant reminder of the longing for healing in our Aboriginal congregations and communities. It is also a pertinent reminder of our need for healing at the level of local congregations and pastoral charges, as well as for our United Church and nation as a whole. For rural congregations and small membership churches where conflict has exacerbated relations between members of the same pastoral charge, or between members of congregations and their ministry personnel, the need for reconciliation and healing is also acute.

No matter which scenario it is, the personal and communal longing for healing among Aboriginal survivors of the Indian residential schools reminds us of the gospel truth proclaimed

by Paul: that if any one of us suffers, all of us suffer. Moreover, this powerful ritual of Aboriginal healing for those who have suffered is a sign of the profound way in which “God touches the world when the church speaks the truth, proclaims good news, performs Jesus-actions, identifies with pain, builds community, shares and forgives.” It points to the prophetic yearning among all of us for God’s healing and transformation of the broken world in which we live.

In making the above analogy between the human body and the body politic, Paul is making his plea for the diversity of the Spirit’s manifestations for the common good. With his readers in mind, Paul is contrasting the “honor” values of hierarchical aristocratic Greek and imperial Roman culture with the egalitarian rule and kingdom of God embodied in Jesus and the early church, based on the solidarity of its interdependent and equally valued members.³⁰

No wonder, then, that Paul elaborates in the subsequent 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians on the panoply of spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit lavishes on believers. “When the New Testament describes the disciples as ordinary, uneducated people, afraid and often lacking understanding,” as stated by Clark Pinnock in his book, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, “is it not telling us that participation in mission does not depend on being talented and well-educated (Acts 4:13)? Does it not prove that any success they enjoyed was not due to them but to God? If there was greatness in the disciples, surely it was not their ability but their openness to the Spirit....”³¹

It was this same emphasis on “openness to the Spirit” that culminated in the focus of the 2006 Rural Consultation: “Discerning God’s Call for the Rural Church Now.” Having experienced first-hand the World Café process at the 39th General Council, the national planning committee decided to use it for the Rural Consultation as well. We hoped that the World Café process would more likely enable all of us to listen to each other and discern the voice of the Spirit in the process. Over the course of the three intense days we spent together, participants listened to one another in small table groups of four. The focus questions we used are included at the end of this resource for you to consider adapting for similar discussions in your own congregations and small groups.

In light of what the participants at the Rural Consultation knew about what makes smaller communities work as well as they do, we could make light of calling the World Café the Rural Café—à la the hit Canadian sitcom, *Corner Gas* (situated in a fictional small town in Saskatchewan). All joking aside, though, Frost’s and Hirsch’s above description of the “missional-incarnational” model of being church sounds a lot like a rural café, a local post office, a hair salon, a potluck dinner at the local United Church: “a web, a series of intersecting lines

³⁰ Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 3rd Edition, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 285.

³¹ Taken from *Flame of Love* by Clark H. Pinnock (p. 145). Copyright © 1996 by Clark H. Pinnock. Used with permission of InterVarsity Press, PO Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515.

symbolizing the networks of relationships, friendships, and acquaintances of which church members are a part.”³²

The particular shape and form and “incarnation” that mission takes in rural ministries “is not arrived at ideologically or even pragmatically,” Pinnock adds. “In mission we ask not just ‘Is this action good and necessary?’ We also ask, ‘Where is God leading? Is this God’s undertaking?’ There are no rules and regulations for mission, because Spirit leadership is central. *Mission is not social work, but deeds directed and empowered by the Spirit.*”³³

Here is where we in the United Church often take the wrong road, but we don’t even know it. We confuse the historic accent on “social service” integral to the social gospel as *the* gospel inclusive, instead of recognizing what was highlighted in the first lens: *the gospel message of Jesus Christ must be lived out in social practice and community service.* “Through the gifting of the whole congregation,” Pinnock concludes, “the church is enabled to express its missionary character as it speaks the Word and ministers in the power of God (1 Peter 4:10–11). Apostles and evangelists plant churches, accompanied by signs and wonders; prophets speak the word of God to specific situations; those with the gift of faith point the way forward. The Spirit motivates and equips the church to move in mission.”³⁴

This passage is not only a perfect prelude to the beloved “love chapter” of the Bible (1 Corinthians 13); it’s a fitting biblical text for recognizing the “missional-incarnational” *context* for rural ministries of the United Church across Canada. The following examples feature the ministry of parish nurses on the one hand, and all sorts of alternative configurations of rural congregational and community-based ministries on the other.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:27–31

In the late winter of 2001, a registered nurse and a member of Castleford United Church was approached by the minister for the pastoral charge and asked if she had ever considered becoming a parish nurse. Castleford United Church is one of three congregations that comprise the Braeside Pastoral Charge in Renfrew Presbytery, Bay of Quinte Conference. The village of Braeside has about 700 residents, mostly commuters to the larger centres of Arnprior, Kanata, Nepean, and Ottawa, Ontario. Since this member of Castleford did not have a clue what a parish nurse was, she responded, of course, by saying that she had not!

³² Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), pp. 43–44. Used with permission.

³³ Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, p. 145, emphasis added.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

After prayerful consideration and a three-month process of discernment, though, which included conversations with a person who was trained in parish nursing and with the minister of a congregation in Ottawa, Ontario, which had a parish nurse, not to mention reading lots of materials, she decided to become a “volunteer parish nurse” for the pastoral charge. At the June 2001 meeting of the Official Board of the pastoral charge, the Board agreed to undertake a pilot project of having a volunteer parish nurse for the rest of that calendar year and for the coming calendar year of 2002. The Official Board agreed to pay for her travel expenses and to pay for any training in becoming a parish nurse that she would undertake.

Initially, the aspiring parish nurse began with a visitation list of some 16 families or people in the pastoral charge. Her visitation list quickly grew to nearly 50 families or individuals. In the fall of 2002, she began her formal training to become a parish nurse at Algonquin College in Ottawa, Ontario. Her formal academic training lasted for nearly three years and it included a lot of work in pastoral counselling. Sometimes her training was very intense, but it was always rewarding.

In the summer of 2004, Braeside Pastoral Charge applied for a Mission Strategy and Support Grant from Bay of Quinte Conference and asked the parish nurse if she was willing to expand her ministry. She agreed and began to work part-time, 10 hours a week, as the pastoral charge’s rural pastoral nurse. The grant was awarded, and this laywoman has worked part-time as the pastoral charge’s rural pastoral nurse ever since. Her work not only includes visiting with people in their homes but also in hospitals, nursing homes, and retirement centres. She hosts information workshops in churches and community centres and does patient advocacy work with a number of the hospitals and health care agencies in the area. She says, though, that the most rewarding part of her work is in praying with her “clients.”

The Muskoka Presbytery report (2000) mentioned in Lens 5 outlined five alternative models of mission strategy for struggling rural and small town congregations typical of Muskoka Presbytery and other rural presbyteries across the United Church.³⁵ This report was commissioned in order to address the serious situation facing rural United Church pastoral charges and congregations for whom order of ministry personnel or professional staff are either not available or affordable. Its conclusion: A different configuration of congregational ministry is often warranted in lieu of the traditional arrangement of one minister per pastoral charge.

Since then, it has become more apparent that derivatives of this “one minister per pastoral charge” formula, such as part-time stipends for ministry personnel calculated on half-time or three-quarters’ time, can often be as confusing and exploitative of ministers as they are impractical. While such arrangements may work as stop-gap measures to keep ministry going, they frequently compromise the very conditions that support ministry as vocation and calling for both ministry personnel and laity.

³⁵ Marvin L. Anderson, “Alternative Models of Mission Strategy for Small and Rural Congregations,” Final Report for Muskoka Presbytery, The United Church of Canada, (May, 2000, copyright by Marvin L. Anderson).

No one denies the present trends of rural depopulation and out-migration across Canada, and the reality of diminishing financial resources and declining membership among many rural pastoral charges. It seems only logical to assume that such trends of diminishing people and resources warrant different solutions and configurations in order to save money. This research, however, shows that other “resources” besides money come to play a more significant role in revitalizing rural ministries in local congregations and pastoral charges.

But many pastoral strategies are solely focused on securing and subsidizing rural ministries as if they are the “deadbeat” welfare recipients on the dole of presbytery or Conference or Mission and Finance at the GCO. This research and this *Alive and Kicking* resource—on the contrary—document numerous examples of how rural congregations and pastoral charges undergo transformation *once* they have dramatically “reframed” their own lenses on ministry. Consequently, they have been changed in return and transformed in the process. Like the contrast between abundance and scarcity, the success of creative ministries lies not in how many resources they have to work with but in how resourceful they are with those resources.

The most well-known alternative model of mission strategy laid out in the Muskoka Presbytery report is the cluster model. A cluster is a group of congregations served by a lay ministry team. A lay ministry team is made up of lay people chosen by each of the participating congregations. In the context of The Uniting Church of Australia, for example, the lay ministry team is subsequently accepted by the presbytery to be the “minister” in each particular congregation and attends to all the functions required of a minister. Once the congregation has nominated a lay ministry team, the names are submitted to the Pastoral Relations Committee of the presbytery for final approval. The lay ministry teams are supported by a cluster (ordained/ordered) minister, whose task it is to enable and encourage the team and be available as a resource to the team and other lay people assisting the team.³⁶

For The United Church of Canada, a typical example of a formal cluster ministry usually involves anywhere from three to seven different small or rural congregations situated within a maximum two-hour driving geography; it is served by one or more ordered ministers, together with several lay people qualified in different ways. In the Australian and New Zealand contexts, in which cluster ministries are more familiar and have enjoyed considerably more success, there are comparable scenarios.

From Maintenance to Mission

Congregations intent on forming or joining a cluster need to clarify their mission. Most importantly, the central emphasis is on mission and mission strategy—as opposed to the usual preoccupation with simply keeping the doors of a church open. In the Australian context for clustering, for example, mission is explicitly carried out on the basis of the following five premises:

- The business of the church is mission.
- The congregation is the base for mission.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 2–3.

- The mission is to the surrounding community, as well as to members of the congregation.
- The mission is undertaken by the laity.
- If you discover and work at what God wants done, God will make sure the work is supported.³⁷

Participating in a cluster and being served by a lay ministry team has distinct advantages for a congregation. There are at least four advantages that clustering offers over traditional models of ministry:

1. First and foremost, it ensures the continuance of ministry regardless of the lack of ministry personnel or a church closure. When a congregation is forced to close, the tragedy lies not only in the closure of the church and the termination of its services, but in the loss of its longstanding ministry to the local community.
2. The cluster model enables congregations to move from maintenance to mission. The constant worry about survival and the need to maintain the church building—which is important in itself—can often take precedence over the mission and ministry of congregations. Thus, the latter is seriously compromised. The survival-at-all-costs mentality perpetuates an insular-minded “conservatism” in the narrow sense of merely *conserving* or *preserving* one’s own congregation, instead of *servicing* Christ and each other as well as those in the community. To the extent that maintenance becomes the *sole* preoccupation, a congregation risks losing its *soul*.
3. Clustering creates fresh motivation to meet local needs in response to Jesus’ call to participate in God’s mission, and thus provides new opportunities for lay ministry. While some have argued that a Lay Ministry Team requires more from the same “faithful” lay people who are already fatigued, numerous examples of successful clusters have shown that new challenges actually release new energy. Too often the traditional model for congregational ministry of one ordered minister per pastoral charge lends itself to burn-out for either or both the minister and the members of the congregation. In practice, Lay Ministry Teams within clusters allow rural congregations to economize on the voluntary efforts of laity, thereby enabling them to work smarter rather than harder.
4. This leads to a fourth advantage of the cluster model: maximization of time and effort. The planned and collaborative approach of a lay ministry team in conjunction with ministry personnel is that it ensures the most productive use of the gifts entrusted to both ministry personnel and laity. While on the surface it may appear that the ordered minister is expected to “take a backseat,” a cluster ministry frees up the creativity for *both* ministry personnel and laity. This helps reduce the likelihood of

³⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

burn-out for ministry personnel, and at the same time releases new energy for them as it does for lay ministers and leaders.³⁸

One of the longest-running successful examples of clustering in the United Church is the Shared United-Anglican Ministry in Turtle River Parish. Turtle River Parish is part of Prairie Pine Presbytery (originally Battleford and Rosetown Presbyteries) in Saskatchewan Conference. It brought together a two-point Anglican parish and a three-point United Church pastoral charge in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both United Church congregations and Anglican parishes were struggling to survive, with the looming expectation that some of them would have to be closed in the near future.

With the help of the former Battleford Presbytery, Turtle River Parish was first formed in 1963. In late 1968 discussion began regarding the possibility of a cooperative parish with the people of the Turtleford Anglican Parish. A plan was finally approved by January 1, 1970. This parish consisted of six congregations. The ministry team at this time consisted of a United Church minister, an Anglican church minister, and a third person who worked half-time. Membership of the parish was approximately 70 percent United Church members and 30 percent Anglican at that time. A new rectory was built in Turtleford and a house in Edam was bought for a manse. New churches were built later at Turtleford and Mervin, while other churches have been renovated over the years. The Spruce Lake congregation dissolved in the 1990s, but Bissell Memorial Glaslyn joined the parish in 2003.

Turtle River Parish is currently served by two full-time ordained/ordered ministers, one Anglican and one United Church. The current United Church minister has served there for nine years. The parish is spread over a large area, which adds to the amount of driving for both ministers on Sundays, as well as for pastoral visits and other parish-related activities. In the 1980s there was some discussion about having a common liturgy, but it never materialized. To this day each congregation participates in an Anglican liturgy one Sunday and a United Church liturgy the next.

There are six services held every Sunday, now that Bissell Memorial Glaslyn has joined. Confirmation classes have always been led jointly by both persons on the clergy team. At the present time two confirmation services take place: one for youth joining the United Church, the other for young people who want to join the Anglican Church. Two parish-wide services take place each year (fall and spring) at a different location each time. At the spring service the sacrament of communion is celebrated, a United Church liturgy one spring, an Anglican liturgy the next spring. Guest speakers from outside the parish are generally invited for these services.

This parish has a strong and dedicated lay ministry, with many individuals committed to do pulpit supply, facilitate workshops, and serve on councils, boards, and committees.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 8–9.

Our AUCW groups (Anglican United Church Women) faithfully continue to be active in serving God in the community. Over the past few years, there is a growing commitment in this parish to participate in mission trips outside Canada. In 2008, Turtle River Parish commissioned eight parish members toward this end.

One of the other successful adaptations of the cluster model in the United Church originated in Quebec-Sherbrooke Presbytery in Ottawa and Montreal Conference. This took place in the same five-point United Church pastoral charge in the Eastern Townships of Quebec from 1976 to 1984 already profiled in Lens 5. In this predominantly rural francophone and Roman Catholic area, the self-esteem of these small, struggling anglophone congregations was low. Any prospects for a viable future were dismal at best. For those ministry personnel who were settled in these congregations, most did not stay very long.

This adaptation of the cluster model was based on a decision to form a cluster that would enable them to cooperate and share in joint programming. Four pastoral charges, comprising 10 congregations in total, were part of the initial cluster. Later on, two other pastoral charges joined the cluster. Each pastoral charge maintained its own separate identity and structure, but the agreement to cooperate fostered three important supports for ministry.

First, the ministry group met twice a month for support, reflection on the ministry context, and visioning for ministry in the area. The second aspect was the creation of a regional church council, comprised of one lay person from each congregation. This was called the Yamaska Valley Parish Council. The Council provided an opportunity for lay people to share their concerns, learn best practices from each other, and plan educational and celebratory events.

The third aspect was programming. Given the small size of the congregations, no one on their own could mount a significant educational event. By working together, however, they realized that they could invite a variety of resource people and expect relatively good success. Therefore, regional events were held that involved music, spiritual discipleship, social action, Christian education resources, etc. A firm commitment from the 10 congregations to advertise and support these events made them viable. Another program activity was a regional worship service held once or twice a year, when all the congregations would close their doors and attend a regional worship service, followed by a picnic.

These activities enlivened the congregations, gave them a sense of working together, and invariably reduced their sense of isolation as rural congregations. They also engaged the imagination of participating congregations to try new ways of being church in their local communities. All of this provided more stability and helped sustain ministry personnel, who in turn tended to stay longer in their pastoral charges.

An off-shoot of his joint venture was an agreement for the pastoral charges to apply for summer interns. It became evident that it was difficult to attract ordinands to ministry in Quebec. However, if a candidate for ministry had a positive internship experience, the likelihood of that individual agreeing to settlement in Quebec was much higher. In fact, this was the case. Many of the future ministers who were settled in rural Quebec had first served there as interns. The cooperative venture had provided a cushion of support and nurture for ministry for the interns who had been placed there.

Too often it is assumed that the general trend of declining rural congregations requires either closure or amalgamation. Both, however, have their merits and often prove to be the best and most practical solution possible. After all, the basis of church union in 1925 was an amalgamation, and it's still working! Within the last decade, there have been several examples of successful amalgamations in Maritime Conference, where older and smaller congregations have been closed and new facilities constructed. Faith Memorial United in Florenceville, New Brunswick, brought three congregations together under a new roof. Five congregations banded together at Winsloe United on Prince Edward Island, while three congregations joined together to create St. Ann's Bay United in Barrachois, Nova Scotia. Three more congregations merged at Hillcrest United in Stanley, New Brunswick, followed by the Tryon-Hampton, PEI, pastoral charge in January 2006, changing its name to South Shore since four congregations now worship as one.³⁹

Most important, though, as we have already seen, is that there are viable and practical *alternative models* to closure or amalgamation. In other words, there are different kinds of configuration for ministry and various solutions, depending on the *context*. As learned and practised "down under" in both Australia and New Zealand as well in Canada and the United States, these contextual solutions are based on the following assumptions:

- Ordered ministry personnel or ordained clergy service a larger rural area and become the trainers of lay ministers.
- Baptized people are called to exercise their ministry in a more significant and legitimate way.
- Congregations relate to each other in new and reciprocal ways.
- Training for ministry is specifically developed for lay people.⁴⁰

In order to legitimize the potential ministry offered by lay people, we need look no further than our biblical and Reformed historical roots:

We have said that every Christian has a call to ministry and that every believer has specific gifts for particular tasks. In this assertion we recognize the influence of the Church Reformers. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther wrote: "...all of us that have been baptized are equally priests.... Therefore we are all priests, as many as us as are Christians."... If we took seriously the Reformed emphasis on the ministry of all persons in the congregation, a person, whether a physician, or a plumber, or teacher,

³⁹ Mike Milne, "Old, almost empty and deeply cherished," *The United Church Observer* (May 2006), p. 28.

⁴⁰ Marvin L. Anderson, "Alternative Models of Mission Strategy for Small and Rural Congregations," Final Report for Muskoka Presbytery, The United Church of Canada (May 2000, copyright by Marvin L. Anderson), p. 8.

would be given support and an opportunity for reporting that honours their Christian witness in the world. We need to think creatively about how to take seriously the call to ministry of every Christian.⁴¹

Yet despite denominational cutbacks and the increasing rationalization of resources allocated to rural ministries, most mainline denominations are now talking more about the rediscovery of the ministry of *all* the baptized. At the same time, more and more congregations are finding they have enough people with sufficient gifts and abilities among their own members to serve the mission needs of their local community. The emphasis is on mission to their local community—not on the self-maintenance of their congregations.

One of the other promising models outlined in the Muskoka Presbytery report is called “total ministry” or “mutual ministry.” This model is one in which diverse lay ministries of the people in a congregation are identified, equipped, and affirmed by the congregation and the respective presbytery, synod, or diocese. In the Anglican Diocese of Waiapu in New Zealand, for example, four parishes made the commitment to adopt the total ministry approach. Because of financial problems, none of the parishes was in a position to fund full-time stipendiary clergy.

The adoption of total ministry or mutual ministry by Episcopalians (Anglicans) elsewhere is well-recorded in recent small-church growth literature. Total ministry has also been used successfully in a missional context closer to us in geographical proximity: the Diocese of Northern Michigan in the upper peninsula of Michigan. Regardless of the nomenclature used in describing alternative models of rural ministry—cluster ministry, regional ministry, cooperative ministry, ecumenical shared ministry, total ministry, or baptismal ministry—each is uniquely what it is, in response to its missional context. As she writes in the introduction to her study *Distinctive Thumbprints in Regional Ministry*, Patricia Ellertson quotes the Rev. David Brown, one of the pioneers of such ministries: “No two clusters are alike. Each has its own fingerprints.”⁴² No fingerprint is the same, and no cluster is the same. Furthermore, no ministry can flourish if it is under the thumbs of ordained parish clergy alone:

But while each shared ministry has its own characteristics, much as our fingerprints have their individual patterns of loops, whorls and arches, each also functions distinctively. The key to that functioning, the opposable thumb that permits each to grasp its specific situation and open the doors to ministry and mission, lies in the recognition among all those involved, including the church’s hierarchy, that ministry belongs to the people. By virtue of our Baptismal Covenant we are all ministers. We have forgotten that responsibility in the comfort of a parish system in which the priest is expected to do it all, in which ministry is the province of a specific profession. Shared/cluster/area/regional

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 9–10. This text is from Dr. Gwyn Griffith’s draft for a “Theology of Call” written for the General Council Executive in 1994. Dr. Griffith is a former principal of the Centre for Christian Studies and a long-time educational consultant to the United Church.

⁴² Patricia Ellertson, *Distinctive Thumbprints in Regional Ministry: Case Studies of Regional or Cluster Ministries* (Knoxville, TN: Episcopal Appalachian Ministries, 1998), p. 1. Used with permission.

ministry invites us to return to the dynamic, energizing milieu of organization for mission, in which function truly precedes form.⁴³

The distinct thumbprint of Kootenay Presbytery in British Columbia has certainly made its mark in this respect. It is one of the more successful examples of adapting the above model of mutual ministries for a rural context for ministry on the Canadian west coast. Kootenay Presbytery, while small in population, is geographically large. Consisting mainly of resource-based communities (some shrinking), it makes up the southeast corner of British Columbia. In late 2000 the presbytery created a task force to study new ways of providing ministry to small, geographically isolated communities, particularly those unable to attract or support paid ministry personnel. After studying various models, the task force recommended that the presbytery support the approach variously known as mutual ministry, total ministry, or shared lay ministry. This is their story:

With financial support from the General Council Office and from BC Conference, a long-serving ordained minister within the presbytery was hired as a mutual ministries developer. For two and a half years, this minister travelled the length and width of the presbytery visiting congregations and providing workshops aimed at empowering lay people to discover their gifts for ministry and to develop them in service of their own and other faith communities. Our mantra has been “Every Community of Faith has within it the resources it needs to do ministry.” This is true even of the smallest congregations.

When there was no longer any funding for the developer, the presbytery remained committed to pursuing mutual ministry and continues to support it. Consequently, they have detected a culture shift within the presbytery. Ministry personnel are now more likely to see part of their job as training and supporting lay persons in some of the functions that have traditionally been done by clergy. For example, it used to be that when the minister was away for a period of time, attendance would drop. We are now finding that congregations are growing from the experience and are claiming their own ministries. They are excited about who will be leading the service next week.

Some congregations have reported being without their minister as the most significant growth experience they have had for some time. Instead of reflecting badly on their experience of ministry personnel, this outlook shows how these rural congregations are empowering their people to be real ministers themselves. We are well past the assumption that when a church can no longer afford a minister, it must close.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid. Used with permission.

⁴⁴ See Peter Gilmour, *The Emerging Pastor: Non-Ordained Catholic Pastors* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1986). This is a fascinating study of the appointment of non-ordained people charged with pastoring Roman Catholic parishes that no longer had resident priest-pastors. Though dated, it covers several midwestern US states and offers a revealing perspective into non-ordained models of congregational and/or parish ministry.

Questions for Reflection

1. How is genuine healing taking place, particularly among those in our Aboriginal congregations and communities who were victimized by the residential schools and other assimilationist policies?
2. What can rural congregations learn from our First Nations' healing rituals and stories to effect their own healing?
3. How are alternative models of ministry altering the face of rural ministry and isolated congregations in decline?
4. How is God changing the lives of both the people in the pews and those unchurched who live and work in small towns and rural communities across Canada?

Lens 7: Sustainability

Each of the lenses we have examined thus far alludes to the inherent diversity of rural contexts *within* Canada. This is reflected in the different and creative ways in which the Spirit is breathing new life into rural ministries across our vast country. Although we have referenced rural ministries in other countries, the reputable advocacy work of the United Church on behalf of social justice around the world has acquainted Canadians with international groups involved in rural ministries as well. Prominent among them is an international faith-based organization whose explicit mandate is the support of rural ministries encompassing the globe. The International Rural Church Association (IRCA) is “a network of rural Christians from around the world who seek to support one another in their mission of connecting the Gospel and rural life in their own context.” You can visit their website: www.irca.is.

With funding from a variety of denominational sources, including the Mission and Service Fund and the General Council Office of the United Church, Brandon, Manitoba, hosted the fourth international gathering of the International Rural Church Association on the campus of Brandon University in July 2007. The quadrennial conference focused on the topic of sustainability in the rural context, and was entitled “Cry from the Heart: How Can We Find Hope in the Rural Landscape?” It was organized by Catherine Christie, a United Church minister from Saskatchewan Conference and the chair of the Canadian Rural Church Network (CRCN), with help from Joyce Sasse, a long-time advocate for rural ministry and now retired United Church minister from Alberta and Northwest Conference as well as a host-team comprised of interdenominational colleagues in rural ministry.

With characteristic rural hospitality, though of a uniquely multicultural flavour, this international host-team welcomed 81 guests from 12 countries for a week of storytelling, Bible study and case studies, local tours and visits, prayer, music, and the best of rural fellowship. Guests came from Iceland, Germany, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, England, South Korea, Indonesia, Tonga, India, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. This diverse gathering of clergy and lay representatives from North America, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the South Pacific was determined to find hope as well as practical solutions to the social, economic, and political forces that are undermining their respective rural communities back home. “It’s called practical Christianity,” said New Zealander the Rev. Robyn McPhail, the chair of IRCA.⁴⁵

It became clear at the IRCA conference that the specific challenges for rural congregations and communities in Canada are hardly unique to Canada. McPhail emphasized that rural communities in every country are under considerable stress in a variety of ways. As lamented in Canada and elsewhere, McPhail said that rural communities are losing their young people to larger urban centres in their search for jobs and education. In her native New Zealand, McPhail said that migration to suburban districts mainly by rich foreigners, has in turn created problems for local farmers as well as the church community. “The problems in the church are a mirror of the changes in the community,” McPhail said. “In some rural areas, you have an influx of new

⁴⁵ Matt Goerzen, “Practical Christianity: Ministers, laymen gather to connect rural life to the Gospel,” *Brandon Sun* (July 5, 2007).

people. But it's more a pull to city values than to rural values. People buy up good farm land and put a big home on it." As a result, new citizens who encroach on traditional farmland tend to stay separated from their rural neighbours. "The role of the church," nonetheless, "is to bring together different groups."⁴⁶

For the duration of the conference, talk about shrinking populations and dwindling resources, the lack of support, and feelings of isolation among parishioners and pastors struck a common note with participants. "Heads of churches and professors are notably absent here; pastors, rural congregants, and farmers provide the reality," commented Lloyd Vidler, past chairperson of IRCA and a minister with Australia's Uniting Church. "With the diminution of the rural population and challenges to the economy, challenges to rural ministry are huge. What's happening here [in Canada] is happening to rural communities in our countries and this solidarity and sense of reality make it all worth fighting for."⁴⁷

B.D. Prasada Rao, who convened the last IRCA Conference in his native India, agreed. "I have lots of visions to share with the rural pastors I train now," he commented. "It's good to see how rural issues are so different in some ways and in others so similar from one country to another." From where he lives in Madanapalle, India, now home to 22,000, Rao sees the numbers of Christians silently growing—thanks, in part, to the historic missionary work in the area. His preaching extends beyond religious barriers when Christians, Muslims, and Hindus combine their efforts to pray for rain. "The plurality of religions is the beauty that God has created in India," he said. "Only the religious fanatics are a problem."⁴⁸

Sustainability was the explicit focus of one of the keynote addresses to the conference delegates. Retired economics professor, John Ikerd, from the University of Missouri at Columbia, delivered a rousing talk on "The Role of the Rural Church in Sustaining Rural Communities." For Canadians, it was reminiscent of the populist oratory fervour of a CCF (Cooperative Commonwealth Federation) speech in the heydays of Tommy Douglas. "Under the guise of rural economic development, rural areas around the world are being 'colonized.' Giant multinational corporations are extending their economic sovereignty over the affairs of people in rural places all around the globe, including here in North America. Rural people," according to Ikerd,

are losing control over their communities, as corporations use their economic and political power to dominate local economies and governments. Irreplaceable precious rural resources, including rural people and rural cultures, are being exploited to increase the wealth of corporate investors. These corporations have no commitment to the future of rural areas; they are only interested in extracting their wealth. This is classic colonialism.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Sarah Yates, "Harvesting hope in the rural landscape," *Mandate* (November 2007), pp. 3–4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Presentation by Dr. John Ikerd to the International Rural Church Association Conference 2007, Brandon, Manitoba, July 4, 2007, in Proceedings from "Cry from the Heart: How Can We Find Hope in the Rural

When the academic Ikerd has donned the hat of a rural community activist, he has collaborated with a wide network of North American colleagues for this expressed purpose: to help local community leaders critically assess the future impact of corporate decisions to establish meat-packing plants and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations in their small towns and rural communities. These communities are often starved for revenue and jobs. Such plants are becoming a more frequent sight in western provinces like Manitoba and Saskatchewan. “More recently,” Ikerd suggested, “corporations have begun to use agriculture to colonize rural areas. The industrial practices of corporate contract agriculture invariably erode the fertility of the soil through intensive cultivation, poison the air and water with chemical and biological wastes, and turn thinking, caring farmers into tractor drivers and hog house janitors....”⁵⁰

“Eventually,” Ikerd warns,

rural [North] America will be seen as nothing more than big empty spaces where the rest of society can dump its wastes. Even today, many rural communities compete for prisons, urban landfills, toxic waste incinerators, nuclear waste sites, or even giant confinement animal feeding operations. All of these so-called economic development opportunities are nothing more than places to dump the human, chemical, and biological wastes created by an extractive, exploitative economy. Rural economic development today is classic colonialism, pure and simple....

But what can rural communities do, and how can rural churches help? First, rural people everywhere,” Ikerd told delegates representing rural constituencies from 13 different countries, “must reject the extractive and exploitive model or paradigm of industrial economic development....”⁵¹

Finally, what can rural churches do to help build sustainable communities? First, they must find the courage to reject the arrogance, intolerance, selfishness, and pride that permeate much of global society today, including many of our churches.... Rural churches today,” Ikerd asserted, “must speak up for the interests of indigenous rural people, and not be apologists for the corporate colonizers. Many rural ministers seem so concerned about losing members and financial support they cannot find the moral courage to preach and teach the principles that must sustain their people of their communities for generations to come. They excuse the destruction of God’s creation as a matter of economic necessity....”⁵²

“Sustainable development,” Ikerd claims,

is fundamentally different from industrial development both in purpose and in principles. The purpose of *industrial* development is *productivity*, pure and simple. Its guiding

Landscape?” p. 19. Dr. Ikerd’s e-mail address is JEIkerd@centurytel.net; the full text of his Brandon presentation can be found on his website: <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj>. Used with permission.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 22. Used with permission.

⁵² Ibid., p. 29. Used with permission.

principle is profit maximization, because in capitalist economies, profits motivate greater productivity. The purpose of *sustainable* development is *permanence*, which requires both *productivity* and *regeneration*.⁵³

Most of our traditional rural communities and small towns are struggling to maintain their historic community and traditional economic resource base. They want to keep the kinds of seasonal work and livelihoods—not just make-work jobs—that are unique to their identity and sense of place. They also want to be faithful to the generations of people and family who established that particular place as *home*. Others, more optimistically, or perhaps from sheer stubbornness and persistence, are “grabbing the bull by the horns.” They are using their collective, entrepreneurial imagination to create alternative sources of income and expand into new areas of economic growth and community development that often coincide with “new rural” local and regional initiatives.

For all of these rural communities, the community investment in trying to ensure *permanence* is premised on encouraging *regeneration* for the sake of *productivity*—not pursuing *productivity* as a sole pretext for profit maximization at the expense of *regeneration*, which in practical terms, ensures the likelihood of sustaining the many generation to follow the present one. Community *regeneration* was the thrust of Alex Sim’s book, *Land and Community: Crisis in Canada’s Countryside*. According to the wisdom of Aboriginal culture, it means thinking about and anticipating the needs of the seventh generation to follow—today. For our United Church of Canada, it means “Discerning God’s Call for the Rural Church *Now*.”

Ikerd recommended the recent Canadian book by Jennifer Sumner to his IRCA audience mentioned in Lens 2, *Sustainability and the Civil Commons: Rural Communities in the Age of Globalization*. Sumner’s own analysis complements Ikerd’s:

Restructuring, downsizing, privatization, deregulation, migration, unemployment, poverty, and insecurity are all taking their toll on rural communities, many of which are marginal to begin with. Yet a profound normative issue is seldom confronted. Rural communities should not survive just because they have learned to adapt to the demands of the global market. They should survive, and thrive, because they are home to many people, places of employment, centres of learning, and hives of biodiversity.⁵⁴

As we have reiterated in this resource, rural communities and small towns are also home to numerous local United Church congregations, not to mention other denominational congregations and faith communities across Canada. Local congregations function, too, as “home to many people, places of employment, centres of learning, and hives of biodiversity.” Yet, no congregation can expect to survive long without being in a viable community. This is the reason why rural congregational renewal is so intertwined with rural community development.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 23. Used with permission.

⁵⁴ Jennifer Sumner, *Sustainability and the Civil Commons: Rural Communities in the Age of Globalization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 7. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

In addition, Sumner observes, rural communities “are the direct interface between humans and the natural environment. Rural communities add value...to our lives and our experience. Without the farming villages, logging communities, mining towns, fishing hamlets, and remote settlements, what would remain of the human nature interface beyond urban wasteland, agrobusiness monocultures, dumping grounds, industrial parks, clearcuts, and, at best, seasonal tourist attractions for capricious urban visitors?”⁵⁵

Similar concerns were voiced by the two keynote speakers for the 2006 Rural Consultation, Cameron Harder⁵⁶ and Cynthia Patterson. Harder and Patterson are all too familiar with the present stresses on Canadian rural communities and the rural congregations that depend so intimately on them, and vice versa. Like Ikerd and Sumner, they know that rural communities across Canada are vulnerable to becoming another casualty of the so-called “efficiency” touted by the evangelists for globalization—like rail service and public education.

As a co-founder of the grassroots citizens’ group, Rural Dignity, Cynthia Patterson, a long-time resident of the Gaspé, Quebec, is well acquainted with the indignities to which many rural Canadians have been subjected by both the private and public sectors. On behalf of Rural Dignity, she travelled throughout Canada from 1986 to 1994 working directly with rural communities in an effort to save post offices and train routes. In 1994, Canada Post finally declared a moratorium on post office closures in small towns and rural communities, where 70 percent of its employees and postmasters are rural women.

In a tone comparable to Patterson’s, Cameron Harder posed the rhetorical question to delegates at the Rural Consultation: “What can we do to help small rural congregations regain hope and vitality and help their communities do the same?” “In every tough situation,” Harder suggested, “there are communities and congregations that are swimming against the current—flourishing when others are ailing. What makes such communities different? Two things especially: attitude and leadership. Communities and congregations that swim against the tide have the ability to see their community as profoundly gifted, and they have the leadership to help them see that and act on it.”

Any effective community and congregational development must accept the highly contextual nature of rural communities across Canada, and work with that context in mind. Harder aptly summarized this in his final remarks at the Consultation: “Rural solutions, and rural leadership, needs to be place-based, not sector-based...research indicates that communities won’t adopt solutions if they aren’t their own.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

⁵⁶ Cameron Harder, Ph.D., has taught numerous courses on rural ministry as well as on rural depopulation and community development. He serves as an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Luther Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

⁵⁷ Marvin L. Anderson, Ph.D., Executive Report, National Consultation on Rural Ministry, The United Church of Canada, November 6–8, 2006, PCTC—Calling Lakes Centre, Fort Qu’Appelle, Saskatchewan, March 30, 2007, p. 2.

Leadership is key to ensuring the sustainability of ministry in rural pastoral charges and rural communities. Among the summary findings from the World Café process at the Rural Consultation, four particular observations merit our attention with respect to the integral role of differentiating *contexts* for rural ministries, and the subsequent need of well-informed and skilled leadership for those ministries:

1. The norms and criteria used for evaluating “successful” and “viable” congregational growth in urban and suburban congregations, i.e., programs, size, worship style, faith formation, etc., may not be appropriate for the different rural *contexts* of ministry in Canada. For example, if small numbers persist and little or negligible growth occurs, it could be more indicative of the local, rural demographics, rather than seen as an apparent lack of congregational vitality or viability. In other words, big is not necessarily better.
2. The onerous burden of national bureaucracy absorbs most of rural congregations’ energies and attention, to the neglect of their own ministries and spiritual growth. In the words of a staffperson for Alberta and Northwest Conference, “many of our congregations are so stressed with financial management, promoting the M&S fund, supporting presbytery, and responding to other national studies, programs, and initiatives, that they have neither time nor energy to discover (discern) much less engage a sense of local mission.”
3. A critical re-evaluation is needed of how we educate, train, and support ministry personnel and lay leaders for rural ministry, as well as conference staff and personnel involved with rural ministry. We need to refocus on leadership development. A stern warning: “Don’t burn out leaders.” What our rural church leaders need, in Dr. Harder’s words, “is a toolbox of processes that will help them discover and activate the unique resources of the places they serve.”

In addition to the two tools often used by Conference offices across the country—asset-mapping and appreciative inquiry—most of the participants at the Rural Consultation found the World Café process to be a useful tool. In the fall of 2007, the World Café process was well-received at the two “Alive and Well” workshops hosted by Kent Presbytery in London Conference and by the inaugural meeting of the new Spirit Dancing Presbytery (an amalgamation of Cochrane and Temiskaming Presbyteries) in Manitou Conference.

4. Recognize the unique place and gifts of ordered ministry personnel without assuming that they are the only ones offering “ministry.” The role of lay leadership is critical to the rural church, and the gifts and aspirations of lay leaders—younger and older—need to be supported and developed.⁵⁸

The need for training and mentoring lay leaders is also important because of the difficulties in obtaining ordered ministry personnel who are called and willing to serve in rural pastoral charges. At the IRCA conference, IRCA secretary Dave Ruesink reported that rural congregations, especially in North America, are having trouble keeping or even attracting urban ministers. “Ministers want to stay in urban areas,” Ruesink said. “Many people in training programs were called to tall-steeple (urban) churches. But when they graduated they

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 3–4.

realize their first call will be to a rural setting.” While approximately 80 to 90 percent of today’s seminary students come from urban, tall-steeple churches, Ruesink said that over 50 percent of graduates are called to rural churches. “It’s a situation they were not prepared for. Seminaries feel they need to teach theology, and not the context.”⁵⁹

The recent birth of the Canadian Rural Church Network (CRCN) is one of the most promising signs of mobilizing rural ministries across the country. Prior to their significant role in organizing and hosting the 2007 IRCA conference in Brandon, Manitoba, Catherine Christie and Joyce Sasse have generously given of their time and energies on behalf of the rural church they love and serve to help launch the CRCN.

Spanning a career of over 30 years of ordered ministry in her beloved United Church, Joyce Sasse has worked in a variety of settings. Sasse has consistently demonstrated her skills as an effective communicator, mentor, and most important, as “a champion of rural ministry” in Canada.⁶⁰ As a veritable midwife, Sasse’s lifelong work in rural ministry and extensive collaboration in ministry have helped bring this timely labour of “rural ecumenism” of the CRCN into being. With inspiration from the Rural Church Network of the United States and Canada (RCN), the recent incarnation of the CRCN assures the continued support of rural ministries in Canada and beyond, as shown in hosting the recent IRCA conference. Their respective websites are: www.ruralchurchnetwork.org and www.canadianruralchurch.net.

The Canada-wide network of informed rural leadership represented by the CRCN is committed to seeking contextual solutions consistent with innovative rural community and congregational development. The vision of the Canadian Rural Church Network is summarized by Catherine Christie:

When we are alone, things can seem bleak, and troubles overwhelming. It often feels we struggle by ourselves, with none who really understand our issues. Doesn’t that happen to rural communities and congregations as well? We feel shut out of the halls of power and decision making. But our history tells us, take heart. When the rural community in western Canada was at its weakest point, pools, cooperatives, credit unions began to form. These networks empowered their members. The vision of the CRCN network is for rural people of faith, connected as we already are by love of the land and love of the Lord, to connect across the country so that we may support each other in days of change; encourage the speaking out of faith values that keep us, as rural Christians, alive and growing; and enhance, as the Church has always done, the quality of life in rural communities.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Matt Goerzen, “Practical Christianity: Ministers, laymen gather to connect rural life to the Gospel,” *Brandon Sun* (July 5, 2007).

⁶⁰ Sarah Yates, “A champion of rural ministry,” *Mandate* (November 2007), pp. 3–4.

⁶¹ Catherine Christie, Canadian Rural Church Network, *Glimmers of Hope in the Rural Landscape* (May 2007), p. 1. Used with permission.

The recent publication of the CRCN, *Glimmers of Hope in the Rural Landscape* (May 2007), applauds the multiple gifts and resilient spirit of rural people:

Rural people don't need to be told they have wonderful gifts and capabilities and are inexhaustibly resourceful. But it is good to have those strengths affirmed, and to remind others in our urban-oriented culture that rural people are the best people to determine how their communities should be allowed to function. And rural people can also make significant contributions to the broader society.

These premises have been the central emphasis of the *Rural Church Movement*, and many rural community and church leaders have been working together to give voice to these sentiments since the early nineties. Advocates emphasize there is a central role rural churches can play in this regard. As a spiritual resource, the local church offers basic rituals of grief and lament along with the Gospel messages of hope and rejoicing in the gifts of Creation.

As long-standing institutions within the community local churches can contribute meeting space and organizational resources. They can draw on denominational resources and invite input from other churches for endeavours affecting their extended communities. In these times rural church and community leaders no longer need to feel isolated. Through the Internet they are able to develop information-sharing networks, name their concerns, offer support and tell their stories.⁶²

The emergence of this new Canadian Rural Church Movement recalls the community focus and social gospel theology of the "rural church movement" in the first decades of the 20th century. Though most of us may not know the historical context out of which the rural church movement and the basis of United Church union came, we know that no significant movement comes out of nowhere. This was the same for church union. Most of the formative work in bringing Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians together happened between 1904 and 1912; church union was not officially consummated until 1925.

One of the chief reasons for the basis of union was the realization that sufficient clergy and financial resources were necessary to service the growing rural population in the Canadian prairies as more and more immigrants poured into this region. It was also believed that this union would help consolidate ministry personnel and resources in eastern Canadian rural communities that were losing population in the east to west migration that took place in Canada from the late 1880s through to the late 1920s. Although there were clearly other factors, both practical and theological, behind the union drive, Canadian church historian John Young suggests that the desire by the national church to serve rural communities better was a key factor in persuading these three mainline denominations to unite.⁶³

⁶² Ibid., p. 2. Used with permission.

⁶³ Adapted from Dr. John H. Young's chapter for *Gleaning the Stories of Resilience and Hope*, pending publication, written in collaboration with colleagues Dr. Marvin L. Anderson, Dr. Gary Goreham, Dr. Gilson A.C. Waldkoenig, and Dr. John H. Young.

In addition to the “disregard of the inherent rights of the landworker” lamented in President Roosevelt’s Report of the Country Life Commission, MacDougall cites other problems plaguing rural communities in his book *Rural Life in Canada*.⁶⁴ MacDougall complains about the unprecedented wave of rural migration to the cities and subsequent rural depopulation, land speculation, monopolies in trade practices and in controlling the means of transportation, unjust taxation of farm properties, and unwarranted logging and poor farming practices resulting in accelerated soil erosion. MacDougall reiterated the alarm voiced by many in the country life and rural church movements that environmental and land degradation had long-term, deleterious effects on rural communities. If MacDougall could only have lived to see how each of these trends have continued unabated a short century later.

In the historical shadow of these movements lay the impetus for the newborn Canadian Rural Church Network (CRCN): the urgency of the present rural crisis in Canadian small towns and rural communities from coast to coast, and from the US border to northern rural and Aboriginal communities. Making matters even worse is the alarming ecological impact of climate change on Indigenous northern communities and their traditional ways of life.

Interestingly enough, it was a professor of sociology, not theology, Dr. Edwin L. Earp, who authored the book by the title of the movement in which he and others were immersed: *The Rural Church Movement*.⁶⁵ Published by the Methodists in 1914, Earp taught for the faculty of Drew Theological Seminary in Madison, New Jersey. In step with many of his colleagues and fellow proponents of the rural church movement, Earp compares the contemporary findings of the liberal historical hermeneutic of biblical interpretation and the historical-critical studies of Jesus’ life to his own academic discipline of sociology. In particular, he draws parallels between biblical exegesis and the sociological observations of the rural community-based surveys conducted by his US contemporaries, Ralph Fenton and Anne Taft.

While considered simplistic by today’s standards, these sociological surveys gave new theoretical legitimacy to the substantive problems of rural life in early 20th-century North America, including those decried by MacDougall. But they also heralded the urgency in applying their surveys as lenses to evaluating the health of their own rural communities. As MacDougall says, “We do not know accurately the needs of the rural community.... ‘Know your community’ must become the church’s watchword in social service in country as in city.”⁶⁶

To their credit, these surveys and other studies from this movement recognized the integral place of *context* for ministry in rural communities. Probably unknown to Earp, the Rev. W.J. Conoly published his own rural community-based survey in Alberta, as did numerous others in other provinces during this period.⁶⁷ In some ways, these rural surveys pioneered the model of “Asset-

⁶⁴ Adapted from my chapter, “Crossing Borders, Crossing Boundaries: The ‘Free Trade’ in Religious Ideas in the Theoretical Formation of Prairie Populism 1900–1920,” in *Gleaning the Stories of Resilience and Hope*, pending publication, written in collaboration with colleagues Dr. Gary Goreham, Dr. Gilson A.C. Waldkoenig, and Dr. John H. Young.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ John MacDougall, *Rural Life in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 170–171.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 172ff.

Based Community Development” (ABCD) developed and promoted by John McKnight and Luther Snow through the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Luther Snow’s book, *The Organization of Hope*, is a workbook specifically written “of, by, and for rural community leaders.”⁶⁸

Both the paradigms of biblical interpretation and historical criticism were used by the sociologist Earp to legitimize Jesus’ ministry to the poor and the marginalized as the normative model of rural ministry for rural clergy to emulate.⁶⁹ The central emphasis on “social service” in the rural church movement was intended for every aspect of rural community reform. Like the social gospel, it was premised on the Bible and the life and teachings of Jesus.

Long before biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan’s recent ground-breaking scholarship on the historical Jesus as a “Mediterranean peasant,” it was Earp who reframed the prevalent sentimental picture of Jesus at the turn of the 19th century. Earp devotes a chapter of his book on *The Rural Church Movement* to the provocative topic of “The Rural-mindedness of the Prophets and of Jesus.” In this chapter Earp credits US President Theodore Roosevelt and members of the Country Life Commission as well as prominent figures in the social gospel movement, like Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden. “Born in a Judaeian hill town in a stable, and brought up in Nazareth in the open country of Galilee,” Earp is not surprised that Jesus draws the “illustrative material” for his preaching and parables “from the scenes and struggles of the common folk in the open country.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, Earp maintains that “the method of Jesus was to deal with fundamental facts:”

1. He places condemnation upon *the system* that was causal to the distress he discovered. The rural districts of Palestine were the victims of the commercialism and militarism of the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. He pronounced his *woes* upon the exploiters and not upon the victims. He discriminated between *cause and effect*. The tax gatherers, the merchants, the lawyers, and the soldiers all came in for their condemnation.
2. He had comfort for the victims. He placed emphasis upon the dignity of toil. (“Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden.”) He proposed better methods of doing work—not rest *from* labor, but rest *in* labor.... He taught the greater lesson of *soul*

⁶⁸ Luther Snow, *The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004). Luther Snow, *The Organization of Hope: A Workbook for Rural Asset-Based Community Development* (Evanston, IL: Asset-Based Community Development Institute/Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, 2001), p. 1.

⁶⁹ “Therefore if we can show a real basis in the Bible for the modern methods of rural improvement, we will the more easily win the consent of the country folk to our program, which is, after all, the nub of the whole Rural Life movement in so far as securing the cooperation of the country people is concerned.” Edwin L. Earp, Ph.D., *The Rural Church Movement* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1914), p. 35.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

*rest as the supreme need of the worker. This is especially true of many rural folk today. [italicized words in original]*⁷¹

In the wake of the media frenzy surrounding his voluminous new book, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant*,⁷² John Dominic Crossan was interviewed by *The Christian Century* in 1991. Two of his responses reiterate just how rural-minded and rural-embodied the man from Galilee was:

You identify Jesus as a Mediterranean peasant, then, with these historical and anthropological parallels in mind?

Crossan: Yes. What's important to me is that we begin to see Jesus not in terms of intellectual, literate Western society, to which you and I belong, but rather from the standpoint of his own Mediterranean society. Within the context of that society I came to the conclusion that Jesus belonged to the peasant class, and, like the great majority, he lived his life near the bottom of the social hierarchy. A peasant of the Mediterranean was something like an oppressed farmer. And if that's too ideological a definition, let's call such a person someone who occupies a particular place in a class system—a place in which those who produce the food on which everyone else depends are allowed only what they need for subsistence. Everything else is taken away from them as surplus. Some may have been better off than others—and we're talking about approximately 90 percent of the Mediterranean population—but most peasants lived a very precarious existence. I think it's safe to say that by our standards, injustice was built into this system—the 10 percent at the top controlled virtually everything.

In what ways was Jesus shaped by his social position?

Crossan: If I may enlist a rather clumsy intellectual distinction for a moment, peasants of that time—or of any time, I suppose—tended not to be as interested in things of the mind as they were in things of the body, and I think this holds true for Jesus. This helps explain Jesus' emphasis upon eating and healing. When we look at the data, we see both of these themes assuming a central position—both, of course, having to do with the kind of basic physical realities which would have preoccupied people living at a subsistence level. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom, he's speaking of a kingdom of nobodies—a kingdom made up of these almost always poor, and sometime destitute, peasants.⁷³

Then the righteous will answer Him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 41–42.

⁷² John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

⁷³ "The Historical Jesus: An Interview with John Dominic Crossan," *The Christian Century*, vol. 108, no. 37 (December 18–25, 1991), pp. 1201–1202. Used with permission.

you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” MATTHEW 25:37–40

From Maintenance to Mission: From Church Buildings (as Noun) to Building Church (as Verb) in Community

Many rural as well as urban pastoral charges across the country are struggling with aging buildings and the increasing costs for upkeep. The dollars allocated for repairs and renovations often function to postpone harder decisions down the road. The work may maintain the present buildings for now, but it hardly solves the problem of whether to keep the present structures and renovate them, sell them, or demolish them. Even though considerable sums of money are often spent on maintenance of aging buildings, it does not resolve whether those same buildings are suitable for the current needs of ministry, let alone future mission and outreach.

In February 2005, members of the Maritime Conference Executive were asked to distribute a questionnaire to find out how people felt about their church building. They received an overwhelming response from across their conference; they received 75 completed questionnaires from the 100 circulated. Most of them were individual responses, although a few were collated group responses. It is also interesting that most of the responses were from lay people.

For those who responded to the questionnaire, there was a wide range of feelings and strong emotions that congregants expressed about their church building. To read their full report, “These Walls Will Echo Praise: A Spirituality of Church Buildings,” visit the Maritime Conference website at www.marconf.ca/these-walls.pdf. For a more detailed discussion of the dilemma that the fear of church closure raises for members of congregations, please read the forthcoming companion print resource to *Alive and Kicking, Loss Is More: Lament as the Door to Spiritual Renewal*.

One of the most pertinent observations gleaned from this report is the anticipated sense of failure, if not often shame, that many rural congregants feel about closing their church buildings:

We believe there is a pastoral need to address the sense of responsibility many feel as the link between the ancestors and the children. Responses to the questionnaire clearly indicate that many respondents perceived church closure as a *failure* of their generation. As conversations about church buildings emerge there is a need to reflect on the history of the congregation and examine “difficult choices” made by the ancestors in their time. As we ponder the challenges our founders faced in their day we may find a pattern of faithful responses which will help guide decisions today.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Maritime Conference, The United Church of Canada, “These Walls Will Echo Praise: A Spirituality of Church Buildings,” 2005, p. 13. This foundations paper can be downloaded at www.marconf.ca/clg-resources.htm. Used with permission.

Several of the summary findings of the World Café process at the Rural Consultation allude to this dilemma for many rural congregations with older church buildings. Although church buildings are not explicitly named as such, the process of grieving and lamenting the past often crystallizes around the deteriorating condition of our older church buildings.

The three following observations from the World Café data, however, signal renewed hope and purpose for rural congregations by exercising the biblical power of lament in exorcising the demons of nostalgia and its tyranny to the past. Such tyranny not only denies the salvific power of resurrection through Christ—life *over* death—but the healing and transformative processes of life *from* death that sustain us and those who faithfully follow us:

1. Living in the present, not the past. Making the shift from the past to the present is not to dismiss the past, because the past is one of the treasures of the rural church. Rather, it means recognizing and celebrating who we are and not mourning the fact that we cannot attain to *what we once were*. Hence, it means that we cannot afford to keep romanticizing the past and thus remain stuck in nostalgia about more traditional rural practices and ways of life.
2. Shift from a preoccupation with survival and keeping the church doors open, to becoming more creative in ministry. This not only includes being more creative with worship and liturgy; it also means going beyond Sunday morning worship and working at greater outreach to the local community, i.e., through local community development.
3. Conscious and appropriate lament for the losses incurred in the changing nature of rural congregational and community life. This is not acquiescence to depression and apathy, but prayerfully moving through them by the power of active mourning and grieving. Without this, communities and congregations remain paralyzed by despair and hopelessness.⁷⁵

One of the participants from Manitou Conference poignantly captured the promise of lament in her presbytery report on the Rural Consultation. She recognized the necessity and healing role of lament in discerning God’s call for the rural church *now*, and for the immediate future: “[F]ar from being convinced that the anguish I am seeing in small and shrinking churches is a negative thing, I’m convinced that this despair, this grief, is in reality, a good thing, painful but absolutely necessary. I’m convinced that the first step into God’s future is to face reality and grieve what is being lost.... If, having grieved appropriately, we listen without rushing to solutions, in honest persistent prayer and meditation, we may actually hear the Spirit’s call and lead our church into God’s future.”⁷⁶

As an itinerant tentmaker and preacher who was frequently “on the road,” the apostle Paul naturally developed a special affection for the small house church communities who graciously hosted him, including some he had founded and some that felt like home bases

⁷⁵ Refer to the forthcoming Congregational, Educational, and Community Ministries Unit print resource, *Loss Is More: Lament as the Door to Spiritual Renewal*.

⁷⁶ Executive Report, National Consultation on Rural Ministry, pp. 4–5.

to him.⁷⁷ As the New Testament scholar, John Koenig, notes, Paul was familiar with the extremes of economic existence (“I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need” (Philippians 4:12; see also 2 Corinthians 6:5, 10). Given his marginal profession, Paul could not always earn enough to support himself, especially during periods of imprisonment. It is interesting, therefore, that he consented to accepting regular financial support from a group that could least afford it: a community of relatively poor Christians in the churches of Macedonia, as we noted above (2 Corinthians 8:1–5).⁷⁸ Koenig suggests that

It is consistent with Paul’s theology of the cross that he saw God’s renewal of the cosmos taking place most publicly among gatherings of ten to forty people in quite ordinary family dwellings. Given his convictions about the imminent end of the present age, the apostle probably envisioned no grander setting in the future for the earthly life of the church. This means that his thoughts about mission and leadership, and even such exalted concepts as “salvation,” were probably worked out in this humble environment and designed explicitly for it.⁷⁹

In other words, the Spirit is indeed alive and well in small, out-of-the-way places! Although the believers at Corinth eventually took part in the collection for the Jerusalem church urged by Paul (Romans 15:26), they were grudgingly slow in getting it ready for delivery to Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8–9). Among the reasons for their foot-dragging was a belief—common enough among people then *and* now who have managed to achieved a moderate degree of material security—that *their own needs demanded most of their resources*.⁸⁰

Paul was not so naive and pious to expect the Corinthians to impoverish themselves from their giving (8:13). On the contrary, though, he expected them to gain from it; indeed, gain from it in the act of giving itself, which is to be done freely, cheerfully, and at the discretion by which fellow believers can contribute on the basis of their limited resources (8:12; 9:7). As always, the eternal foundation and ever-present *re-source* for this divine plenitude is the abundance and wealth they received from God through Christ, who, “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).⁸¹

⁷⁷ John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 62.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61. The number 10 is probably derived from the *minyan* or quorum of men required for the formation of a synagogue. See *ibid.*, p. 82, n. 11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.... He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.... 2 CORINTHIANS 9:8, 10–11

We suggested the metaphorical exercise of finding a biblical story to match or mirror your own church in the introduction. Can you locate our own rural congregation in any of these biblical narratives from the healing and transformative ministries of Jesus and his movement? With the imagination and hope that God has entrusted you and your congregation, can you envisage the extent to which your own local United Church pastoral charge parallels the small *minyan* house churches of the Mediterranean society to which Paul ministered, and on whom he continually depended?

The generosity of the poor Christian believers of the Macedonian churches helped sustain Paul's ministry, and from his letters, Paul's spirits, in the midst of persecution and imprisonment. Can we do any less in how we trust that God's abundance will be readily available in the midst of material scarcity? As Frost and Hirsch have observed, the attitude epitomized by Paul in being sent to serve describes the essence of the missional church:

An emerging missional church...has abandoned the old Christendom assumptions and understands its role as an underground movement, subversive, celebratory, passionate, and communal. Mission is not merely an activity of the church. It is the very heartbeat and work of God.... God is a sending God with a desire to see humankind and creation reconciled, redeemed, and healed. The missional church, then, is a sent church. It is a *going* church, a movement of God through his people, sent to bring healing to a broken world. North America is as much a mission field as any other nation or people group on the face of the earth. The existing church, which is invariably static, rooted in one place, institutionalized, needs to recover its *sent-ness* in order to become the missional church.⁸²

As we discern the directions in which God is indeed calling the rural United Church, we would do well to recover this “missional” charism of *sent-ness* that characterized our United Church in its inception. Instead of succumbing to the fatalistic belief that church decline means a veritable spiritual bankruptcy—“going, going, gone”—we can draw on the sustaining faith of our historic and biblical missional mandate as “a *going* church, a movement of God through his people, sent to bring healing to a broken world.”

In his final chapter on “rural uplift,” MacDougall illustrates how this central concept of the rural church movement exemplifies the regenerative power and vigour of rural innovation. He cites the example of N.F.S. Grundtvig, a famous Danish Lutheran bishop and minister who was a contemporary of Søren Kierkegaard. Grundtvig was the acclaimed father of the Danish “folk

⁸² Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 18. Used with permission.

school” movement and iconic figurehead for the cooperative movement in rural education.⁸³ Hence, MacDougall lifts up the seminal concept and cultural practice that helps promote rural revitalization and rejuvenation: cooperation.

As the term “rural uplift” was coined by the currency of the rural church movement, the corollary emphasis on “cooperation” was minted by subsequent rural movements for social change in western and eastern Canada. In the latter case, the Antigonish movement stands out. This movement began in the late 1920s in Cape Breton Island and in the eastern part of mainland Nova Scotia as a response to the dire economic situation faced by the fishing and mining communities of the region.⁸⁴ The movement soon spread throughout the three Maritime provinces and to rural communities whose economic bases were either agriculture or lumbering.

Combined with the Antigonish movement’s central emphasis on adult education and leadership development in rural communities was the principle of cooperation.⁸⁵ Co-operation, therefore, came about through initiatives for developing cooperatives for buying goods and equipment, or for selling the produce of the community or local enterprise in question. Co-operation proved to be key to the success of the Antigonish movement.

Recall that the apostle Paul knew that some of the Corinthians naively thought that they could ward off material scarcity by believing and acting as if *their own needs demanded most of their resources*. On the contrary, as we have seen from Paul’s writings, the divine promise of abundance as a consequence of generosity and caring—regardless of scarcity—is what matters. The Christian practice of stewardship and generosity underlines the community genius of cooperation *as service: it is the needs of others over ourselves that mandates the giving of our resources*.

Therefore, it is no wonder that the most promising development in the area of congregational and community ministries in Canada and in the United States has been the emergence and subsequent success of “cooperative parishes.”⁸⁶ We know more about the reasons why cooperative parishes have succeeded where other shared ministries have not, based on the extensive recent US study, *Cooperating Congregations: Portraits of Mission Strategies*, researched and authored by Gilson A.C. Waldkoenig and William Avery.

Sometimes called a coalition or cluster, a cooperative parish is defined by the sharing of resources between congregations in a local area. A cooperative is more than a “yoke” or “circuit”

⁸³ The historic legacy of Grundtvig’s educational movement focused on the needs of peasants and impoverished rural communities in his native Denmark, but its influence far exceeded that of his homeland. Many of Grundtvig’s followers emigrated to North America, including Canada.

⁸⁴ Adapted from Dr. John H. Young’s chapter for *Gleaning the Stories of Resilience and Hope*, pending publication, written in collaboration with colleagues Dr. Marvin L. Anderson, Dr. Gary Goreham, Dr. Gilson A.C. Waldkoenig, and Dr. John H. Young.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Gilson A.C. Waldkoenig and William Avery, *Cooperating Congregations: Portraits of Mission Strategies* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 1999). Rev. Dr. Waldkoenig is the Director of the Town and Country Institute at Gettysburg Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This model is also included in the Muskoka report referenced above.

in which congregations merely share the services of a pastor. A circuit or yoked parish has a lone pastor shared between or among congregations, with little or no other programmatic collaboration between them. Cooperatives, meanwhile, are intentional strategies for a specified area mission in which individual congregations share staff, program and resources to ensure a broader and deeper mission impact than they were only working on their own as isolated congregations.⁸⁷

The cooperative parish model has usually emerged as a pastoral strategy among small Christian congregations of *either* very rural or very urban environments. Cooperatives are different from mergers and consolidations, however, in that the identity and integrity of the individual congregations is maintained. Most cooperative ventures declare in their foundational documents that their intention is not to merge or close individual congregations.

A central council usually coordinates program or mission in a cooperative parish. This council is usually comprised of either a single resource person or director, along with a pastoral staff compensated by the central council on behalf of the entire cooperative. Some degree of budget consolidation exists, although the budget may not be totally centralized. The clear intention in a cooperative is to plan and organize united mission among the congregations under common staff leadership.

The vision of a cooperative parish is to expand the ministries of the participating congregations within a specified area mission for the sake of the whole church. While often thought to be merely desperate, remedial strategies for waning congregations, cooperatives are increasingly recognized as viable mission postures for the future church. The cooperative parish offers possibilities for vibrant witness and community outreach for many congregations. The cooperative parish model, however, is not a one size-fits-all answer for dwindling rural congregations, nor is it a panacea for the plight of the rural church's mission in our time.⁸⁸

The flexible and sustainable nature of cooperatives does, however, lead to a number of advantages:

1. The cooperative parish can renew congregations in mission. By forming a cooperative, formerly self-absorbed congregations intentionally choose a mission stance of service beyond the walls of their churches and themselves. Their whole reference point changes, and they change with it. Instead of being preoccupied with survival, the cooperative model leads many small membership and rural congregations into a mission posture, serving the local community and the wider public. Therefore, the cooperative arrangement creates a new entity more adept at defining mission needs and helping congregations work together at addressing those needs. In turn, through their joint mission, these congregations begin to think of the church in a collective and community context.

⁸⁷ Marvin L. Anderson, "Alternative Models of Mission Strategy for Small and Rural Congregations," Final Report for Muskoka Presbytery, The United Church of Canada, (May 2000, copyright by Marvin L. Anderson), pp. 13–15.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

2. The cooperative model also promotes and develops lay leadership. In theological language, all baptized members are missionaries of the church; therefore, congregations are outposts for worldwide mission, not self-contained institutions. Likewise, pastors are missionaries, not professionalized experts; judicatories are secondary resource providers to the frontline work of congregations, not authorities calling all the shots.
3. In addition, cooperative parishes have a proven record of effective local community service. Through a cooperative, congregations can do more than they would be able to do on their own. They can also set up extra-congregational structures that are often necessary for community-building projects. Christians speak with a more unified voice when they address local community issues as a cooperative. “Cooperatives provide a bird’s-eye perspective on community needs that would otherwise escape the notice of isolated congregations, and a cooperative community can define area needs more effectively than individuals, congregations, or even community services in some cases.... They serve not just their own members, but their neighbours as well.”⁸⁹
4. Furthermore, the cooperative model allows for adaptive responses to changing circumstances, so that the church is free to express itself institutionally in a variety of ways. Quite succinctly, cooperatives provide a balance between community and individual choice, and can hold these two in fruitful tension. On one hand, cooperatives help congregations to avoid becoming communal islands. When the church becomes simply a part of a localized community, it cannot hear dissenting views or prophetic messages. On the other hand, cooperatives help congregations to avoid becoming merely associations of like-minded individuals. When the church is simply a matter of individual choice, then one opinion seems as valid as any other does.
5. Furthermore, the advantage of the cooperative model is that it fosters the organic development of rural congregations. Since change is a given, congregations need strong leadership that can nurture congregations to grow with, from, and through change. In the very places where one would expect further decline and despair in rural communities, the authors of *Cooperating Congregations* found that cooperative parishes actually helped stabilize and revitalize rural congregations.

One of the United Methodist ministers for the Upper Sand Mountain Parish, Dorsey Walker, believes that without the cooperatives, most of the churches in this geographical area of Alabama would be dying. In each of the five cases profiled in this study, the participating congregations seemed to be holding their own with membership, despite the vagaries of demographic and economic hardship. Moreover, these same congregations have flourished during a time when their own national denominations were declining in membership.

6. The cooperative model also offers a more viable alternative to conventional but mostly ineffectual strategies for providing ministry to small and rural congregations. In well-populated areas, for example, it is easy for judicatories and presbyteries to recycle retired pastors in small membership and rural congregations. We all know that rural congregations

⁸⁹ Gilson A.C. Waldkoenig and William Avery, *Cooperating Congregations: Portraits of Mission Strategies*, p. 190.

are frequently treated as convenient stepping-stones for recent M.Div. graduates out of theological college. Such attitudes and policies limit the scope of rural ministry to either being a “dumping ground” or “training ground” for new ministry personnel, denying rural pastoral charges the needed experience and perspective of seasoned rural ministry and professional congregational leadership.⁹⁰

Many of us know that rural congregations often complain in a self-deprecating way that they cannot expect to get anyone “good.” They subsequently settle for a retired, inexperienced, or student minister, instead of believing they deserve a settled minister. When they do hire one of the former, it is often on a part-time basis because of limited funds. They would never dream of thinking they could host other life-enhancing ministries such as parish nursing, professional counselling, and other community services that proliferate in successful cooperating congregational settings.

Cooperative parishes can therefore provide challenging and exciting calls for order of ministry personnel in the prime of their careers. But cooperative parish ministry does not preclude calls to certified lay ministries, diaconal ministries, and other officially recognized forms of congregational or community ministry, or does it discourage partnerships between such leaders with ministry personnel.

7. Finally, like clusters, cooperatives have demonstrated time and time again that they can reduce the rate of burn-out among clergy, resulting in a longer tenure for order of ministry personnel. This is welcome news to the chronic yet legitimate complaint about the frequent turnover of ministry personnel. There is seldom sufficient time for the latter to earn and build trust with congregants and members of the community in this “revolving-door” scenario.

When an attitude of mutual respect and support exists among the staff of cooperatives, it guarantees longer and more satisfying ministries for order of ministry personnel than would normally be the case in many congregations. In this way, cooperative parish ministry offers a convincing alternative to the inevitable hazard of “the lone ranger” outlook that has is so pervasive in small town and rural ministry, aptly described by a longtime minister himself and recognized author on rural ministry: “I see the other ministers who work pretty much by themselves out here. They die!”⁹¹

Among the plenitude of gifts from the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul lists patience. Akin to the endurance for running the spiritual race described in Hebrews, patience is undoubtedly related to the same trio of historic traits or “assets” found in traditional rural communities highlighted in this resource: imagination, resourcefulness, and creativity. Resourcefulness is a capacity and openness to working with what limited resources are at hand, and using them well. Innovation is implicit in any act of real imagination and creativity; it is easier to describe than to carry out, because inevitably, it risks going against the grain, or the status quo.

Last but not least, is the remarkable property of the biblical metaphor “yeast” that leavens the bread to rise above adversity: this is the miracle of resiliency. Resiliency is characterized by a

⁹⁰ Marvin L. Anderson, “Alternative Models of Mission Strategy for Small and Rural Congregations,” pp. 16–18.

⁹¹ Gilson A.C. Waldkoenig and William Avery, *Cooperating Congregations: Portraits of Mission Strategies*, p. 195.

fearless faith in God and fierce determination to keep going, while adaptive and flexible to the reality that we only have so much control over our lives.

This practical repertoire of rural survival skills includes the capacity to absorb the stresses at hand and cultivate mental flexibility. It includes the capacity to “make do” with what scant physical, social and financial resources are available. Unlike the nagging anxiety of the survival mode of maintenance-at-all-costs, this rural repertoire of survival skills describes the historic traits of “sustainability” among rural people in general, including those honed and practised by generations of peasant, Aboriginal, and Indigenous communities. Ironically, variations of these same assets are zealously championed in today’s best-selling business books and business sections of our national newspapers as the keys to entrepreneurial success.

This rural repertoire of resiliency, resourcefulness and innovation represents a powerful legacy for present and future generations. These skills have enabled all kinds of people who depend on the land or the sea for their very livelihood to survive and often flourish, despite the vagaries of adverse weather (and now climate change), wars, colonialism, and other overwhelming historical and political odds stacked against them. We are reminded yet again of how such biblical-inspired courage and fortitude *sustained* our familial and spiritual ancestors in times of adversity and scarcity. Will they not sustain us as well?

The congregational trans-mission of this repository of rural survival skills between generations of rural congregations is prerequisite for sustainability. Sustainability in the rural context is, therefore, negotiated between each and every generation of rural people that inherit the land and the communities in which their ancestors and relatives have lived, or that move into and settle in those communities. It is not always a successful transmission, nor an easy transition, and it is tricky at best.

The anticipated and abrupt transformation that comes with this transition among Canada’s diversity of rural people, communities and congregations is often accompanied by the seasonal changes in the land and weather in the harsh places where many of us live—reminding us again of the rural roots/routes from which we come, and the new rural roots which we are obliged to put down where we live. The emerging and often divided identity that comes out of this transition for rural people was recently described by an Albertan woman, Angela Stewart:

There are mornings in Alberta when you wake to a world that has gone colourless, when heavy frozen fog moves over the land like a thick brush, leaving trees and houses and trucks painted winter white. And the sun rises in the vast daytime sky muted like the moon....

This is a harsh land and we have become a hardy people, evolved to such from necessity. The possibility of eight months with snow and a winter that sometimes hits -40 C is not conducive to weakness. I have wondered, on mornings painted white when we rush down frozen sidewalks, what this cold land has done to our collective heart and the ways in which it has split our lives.

It is true what they say. We are a little rough around the edges here. We live in suburbia in elaborately large houses, but make room in our two-car garages to hang by the hooves the buck we shot on the weekend. We drive pickup trucks with hitches and carry chains and ropes behind the seat....

We are a wealthy people, most of us, but we do not come from wealthy families. Our parents and grandparents knew sweat and failure, farming and fasting, frozen blowing landscapes with the fence down in the far field and the cows roaming loose.

The last generation has paid our admission and we are enjoying the show, not certain we belong but not giving a damn either.... And all the world is watching, it seems, judging us and our snow, our money and our spending, our emissions and admissions. We are all of us an emerging people, caught between opposing forces of blue collar/white collar, street smart/book smart, cowboys/actors....

Last week, I slid into the ditch on a quiet country road and before I could finish my call for help a pickup truck with wheels bigger than my car pulled up beside me. I stood watching on the road in my pointy black shoes with the bows and the heels and my thin black stockings like a northern Blanche DuBois, depending on the kindness of this stranger, while he laid his coat on the snowy ground and hitched my vehicle to his. A tug, two tugs, and I was out, driving toward the city again within minutes, wondering about my province and her people.⁹²

In the divine cosmic drama that is played out in the mundane and ordinary lives we think we lead in our small towns and rural congregations from coast to coast, may we thank God for the generous kindness of those strangers whose hospitality reminds yet again of what adversity brings out of rural people. Be they local ranchers or ministers sent to that particular place at that particular time when we need them most, those modest acts of compassion from complete strangers remind us of the words by the apostle Paul: when any one of us suffer, we all feel the pain.

In a cold climate and increasingly heartless society that seems oblivious to noticing us when we are most vulnerable and need of attention, it is often the epiphanies where we least expect them, and from the people we least expect them, that jolt us out of our apathy and cynicism. It may only take one or two tugs of the four-wheel drive pickup, but the subsequent tugs at our relieved and grateful hearts reminds us that this act of unsolicited kindness is no more random than the multiple ways in which the Spirit whispers, often naggingly because we have iPods blaring in our ears: "We are not alone."

⁹² Angela Stewart, "Hearts divided: We are an emerging people in Alberta...," *The Globe and Mail*, January 22, 2008. Used with permission.

Questions for Reflection

1. Using the language of assets and gifts, what kind of financial and spiritual resources does our rural congregation have?
2. How do those relate to the economic resources and livelihoods of our respective rural communities?
3. How can our congregation critically and prayerfully reflect on our stewardship of those resources that would sustain our Christian witness and ministries into the future?
4. What kind of pastoral strategies and visioning would contribute to participating in God's transformative mission in our world?

Group Process Suggestions

For a Retreat Setting

Getting Started

Begin with worship that celebrates:

- the good news of Jesus Christ
- God's abundance and grace
- God's presence and faithfulness
- God's Spirit, which calls us to do greater works than we could imagine

Ask participants to find someone in the room they don't know well and to share in pairs for 5–10 minutes on the following question:

What really matters to you about the ministry of your congregation?

Make a brief presentation about the material in the Introduction to this booklet: the nature and assumptions of this tool, that God has called you together as a congregation for a reason, that God provides what you need to do your work, that the process is about discovering your congregation's gifts and areas where God is already working, rather than finding out what you're "doing wrong."

Briefly name the seven lenses and give a sentence or two of description. Introduce Lens 1, using the descriptive material and congregational stories from this resource. Then continue with the other six lenses in the same way. Spend about 45–60 minutes on each lens.

World Café

As discussed in this resource, the World Café process is designed to raise and exchange ideas in small and large groups of people simply and effectively.

Have people gather in groups of three or four—no more—for intimate conversations. Allow people to choose their own groups, and ask them to intentionally choose others who are different from themselves—that is, those of a different age, who may have different attitudes/opinions, have a different level of experience with the church, and so on.

Take 15 minutes to allow each person to share in the group her or his response to the following:

Describe a time when you experienced a real sense of purpose and of belonging in your congregation.

After 15 minutes have one person in each group stay where he or she is as host, while the others move to another group, again looking for people who are different from themselves.

The table hosts welcome the new people and share *one* thing that struck them from the previous conversation. (It is not necessary that they try to summarize all that was said, but those

observations or comments that that stuck out for them and their table group.) Then each person in each group shares her or his reflections on the following questions:

What is the vision? What do you see as the purpose for which God has gathered your congregation as Christ's body in this community at this time?

After 15 minutes the some host stays put while the rest of the group disperses and finds another group of no more than three or four people who are different from themselves. The table hosts again welcome new members of the group and share *one* thing that stands out for them from the previous conversation.

Now move a little deeper. Have each of the group members share about the following questions:

What walls do you come up against in yourself that inhibit you from moving more fully into God's vision for your congregation? How do you address your inner barriers to realize what God's Spirit is calling you to that is greater than what you could imagine doing?

For the next six lenses, allow people to choose which lens or lenses they want to reflect on and discuss. This reflection can be done in a variety of ways depending on how much time you have. Here are two approaches:

- Option 1 (30 minutes)
Assign one table for each of the six lenses and have people gather at whichever table they interested in joining. Each group chooses a facilitator, who will have someone read the section of this booklet on that lens and facilitate a discussion on it based on the reflection questions.
- Option 2 (60–120 minutes)
Repeat Option 1 once or twice so people can reflect on two or three of the lenses that most interest them.

The focus questions for the World Café process at the 2006 National Consultation on Rural Ministry were as follows. You may want to use them for your own group:

1. What question(s) do we need to ask? What questions do you bring with you?
2. What are the gifts that rural churches offer to the wider church and the wider community?
3. What in your congregation or pastoral charge needs to change to enhance your ability to use your gifts?
4. What will you need to leave behind to do that?
5. What story can you tell of hope in action in response to loss?
6. How are we discerning God's call for the rural church now?

Two Suggested Focus Questions

1. Rural and small town people have strong vernacular skills in storytelling. They have also inherited oral traditions that include poetic language. In that vein, please briefly describe for others in your small table group what “economic” climate change is like, using the familiar

language of the weather, almost as if you were pretending to give a weather forecast. We all know the way in which rural people relish talking about the weather, but *we also know how much both the weather and the economy seem to dictate our rural lives and communities.* Here is an opportunity to identify the economic growth or downturns or recent changes in your community using the metaphorical language of the weather.

In light of the current attention to climate change, *how would you best describe the “economic” climate change that is occurring in your small town or rural community at present?*

2. In a similar metaphorical and poetic vein, please reflect on and briefly share with others at your small table group *which kind of tree best describes your current rural or small town congregation or pastoral charge. What is it about that kind of tree that brings to your mind the spirituality and history of your particular congregation or pastoral charge? Why that tree?*

Closing

Close with prayer and a hymn from *Voices United* or *More Voices*.

For a Study Group or Committee/Board Meeting

Another way to use this assessment tool is with a regular Bible or book study group, or during a regular committee or board meeting. Use Option 1 or 2 above to examine one or two lenses per meeting, covering the seven lenses over several weeks. Don't limit yourself to one lens per meeting if it appears to engage your group in further discussion for subsequent meetings.

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