

BEING
The Essence And Vitality
of
Rural Congregational Life and Ministry

A THESIS

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by

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presented by:

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Dedication

We wish to dedicate this work to the memory of our friend and colleague, Marg Shortt. Marg's continuing quest for knowledge and 'what was exciting out there' offered us both challenge and support. Her questions and insights always invited and implied a shared vision and practice of ministry. We celebrate the life and gifts of this special friend.

We also wish to dedicate this work to our families without whose patience and support this work would never have been finished. To Deanne, Laurel, Brendon and my parents Ed and Jacky, thank you. To Anne, Dan, Meghan, Jenny, Kevin, Keith and my parents Howard and Florence, thank you.

Finally we wish to dedicate this work to each other. This thesis represents our patience, caring and commitment to working together.

ABSTRACT

BEING The Essence and Vitality of Rural Congregational Life and Ministry

For this thesis the co-researchers listened to the stories of five rural United Church of Canada Congregations in the Peace River Country. Qualitative Research methods were used to address what it is that sustains, nurtures and enlivens these congregations. The following areas were identified as common themes: church as presence, spiritual needs, the stress of multiple responsibilities, leadership and self-esteem.

It was concluded that sustaining rural congregational life and ministry may happen without nurturing and enlivening. Sustaining in and of itself is maintenance and is seldom life-giving. Nurturing seems to be the key that offers the ability to sustain rural congregational life in an enlivened way.

The presence of the church as BEING is the essence of rural congregational life and ministry. BEING represents this animation of life and soul. BEING is the presence of God. BEING is the expression of mission of the rural church.

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Chapter One

Introduction

"There's a church in the valley by the wildwood, No lovelier spot in the dale; No place is so dear to my childhood, As the little brown church in the vale."¹ We respond to these familiar words differently, depending on our context and experience.

At first glance the church is much in evidence in rural Canada. In small towns its spires rise above the surrounding settlement, while in the open country there is still a sprinkling of small tidy structures open for worship. They stand at crossroads that once offered other services -- a grain elevator, a cheese factory, a blacksmith shop, a store, a post office, or a mill. ... The question is not why an artifact of the horse and buggy era has survived, but what message does the church have for the future of the rural community?²

Is the country church a pleasant memory from childhood? Does the church symbolize a hope for a return to the 'good old days'? How do our memories and experiences of church shape and inform our actions in the rural church of today? What sustains, nurtures, and enlivens rural congregational ministry? These are the questions that this thesis will consider.

Sustains, nurtures and enlivens ... what is it that keeps rural churches alive, what is it that feeds and supports rural people as they live their ministry, and what is it that energizes the rural congregation?

We begin with the assumption that sustainability represents that experience of rural church that means it endures. Lyle E. Schaller points to the hardiness and toughness of the rural church when he states...."The small church is tough!....one of the most distinctive characteristics of the small church is that it is a hardy institution that usually can survive..."³ This quality of enduring continues through all the changing scenes of a rural community. Sustaining involves the upholding and the preserving of not only the church, but the values that the church maintains. These values are represented in differing ways both to the community of faith and the community at large.

In the rural community we often refer to sustainable agriculture or forestry. 'Sustainable' includes living and working in a way that respects the need for production in the midst of protecting and enhancing the basic resources within our environment. As we examine sustaining the church, we acknowledge many similarities. The church and the community are, of necessity, interconnected. The church is not an entity in and of itself, rather the church is comprised of individuals and groups who live and work within community. The church and community often share common excitements and tensions. Sustaining the church confirms within a particular context that church is important and offers an ongoing presence not only of

God but of stability and moral values. In a world of shifting morals and values, God is sometimes perceived as a reliable and stable source of values and moral standards.

We would suggest that nurturing is the process that occurs when people of a congregation are continually seeking to actively and intentionally care for one another and the world. Rural people and the rural church value living with quiet dignity and great compassion for one another. Nurturing is about mutual feeding of body and soul so that individuals or the group can thrive and grow, develop and unfold. Churches are well known for their literal feeding and nurture of people through their annual turkey suppers and their potluck suppers. An annual turkey supper offers a traditional predictable menu. Potluck suppers tend to offer surprise and diversity and to be a time to offer something new. If we think of the image of the turkey supper in terms of nurturing as a church we see that nurturing involves celebrating our common history and roots. Turkey suppers offer an opportunity for strengthening ongoing relationships. In turn this strength offers congregations the stability and the ability to initiate and respond to changes.

Turkey suppers, potluck meals and other traditional occasions of providing food, are rituals by which a congregation affirms its identity as a nurturing community, and does so in the name of God. At the same time, as we think of the image of the potluck supper, we see that nurturing as a metaphor recognizes and offers future possibilities as we struggle together to respond to change and to initiate change.

Nurturing is about making choices that will support and foster new opportunities and challenges as we seek to live God's call. It is also about making choices that are appropriate for the context and reflect the needs of the people as discerned by the people. Nurturing is about encouraging people to recognize, to claim and to live their respective ministries. A nurturing church acknowledges and respects the value of past, present and future.

For us, that which enlivens represents the coming together and the connectedness of a community, ... "where we are not afraid of life, we get into it."⁴ The concept of enlivening speaks of that which brings delight and joy, that which sparks and maintains enthusiasm. An enlivened church offers opportunities for various individuals and groups both within the community of faith and beyond to identify and express the meaning in their lives. An enlivening church is a source of vitality that in and of itself offers the essence of what it means to be a spirit-filled community.

For this thesis, ministry will refer to the life and work of a congregation which includes paid accountable ministers who work within the congregation. This life and work of a congregation include all of the services provided by a faith community within itself and to a geographic community, as well as to the world. We will also address the style of paid accountable ministry that enables ministry to be focused through the life and work of a congregation.

Our writing style for this thesis involves the inclusion throughout the body of this thesis of our review of literature. This style of writing reflects our need to weave together the stories, the literature, our thoughts and analysis. This blending affords opportunities to consider the various facets of rural ministry and the rural church in a way that reflects our belief in the interconnectedness of people, community, creation and social structures.

One of our first learnings as we began this project is that even though rural ministry seems to be increasingly of interest, there is nevertheless, limited literature. There is some literature that deals specifically with rural ministry and the rural church as not "urban." Alex Sim reminds us that in many ways it is easier to define a city or urban area than a rural community. Is a rural area simply non-urban? There's a tendency among sociologists to use negative terms to define groups that do not easily fall into clear categories. Sim sees this mentality of using negative terms to define as a kind of urban imperialism. This is a mentality that defines in terms of usefulness or relationship to the colonizer.⁵

We are faced with a dilemma in trying to find an adequate and appropriate definition of the term rural. Is it defined in terms of geography, work, independence, population density, state of mind, isolation,? ... We strongly agree with Sim that it reflects a colonial mentality to simply define a people and a place in terms of usefulness or relationship to its colonizer.

Rural is certainly a place, usually of low population density, a particular kind of work, and so on but we suspect that rural is much more. Rural is many things including a state of mind,

a preference -- some chosen and some given, all involving a relationship with the land. This relationship includes a respect for the integrity of the land, respect that comes from the ability of land to support and enable growth and respect that comes with always wondering what the land will yield this year. Joyce Sasse says that, "People who live in rural communities experience a closeness to the land that cannot be explained as strongly as it is felt."⁶

It is also important for us to recognize that rural communities and churches are at once unique and yet they have much in common. Although rural people engage in differing economic activities that sustain both community and church, most would describe themselves in terms of their relationship to the land.

Rural churches are a blend of people that offer a unique flavor to each congregation. Jeffrey Hoag reminds us that we must "...also exercise caution when we are tempted to lump all rural churches into one sociological heap. Stereotypes may be convenient for explaining downward trends and decreasing influence, but if they work their way into the corporate mindset of a denomination, they can become self-fulfilling prophecy."⁷ In our interviewing it was evident that not all rural churches are the same. We conversed with five rural congregations, all of which are unique. They varied in size, age range, interests, activities, and the way that they work with paid ministry support. To lump these church communities together would be to do an injustice to the integrity of who they are. Yet there are some common threads that run through all rural communities. We would want to affirm both the differences and the similarities.

Other writings tend to focus on the small church as a stepping stone always requiring growth. The fact that there is limited literature that sees the rural church and ministry to be valued intrinsically, reflects for us what has been too long the attitude of the institutional church to the rural reality. Even paid accountable ministry personnel are frequently asked why they are in rural ministry, rather than in a 'big city church'. The implication of this question is that those in rural ministry are inept and unable to handle the real challenges of real ministry.

...As a minor voice within the world church, rural Catholicism is a neglected feature of the cultures of American Catholicism. American Catholicism has been primarily focused on metropolitan concerns. It is within the cities that chanceries and pastoral centres are located; that pastors have preferred assignments; where seminaries and major educational services are located; where most social services, schools and hospitals are located.⁸

This representation of the Roman Catholic church in America also speaks to our situation in this country. According to the United Church of Canada Year Book 1993, the following statistics are reported. ..."Approximately 56.6% of our congregations are considered rural (located in communities of under 2,000); 20.4% are considered town (located in communities of between 2,000; and 30,000) and 23.0% are considered city and suburban (located in or immediately adjacent to communities of over 30,000)."⁹

From the United Church of Canada we also hear that,

As the country has become increasingly urban, we have altered the structure, and methods of our institutions, including the church, to fit an urban way of life. Although the majority of United Church congregations still are in rural areas, our ways of doing, saying, and even thinking have become increasingly inappropriate and almost irrelevant for rural charges.¹⁰

Rural ministry is a specialized expression of ministry. This ministry is often lived out in a family style church. Among the many strengths of a family style church is their care and support of one another. William R. Adamson comments that "it is important to recognize the distinctive features of small congregations ... their greatest asset is their care and support of people... the small congregation is something like an extended family. Carl Dudley, in his Making the Small Church Effective writes: that small churches are a single caring cell embracing the whole congregation. Everyone has a place and is involved in the fabric of the congregation. There is an intimacy among the members."¹¹

Part of our commitment to rural ministry and the rural church is to offer this thesis that comes from being with rural people as they share their stories, questions and insights. It is our intention that this thesis might offer another perspective of the rural church and ministry. We offer this study and reflection of the rural church and ministry from a particular rural context.

We live with change all the time, yet we need to recognize the magnitude of change within the rural context. This dramatic change has happened in this century, even within the lifetime

of many people. For some people in rural areas, the practice of farming has included breaking land by hand, and seeding quarter sections with teams of horses, through to seeding sections from an air-conditioned tractor cab. As a result, not only has farming changed for families, but as families farm more land, fewer people are involved in farming.

Factors such as mechanization, globalization, industrialization and their resulting impact on communities have contributed to the focus of the practice of farming shifting from being a way of life to a way of making a living. "No century in recorded history has experienced so many social transformations and such radical ones as the 20th Century.... Before the First World War, farmers composed the largest single group in every country.... In all developed free market countries,... productive farmers make up less than half of the total farm population... Traditional farmers are close to extinction..."¹² As farms have become more mechanized and larger there are resultant changes in relationships among people and communities. One is more aware of the need to be intentional about maintaining quality relationships with people and the land. It is easy to be too focused on the making of a living at the expense of the way of living. When the focus in rural areas is predominantly making a living, then land tends to become more of a commodity to be used than a resource to be respected and protected.

We believe that the rural community and the rural church continue to be present through times of change. However, change is also a natural part of the rhythm of rural living. Even though many of the changes in social and economic realities are cataclysmic, rural people

continue to respond to all change in much the same way. While the paradigms described in the literature all contribute to an understanding of rural living, no one of them describes the unfolding character of change in a rural community.

Because change is an integral part of the rural context, change is seldom seen as a sudden break or shift, rather change tends to be perceived as an unfolding. In the rural context, living and making a living are connected to and reflect, the seasons. There is a rootedness in the land and a connection to the seasons and cycles of the land that shapes and informs who people are and how people live and make a living. This connection to the land is something that is felt in ways that are beyond words. Life is indeed dependent on the seasons. This sense of rhythm with nature may be true for rural people regardless of the size of landholding or their way of making a living. There is a strong interconnectedness between human life and creation. One cannot help but be aware of a rich spiritual heritage based on this interconnectedness and deep spiritual searching that continues as part of life today.

In farming communities, significant social, cultural and church events do not happen during seeding time (gardening and fields), harvesting or calving. In communities with logging, and oil and gas industries, significant events are tied to spring breakup. Regardless of how people choose to make a living, rural life is a way of living that continually reminds people of and connects them to the environment in which they live.

As a society and as the church, it is often claimed that rural communities and the rural church are in a state of crisis. It would appear, however, that rural people often speak of this crisis reluctantly. Perhaps this reluctance comes from questions about who names the crisis and who decides what the nature of the crisis is. For example the crisis as seen from beyond the rural community is one that may be described in terms of too many farms. These farms are seen as not efficient enough to compete on world markets. This inefficiency is measured in terms of trade agreements Canada has negotiated that tend to favour other commodities. Within the rural community, crisis may be seen as the difficulty of continuing to sustain rural communities and churches. Rural communities are subject to low commodity prices that are set by forces beyond their control, that make it increasingly difficult to survive. This fact, along with attempts at being efficient by enlarging farms, has decreased the population. However crises may be named, rural communities tend to be characterized by living with fortitude in the midst of economic instability.

Our idealized vision of the "church in the wildwood" maintains an expectation of stability and identity in rural living that is often unrealistic. These unrealistic expectations exist for those living in rural communities and those beyond. "A crisis happens when the self definition of a person or culture is challenged, threatened and destroyed by forces, external or internal, over which that person or culture has no, or at best only limited, control. At this time, the self-understanding of the rural community is under attack ... and results mainly from insensitivity to the dignity of the rural community."¹³ In the context studied, community identities are threatened by changes in health care, grain elevator services, centralizing of

school administration, changes in municipal administration and global trading. Identities are further threatened by the fact that many such decisions are made outside the communities and imposed upon them.

It is our contention that diaconal ministry offers a style of empowerment and skills particularly required in times of great change and crisis. As persons committed to a diaconal ministry, we believe that people are competent to discern their own needs in community. We understand diaconal ministry to be a ministry that is defined by the people and situations with which we are called to work, rather than being defined primarily by function. Diaconal ministry with rural people includes facilitating discernment around what kinds of change can be chosen, how to cope with changes forced upon us and how to discern the Holy in all of it.

Historically in times of crisis those in diaconal ministry have worked with people to survive and to discern creative options. Diaconal ministry involves finding meaning in change. We believe that the rural congregation along with the rural communities of which it is a part, is in a time of crisis. Loren Mead of the Alban Institute reminds us that ..."Beneath the confusion we are being stretched between a great vision of the past and a new vision that is not yet fully formed... The familiar roles of laity, clergy, executive, bishop, church council, and denominational bureaucrat are in profound transition all around us."¹⁴

We are indeed in the midst of in-between times. Our focus in this project is being with people and the church in discerning where we are. It is in this between time that we engage

five rural congregations in conversation about what sustains, nurtures and enlivens ministry within their rural church and the wisdom this can offer to others.

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- ¹ Oliver Funeral Chapel, Hymns; Church In The Wildwood. Parkland Colorpress Ltd., College Heights, Alberta, p. 6.
 - ² Sim, R. Alex. Land and Community. University of Guelph, 1988, p. 130
 - ³ Schaller, Lyle E. The Small Church Is Different!. Nashville, Tennessee, Abingdon Press, 1985, p. 28
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 - ⁶ Sasse, Joyce. Country Preacher's Notebook. Woodlake Books, Winfield B.C., 1990, p.14.
 - ⁷ Hoag, Jeffrey. "De-Mythologizing The Rural Church." Rural Ministry Issue, PMC, May 1988, p. 22.
 - ⁸ Andrews, David G. Ministry in the Small Church. Sheed and Ward, Kansas City, 1988, p. 4.
 - ⁹ The United Church of Canada. Year Book and Directory. Department of Education and Information The General Council Division of Communication, July 1993 p.160.
 - ¹⁰ Morris, David. "The Southern Ontario Orientation to Rural Ministry." 1993, p.1.
 - ¹¹ Adamson, William R. Small Churches Understanding and Encouraging Them. Adam Enterprises, Saskatoon Sk, 1993 p.31.
 - ¹² Drucker, Peter F. "The Age of Social Transformation." The Atlantic Monthly, November 1994, p. 53-54.
 - ¹³ Hollingsworth, Richard. "Under Attack." Rural Ministry Issue, PMC, May 1988, p. 14.
 - ¹⁴ Mead, Loren B. The Once and Future Church. Alban Institute, Inc. New York, 1991, p. 5.

Chapter Two

Ministry

As we look at rural church and rural ministry, it is important to share some of who we are and the assumptions we bring to this conversation. We are both English speaking, white and female. Our families of origin have strong roots in the United Church of Canada that grow out of Presbyterian and Methodist founding denominations. Throughout all of our years the church has been a central part of our living.

One of us has lived most of her life in a rural context and brings this worldview and experience to our work. Other significant influences include being the oldest of three children in a farm family in southern Ontario. Church and community life and mutual support of extended family was important. Early education included rural sociology and adult education. Out of that came the opportunity to work for two years in southern Africa. Upon returning to Canada farming in southern Ontario no longer seemed economically viable for a new family. An opportunity for employment resulted in a move to Peace River area where although off farm income sustains the family, the values and importance of farm family life continue to be important.

One of us was born into a United Church of Canada clergy family in a rural pastoral charge in Manitoba. Like many families of United Church clergy, during childhood, we found ourselves living in two larger centres. Our family which included three children enjoyed summers of camping and living at the summer cottage. For many years extended family were at some distance away and visits were always planned whenever possible. After college there were many years of working as an office administrator and legal secretary in a large city. Much of this time was spent with Legal Aid. Following a time at home with young family, an opportunity became available to work as a staff associate in an urban church. Another significant life influence is living with the chronic condition of diabetes and the later diagnosis of one of three children having this condition as well. Before choosing to live in a rural context, many years were lived in an urban context.

1989 brought the opportunity for further study in diaconal ministry. The urban and rural perspectives which the two of us bring shapes our work as well. We often look at the same situations with differing eyes and yet we appreciate and celebrate the richness that this brings to our work, to our personal lives and to this study with the rural church. We are both actively involved in diaconal ministry as a team, in the rural context to which this thesis pertains. We have differing backgrounds and we bring our varied experiences to rural ministry.

In this section of our thesis we will share some of the assumptions we bring to our work with the rural church. How we understand ministry shapes and informs our practice of

ministry and our view of ministry issues. Our understanding of ministry has also influences how we have approached and carried out this thesis work.

...Servant, shepherd, prophet, priest, apostle, deacon, disciple... these are all biblical images of ministry that have and are still informing our visions and practices of ministry.¹ As we reflect on ministry today and in the near future, we wonder what images, practices and issues are relevant and challenging for us. It is our intention to consider our current context as we struggle to discern images of ministry that speak to our experiences. Our focus is diaconal ministry, however, we recognize the interconnections of all functions and styles of ministry. "The intention and relevance of diakonia and priesthood must be continually interpreted and translated into the times in which people live."²

A conviction that we bring to ministry declares that ministry requires being friends. In John 15 we hear Jesus declaring to the disciples,... I no longer call you servant, I call you friend ...for the servant does not know what the master is doing; ...I have called you friends for all that I have heard from God I have made known to you. As friends in ministry we all journey with one another.

Much ministry practice has been characterized and experienced as an hierarchical/patriarchal model. In the Redemption of God, Carter Heyward suggests that the possibility of friendships and mutual relationships threaten our institutional structures that are based on greed and exploitive power.³ Being a friend offers us a vision of mutuality. The

leadership that we offer in the context of ministry constantly strives to be with people as together we challenge one another in seeking justice for all of creation. We believe that we are all called to a mutual ministry. Our role is to be with others as all of us clarify our gifts and discern the vision and mission of the church for today. Ministry involves living a theology that according to Mary Hunt ... "emerges basically from people's sharing of their work, their faith and their lives"⁴

The friendship model of ministry is difficult because it challenges traditions and values around the practice and experience of ministry and our cultural expectations of leadership. Our institutional structures are sealed fast by a deep and common fear of friendship and love; fear of chaos, anarchy, pain, and loss.⁵ As those in diaconal ministry, we have a particular concern to offer leadership that serves to bring fulfilling and authentic life to ourselves and to those with whom we relate.⁶ The context is an integral part of ministry. In fact ministry cannot happen without a context. Chung Hyun Kyung when speaking of the oppression of Asian women and the significance of claiming and honouring context offers "only when we Asian women start to consider our everyday concrete life experiences as the most important source for building the religious meaning structures for ourselves shall we be free from all imposed religious authority."⁷ This premise holds true within our northern rural context. As rural people we continue to find our theology and our sense of God grounded in our everyday experiences as faith communities.

The functions of ministry are discerned and evoked within the community. We recognize the need to continually check and re-interpret ministry within context and times. A primary focus of diaconal ministry is mutual empowerment and friendship through education, service and pastoral care. Diaconal ministry may be characterized by a commitment to justice. Because diaconal ministry tends to identify more with a particular egalitarian style and vision, ministry is understood as intended to meet the needs of the community as discerned with the people.

We understand that the diaconal expression of ministry does not preclude assuming responsibility for particular tasks and functions. Rather, leadership is offered in response to whatever needs are discerned within the community. This reflects the diaconal preference to be identified in terms of style and vision rather than with a function of ministry.⁸

Diaconal ministry is rooted in Christian scriptures. The Greek word diakonia actually means service. Jesus' life and teachings exemplified this style of serving ministry. We recognize that within a serving ministry we may be called upon to function in differing roles such as servant, pastoral, or priestly roles. How and what we do varies with people and context. For example, we serve by conducting funerals and facilitating board meetings ...

Diaconal ministry is traditionally regarded as a serving ministry. Jesus offered different insights into the practice and role of servant. The disciples were drawn into a relationship with Jesus and one another. This experience of relationship reflected who Jesus was and what he

was about. "Integral to the style of Jesus' ministry was empowerment of others which meant living a new vision of community where people lived together in love and service."⁹

The only framework the disciples had to understand this powerful experience of relationship was the power they saw exercised by rulers over subjects. Jesus does not rebuke the disciples who want to share in the power that they experience with him, but offers a surprising new model for transforming life. Jesus offered the familiar role of a servant differently. A ruler has power over subjects, a servant only has power in relation. Jesus challenges the disciples who seek greatness to risk finding their common power through mutual service with one another. By using the serving image, we believe Jesus' ministry puts an emphasis on a serving style.

We believe God is present in relationships within community, empowering all ministries. Community cannot be limited to Christian believers. The authority to offer ministry rises out of experiences of God within community. We see this as a particular mandate for diaconal ministry and we are called to live this out in a style that is consistent with what we believe about power as resource. "Jesus' choice to co-operate with the power that moves him into relation and keeps him there is his choice to do God's activity, or to god, in the world."¹⁰

The opportunity to serve comes from people and it is both a privilege and a responsibility to serve and to be served with people. Serving includes accountability to and with each other in the congregation. Certain functions may be necessary to the congregation and may be

carried out in a mutual style of working with one another. "To Jesus all the enduring values of life can be included within servanthood"¹¹

Diaconal ministry has been a part of the church since its beginnings. In the text of Romans 16, Phoebe is given the title diakonos. Those with this title appear to be not only itinerant missionaries, but leaders in local congregations....they also served in a recognized official capacity as teachers and preachers in the Christian community. From Romans 16:1-2, Phoebe is ...deacon ...of the whole church at Cenchrae."¹²

We understand that diaconal ministry is more about discerning needs and responding to them than about institutional maintenance, therefore diaconal ministry tends to happen on the margins. There is for us a tension in living a ministry style that is marginalized and yet is still within the institutional power structures of the church. This living on the edge corresponds with the place of the church within society and to the place of the rural church within today's church structures. Living on the edge provides a common ground in the challenges of rural ministry.

We understand that power involves the sharing and the generating of resources in ways that enable people to live their faith. Carter Heyward offers us a distinction between exousia which is power that is socially licensed or allowed and dunamis which is power that is experienced by others as spontaneous, unpredictable and often frightening. Dunamis is power

in relation. We have choices of how we use power to influence in our relationships and our structures. Exousia power is an expression of power that serves to maintain and expand our institutions and structures. This becomes negative when the purpose and result is intended to claim further authoritative power.¹³

In The Promise of Partnership sharing power is described as, "Partnership in power - the ability to enjoy mutual influence and mutual empowerment ..."¹⁴ Mutuality can be described as dunamis power. Mutuality embodies an intimate relationship where we empower one another. A mutual relationship involves sharing through the giving and receiving of power. For us mutual relationships include the willingness to risk vulnerability - to open ourselves to minister 'with' rather than 'to'. If mutuality is not present, then ministry can become a shield or barrier that can be silencing, as it discounts others, perhaps even discounts the self and often requires conformity. It is important to recognize that the ability and the willingness to share power varies depending on a faith community's experience and circumstances.

We recognize that power is inherent in position. Indeed, it is an abuse of power to refuse to recognize our personal and professional power. For us, diaconal ministry emphasizes the sharing of power for the work of enabling one another. This involves a challenge of working with and within structures in just and lifegiving ways. In ministry we are called to live in the tensions of prophetic and pastoral ministry. We need to discern when challenge and/or when comfort is required.

Not only does diaconal ministry, claim to work and to be on the margins, there is a continual need to discern what we would choose rather than merely endure what others choose for us. Margins offer chance to experience differing visions and insights and open up the possibilities of new awareness. Walter Brueggemann refers to a worldview and an identity that requires a "faith and life lived outside the imperial system in a zone of freedom and justice. This is faith formation which nurtures persons to live outside the dominant system with the courage and imagination to construct countersystems of reality."¹⁵ Like this worldview, diaconal ministry includes challenging systems, and systemic injustices. Diaconal ministry involves being in solidarity with all persons who are marginalized as we seek wholeness through change and transformation.

How do we live on the margins when the margins are continually moving? Margins disturb the centre and are a source of chaos. "With change comes confusion and uncertainty. We would prefer certainty, and stability ... We want to move to something new and different and yet we would like things to be clear and certain"¹⁶ Therefore the 'centre', in its need for order, may deny or attempt to remove the existence of the margins or it may co-opt any of the margins which seem to have the potential to generate power. Margins begin to move when there is a critical understanding of how a group or society arrived in that situation.¹⁷ This necessary analysis with critique, comes with the sharing of stories. Questioning, growing and changing are an integral part of our tradition and faith experience. This is living our faith through actions in the world.

How then do we care for ourselves as communities of faith in a rural context? Particularly how do we do this without being consumed in a power struggle at the expense of ourselves, others and ministry needs? We recognize the need to continually check and reinterpret ministry within the context and times. This includes continually critiquing our values as we clarify the questions and convictions that inform our reflecting and acting.

Ministry involves mutual trust. This trust is a necessary part of one to one relationships as well as the life of congregations and communities. In fact ministry cannot happen without a commitment to trust. This commitment to trust assumes a sharing of power among all those involved. When trust is broken through boundary violations, for example, when professional information is used to meet personal needs, then the possibility of mutuality is lost for empowering ministry.

It has been our experience that ministry is frequently seen as happening primarily within the confines of 'congregational maintenance', or growth for the sake of maintenance. Too often ministry is perceived in terms of the middle class regardless of all who would name themselves as middle class. Ministry can also be categorized narrowly. We believe that ministry is ideally mutually accountable and justice seeking.

We live in a pluralistic world. This pluralism is expressed in many ways. For example, there are economic and social injustices locally and globally. Pluralism may also include multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-religious communities both rural and urban. The fear of chaos

felt by many in our church and in our society is one of many expressions of the need for and the presence of transforming work in our midst. Our challenge in ministry is to be in community with people of God and to grow to wholeness within that community and in the world. The task of the church today is to transform lives and the structure of our society that oppresses.¹⁸ Ministry is within the mission of justice and compassion of the church.

In the document "Report of the Futures Task Group of the United Church of Canada", we read that, "ministry personnel will be called to provide advocacy and leadership in the field of social change. Advocacy on behalf of those who are marginalized in our society will be increasingly important."¹⁹ As a church we are increasingly called to clarify and discern who we are, whose we are and what we are meant to do and who we are to be with all people and all of creation.

A necessary part of our re-interpreting and translating the times in which we live is accountability. Accountability needs to be an inherent part of ministry. We are accountable to ourselves, to God, to colleagues, to church courts and to the world. We struggle to seek right relation in all that we do and are. Carter Heyward comments, "I am accountable to those who are committed to justice for all. This does not mean that I live this value very evenly or very well. Most of us do not. But the commitment is honest and strong."²⁰

Accountability is a necessary part of partnership. In fact, partnership requires structures of mutual accountability. There is an intentionality to accountability that assumes coordinated

planning. Grace giving and receiving accountability is a part of the promise of partnership.²¹

This requires openness, trust and support for persons and structures.

We recognize that we are in 'paid accountable ministry' with communities of faith in a rural context. This title declares that ministry does not happen in isolation or independently. Like ministry, such accountability and responsibility is not static. It is continually growing and changing through challenging, critiquing, and caring. Accountability offers depths, strengths and new dimensions to ministry.

Beyond structural accountability, an important expression of accountability for us, is the need for safe community. Community offers safe place to challenge and be challenged. Such community involves people with whom accountability is an expectation. This connecting sustains and nurtures spirituality and enables and empowers authentic life.

God's commitment to the dignity and well-being of those most vulnerable in society requires us to be friends, to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6:1-8).

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 - ² *ibid*, p. 2.
 - ³ Heyward, Isabel Carter. The Redemption of God. University of America Press, Lanham, 1982, p. 165.
 - ⁴ Hunt, Mary. With Passion and Compassion, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1988, p. 90.
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 - ⁷ Kyung, Chung Hyun. Struggle To Be The Sun Again. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, p. 5.
 - ⁸ Heuer, Kay. "So Tell Me Again, What Is A Diaconal Minister?" October, 1992, p. 1.
 - ⁹ The United Church of Canada. "Diaconal Ministry in the United Church of Canada." 1993, p. 7.
 - ¹⁰ Heyward, Isabel Carter. The Redemption Of God. University Press of America. Lanham, 1982, p. 39.
 - ¹¹ Keller, Rosemary Skinner, Moede, Gerald F. and Moore, Mary Elizabeth. Called to Serve. United Methodist General Board of Higher Education, Nashville, 1987, p. 75.
 - ¹² MacFarlane, Mary Anne, Seller, Carol Stevenson and Wood, Dawn. "The History of Diaconal Ministry", United Church of Canada, 1987, p. 1.
 - ¹³ Heyward, Isabel Carter. The Redemption of God. University Press of America, Lanham, 1982, p. 41.
 - ¹⁴ Whitehead, James D. and Whitehead, Evelyn Eaton. The Promise of Partnership. Harper, San Francisco, 1991, p. 121.
 - ¹⁵ Brueggemann, Walter. Hope Within History. John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1973, p. 14.

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- ¹⁸ "Diaconal History Style and Formation". St. Stephen's College, Diaconal History, Style and Formation Course, November, 1990.
- ¹⁹ "Report of the Futures Task Group To The Division of Ministry Personnel and Education", The United Church of Canada, February, 1993, p. E15.
- ²⁰ Heyward, Carter. Touching Our Strength. Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1989, p.96.
- ²¹ Whitehead, James D. and Whitehead, Evelyn Eaton. The Promise of Partnership. Harper, San Francisco, 1991, p. 175-176, 54-55.

Chapter Three

Theology

The book, Lift Every Voice, suggests "theology's task is ...to reflect critically on the practice of the gospel in specific times and places".¹ Theology may be described as that which deals with ultimate questions of meaning and purpose, it is about telling stories and hearing meaning in the stories. Theology includes the doctrines and principles that emerge from our reflections upon the meaning of our experiences of the sacred and the Holy in our lives. Our stories offer us purpose and reference points by which we may make value decisions that offer us choices and direction. Theology is our human expression of stating God's meaning in our lives.

We are convinced that adequate theology reflects upon life experiences in ways that include a commitment to providing all people with access to the sources of life. Such theology also requires the development of a concept of the experience of God and of all creation that emphasizes mutual empowerment as a basic value.

No theology exists in isolation. Humankind enters the realm of theology through the varied experiences of life, through the joys and griefs, the satisfactions and the frustrations of being alive. There is an interconnection of theology, ethics and spirituality. In turn these three

components are grounded in the moral and ritual practices of communities.² Theology and the devotional life are also interconnected. They inform and shape each other. Indeed, what we believe about God (theology as doctrine or confessed belief) determines what we recognize as holy in our everyday life and how we will live out the expression of our theology.

We offer this conversation about theology in this rural context, mindful of the comment by Judith Plaskow and Carol Christ, in Weaving the Visions, ..."the full reality of "(women's) experience" is contained not in any one voice but in the rising chorus that speaks from many standpoints, pressing toward the creation of a society in which all can be heard."³ We trust that the context and experience described in this thesis will contribute to a 'rising chorus' of rural voices as we seek to bring meaning out of the stories of our faith communities. "No one person writing theology out of a particular set of life experiences can interpret the meaning of the gospel for all others. Theology is an ongoing activity, not a final end in itself."⁴

In much contemporary theology, connection to the land and nature are offered as an ideal to be claimed. We suspect that many of these ideas and images are in fact a reality of rural peoples' living. What for many in other contexts is an ideal or an image to contribute to wholeness, is everyday life for the people in this Peace River country.

In traditional theology, when reference is made to a rural reality there is a tendency to idealize and romanticize rural living. For example, the birth narrative in the gospel of Luke is often presented as a cozy scene in a stable. In the popular image, reality seems to be limited to

the presence of livestock. Usually much is made of God 'with us' as a baby. There is little acknowledgement of the experience of cold and dirt and hard labour for those who work in stables. Experience enables a connection to the biblical narrative that the romantic treatment of many texts hinders. Not only do rural people have to shovel through romantic images, but there also is the knowledge that for others, the reality of a stable would be very uncomfortable and quite unacceptable.

We wonder what difference it makes to hearing the birth narrative, when it is a common practice among rural people to put a priority on improving the stable before making the house comfortable. From this perspective the setting of the birth narrative in a farm building for animals expresses not so much a humble place but a place of importance that may exceed the importance of human wellbeing.

What expectation or experience of God do we have if working in a stable is part of our experience? If we are personally involved in the work of shepherding, our hearing of the 23rd Psalm is grounded differently from those whose context includes no experience of sheep. Truly then, theology needs to grow out of the context and experience of the people who are doing theology.

There is oppression in feeling the contradiction between the images of romanticized theology and the rural experience. There is oppression in a rural worldview that is defensive of a way of living that dominant society romanticizes and idealizes and yet does not value.

There is oppression in a rural worldview that does not see or experience any possibility of change in their context or in relationships with those of differing contexts. Chung Hyun Kyung when speaking of the oppression of Asian women and the significance of claiming and honouring context says "only when we Asian women start to consider our everyday concrete life experiences as the most important source for building the religious meaning structures for ourselves shall we be free from all imposed religious authority."⁵ Like Chung Hyun Kyung suggests we all need to claim our everyday life experiences as important sources for building meaningful structures.

Ernesto Cardenal a Roman Catholic priest who was a member of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua encouraged people to read scripture in such a way that their own lives were reflected there. Cardenal reveals how theology grounded in real life experience is revolutionary. What is important to Cardenal is not what the gospels should mean, but what the words and works of Jesus actually mean to people in their daily lives.⁶

We have chosen, in this thesis, to attend to what people tell us about rural ways of living and ways of making a living. We have pursued people's stories because "... one of the early insights of feminist theology was that, like a good novel, poem, or play, theology best illuminates the universal in human experience through attention to the details of human life."⁷ It is through our stories that we claim the experience of God in our living. It is through the biblical stories that we find meaning in the connections of God's presence with others and ourselves.

When we think of the rural context the image of exile offers some insights. The traditional biblical reference of exile involves a moving away to a foreign land and attempting to sing the Lord's song in an alien land (Psalm 137). However, we understand exile in the rural setting to refer to the experience of being 'cut off' within one's own land.

In the biblical reference to exile, those who were chosen to be exiled in ancient Israel, were the sophisticated urban folk, the scholars, the financiers, politicians and other people with positions of power and influence. "As happens in any conquest, the poorer people in society suffer a great deal often without knowing exactly what is going on around them. However, the extremes of punishment were reserved for the privileged ones...The cream of Hebrew society was carried off as captives to Babylon."⁸ In The Old Testament Survey it says that at the time of exile in King Zedekiah's reign, "His people had been stripped of political, religious, and economic leadership."⁹

Those left behind were the rural people. The result was a large gap, between the people in positions of power and the people living in rural areas. Like the rural people of ancient times who were cut off from the intelligentsia and former wielders of power in their own land, and left under the power of foreign occupiers, there is a parallel today for rural people who also are cut off in their own land and feel helpless under the power of world systems. The important point with regard to any exile is the separation of people from one another and thus from one very important way of experiencing God.

The experience of exile in rural communities may often come about through feeling cut off from decision making processes, through feeling cut off from one's past, or being cut off from one's sense of identity. Indeed the very process of change can leave individuals, communities and the rural church feeling exiled.

The following statement from an American source, offers us a reflection on changes that are common to rural communities and in particular to the communities such as those with which we are working.

Rural people are like the people of Judah who were torn from the security of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 B.C. Those things that gave life meaning and purpose are slipping away. The old ways that served previous generations no longer work for them....Rapid changes in values, technology and relationships confuse and baffle older residents. They are exiles living in an America very different from that of a few years ago.¹⁰

Not only are rural people experiencing confusion, but this confusion is also evident in the decisions made by the wider church. Available options and resulting decisions by the local and wider church frequently seem to reflect an idealized past that resembles some invisible, promised land.

...the biggest stumbling block for rural churches today is their use of the wrong biblical paradigm. "Exodus and the New Moses" has all too often become the model for ministry in declining churches.

There is a longing to find a new promised land - like the golden era in the past. This earlier era was the period of the church's highest membership, a time characterized by good feelings, a sense of success, and financial stability. Every time a new pastor is called the unspoken question is, "Is this our new Moses, the pastor who will lead us back to having full pews, a large Sunday School and lots of families?"¹¹

This Exodus paradigm is certainly appealing to the rural church because of the connection to the land. Walter Brueggemann declares that "land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith."¹² Brueggemann suggests that the land was one of the most vibrant symbols for the people of ancient Israel. The land was a place for the gathering of the hopes of the covenant people. The promised land was a place that called the people to remember that, 'you will be my people and I will be your God'. The promised land was not a place about success and prosperity in the usual sense, but about being God's witness in the world.

The rural church tends to be characterized by a high turnover of ministry personnel. This contributes to a continuing expectation that the "new Moses" will lead us back to the promised land.

One of the great tragedies of this model is the unrealistic expectations it places on each new pastor. Churches waste a tremendous amount of energy trying to relive old memories. The church must live in the present and discover the new things God is doing now. This means establishing a new identity. To accomplish this a church

must find a model that fits it today.
 One such paradigm might be called
 'Exile in an Alien Land.'¹³

The horror of the exile was that, among other things, it seemed to end the sense of Jewish identity as a visible, unique people of Yahweh. Their identity had been dependent on their temple cultic practices and religious unity focused on the temple.

Change can cause despair. However, our biblical record offers those in exile words of hope and comfort through the teachings and actions of the prophets. Comfort, comfort my people, says our God (Isa.40:1). Perhaps today's rural church can also look to the prophets for models of ministry.

A second model might be titled 'Singing a New Song.' When Jeremiah heard that Jerusalem had fallen he did a paradoxical thing: he purchased a field there as sign of hope..... The Babylonian Isaiah speaks for the Lord, saying: remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? (Isa. 43:18-19).¹⁴

Jeremiah 32:1-5 talks of Jeremiah's imprisonment because King Zedekiah saw Jeremiah's prophesies of the end of Judah as opposed to the national interests. While imprisoned, with Babylon on the point of final and overwhelming success against Judah, Jeremiah bought the field at Anathoth. He was buying the future, planting seeds for a harvest he might never see.

We need the comfort that Isaiah offered those from the Exile. We need the freedom that comes with naming our own place of worship where we are and not only the temple in Jerusalem. We need the challenge and expression of solidarity that comes with Jeremiah's purchase of a field. Jeremiah's actions offered a political statement that he believed there was a future and he was prepared to be an active part of it.

Perhaps the challenge faced by the rural church today is similar to that experienced by the people in exile and in Jeremiah's time. Change is happening. How do we enable the past to sustain our moving to a new place? How do we buy a piece of land today that becomes our expression of commitment to our future as the rural church? In his article "Singing a New Song in Rural Churches", David Henry suggests that "Being an exilic church requires flexibility, self-examination, and the willingness to change, grieve and go on. It starts with God's call to new identity....An exile paradigm is neither a growth model nor an excuse for not growing. It is a model of how to be God's church when significant change has occurred."¹⁵ Neither Isaiah nor Jeremiah promised that the future would be entirely pleasant. Similarly rural people today face many possibilities for the future which may include survival, maintenance, new directions, prosperity and shalom. In all of this we would suggest that a neglected expression of ministry is the need to publicly grieve through the naming of our realities in the sharing of stories. The prophets promised that there would be a future, that God would be with them. They did not tell people not to grieve, but advised them to push beyond the grief to new life.

We are mindful that the biblical exiles were sustained by the vision of the homecoming. The experience of the homecoming, however, was not as people had imagined. The homecoming led to repressive times and the people lost some of their sense of God in community. Learning from the Jewish experience of exile, perhaps the vision is not homecoming, or a perfected shalom nor even an utopia of having arrived. Perhaps the vision is singing the Lord's song to ears unprepared for the hearing and faithfulness to a vision of justice and peace that may never be realized. Maybe the journey is home. The challenge for ministry today is to encourage those who may be in exile to sustain and to live the vision informed by the past and living for the future.

Rather than offering another paradigm, we believe that it is the season to listen and to understand why rural congregations continue, what has sustained the congregations and the people and what is required to remain grounded and justice-seeking in our time. In this understanding we are attempting to be in solidarity. By choosing to do a project on the rural church we are, like Jeremiah, buying a piece of land. Our project is offered as an expression of hope and commitment to the continued life of the rural church.

We recognize that theology cannot be prescribed. Theology may be described as it has happened and as it continues to happen. This is an essential part of sharing our stories from generation to generation. Theology can be found in the questions and relationships of people

with God, with one another and with creation. Seeking and living out the questions enables us to continue to be prophetic and transformative.

In its beginning and at its best, theology is grounded in context and therefore our rural context is our starting point.

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- ¹³ Henry, David A. "Singing a New Song in Rural Churches". The Christian Ministry, Christian Century Foundation, Chicago, Sept/Oct, 1990, p.22.
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- ¹⁵ *ibid*, p.23.

Chapter Four

Context

Theology is the human expression of what God's meaning is in our lives. Ministry is the living out of our theology in action. Both theology and ministry are grounded in context and therefore context is our starting point. Being faithful involves discerning how to live our faith within context(s).

The particular geographical context we consider in this paper is northwestern Alberta, and northeastern British Columbia. This area, commonly referred to as Peace River Country, is open prairie grassland and parkland. The landscape tends to be focused on the river. The agricultural possibilities are limited by temperature, especially the number of frost free days. There is a marked difference in growing conditions in the river valley and in the higher prairie. Beaver, Cree and Sekani peoples first lived in this region. They practiced extensive gardening along with a nomadic existence that included hunting and gathering. Later this involved following trap lines as the indigenous peoples became more dependent on trading with the newcomers. Grain farming and ranching are options for today. The oil and gas industry provide much employment and economic activity. This form of activity reminds us of the similarities of dependencies and exploitation of the fur trading days. Once

again the residents of this land find themselves making a living removing the resources from the land, and are still dependent on outsiders for an economic return.

Location of settlements and towns initially was largely determined by rivers and ultimately by the railroad. Villages existing prior to the coming of the railroad often found it necessary to move close to the line of rail because decisions regarding railroad location were made in eastern Canada and seldom took into account the needs and realities of local people and conditions. The builders of the railroad valued expansion and profits rather than considering what the settlements might see as important. Settlement began in the early part of this century but was especially active in the 1920's and 1930's as new farm land was required.

The church presence in this area has come in a variety of ways. The native people first met early Roman Catholic priests who accompanied the traders attached to the Hudson Bay and Northwest Companies. The Anglican and Presbyterian churches followed soon after. Today there are many Christian denominations represented through the region. Some small towns with a population of less than one thousand people have as many as five or six churches. Most communities have at least a mainline Protestant church, a fundamentalist church and a Roman Catholic church presence.

As the area began to attract farm people, many farmers came to the Peace River area from dried out areas in the southern prairies. These people were from a variety of European

ethnic backgrounds. A large number of farm people arrived from the Ukraine, some directly and some via the drier prairies.

The Peace River country was described by developers and government agents as a land of milk and honey, lush green fields, bumper crops of grain and great opportunities for everyone. Indeed it was described as a 'promised land'. The Edmonton Capital on February 8 1912, ran an article in support of railroads for the Peace country. "In gushing support, the paper went on to describe the Peace River Country as the greatest agricultural country on the globe".¹

This experience of settling on new land is fresh in the memories of these people and they recount their memories through the stories shared in the community. A visit to local museums offers opportunities to visit with people eager to share their stories of homesteading. The old expression "next year country", still describes the expectation of better times to come and also refers to the reality that life has been and continues to be hard.

In our context, farming and connection to the land is a vital part of every community. Alex Sim says, "Land is the total natural environment in which a settlement grows and from which it draws its life: nourishment, space, materials, a place to play, and a place to live."² Congregational members would claim an agricultural connection regardless of economic involvement. Agriculture is a part of the identity of these communities. Joyce Sasse claims, "Agricultural people know vulnerability as a part of daily life. The weather,

among many other things, can determine the survival or collapse of an agricultural community." ³ This reality is also a part of the life experience of a rural church.

We also recognize that although rural is often equated with farming, other economic factors are also a part of the rural scene. Along with the oil and gas industry, logging is an intrinsic part of the picture. The oil and gas and forestry industries offer some financial stability at the same time as they remind people of the vulnerability of agriculture as a means to earn a living and as a way of life.

Because of changes in agriculture, the days of a farm family on each quarter of arable land are gone. The rural population has declined in the last two generations. As with each generation there are those who choose to leave for study and work. For many the need to leave is because of lack of opportunities at home. Off farm employment influences the choice of young people to stay in the area. Opportunities to work in the oil and gas and logging industries allow young people to remain in the region. These opportunities create a dilemma as they hinder young people from pursuing post secondary education.

Congregations often find that decisions are made about them from outside the community. This is true of grain prices, oil and gas prices, church systems, education and health care. Such decisions are frequently made by people without adequate knowledge of the local context or an awareness that there are unique needs, opportunities and characteristics in the Peace River country. "Urban society's attempt to coerce the rural

church into theological relevance again attacks the rural community's religious self-definition. Extreme examples of this include attempts to close economically unviable rural congregations, the issuing of policies and directives from "above," and an emphasis on urban issues and concerns."⁴

Rural communities are often trapped by standards based on the number of people and the level of available income so that the viability of the community is determined solely by financial factors. Economists can analyze communities and presuppose their economic potential for survival. While we recognize that church closure can be an appropriate and a necessary choice for some communities and congregations, we are concerned that decision-makers should also consider a community's vitality. Vitality, Alex Sim suggests, depends on such things as the history and tradition of the people in the community, the quality of local leadership, the degree of cohesion, and the community's system of values. Sim stresses strongly the role of values, beliefs and convictions. The communities that have survived, that remain both viable and vital, have recognized their own values, and have been willing to act on them, even at some risk.⁵

Many of the people in the Peace River area left Eastern Europe without the blessing of the church. Like most exodus experiences the journey was hard and filled with circumstances for which the travelers were unprepared. Yet most people perceived their life in the Peace Country as better than what was left behind. "Congregations have been places

of refuge and identity for those from distant lands who spoke different languages, making possible the first steps of the immigrant into a new nation."⁶

As the population grew, the Roman Catholic church sent Sisters to provide medical care. Opportunities to celebrate Mass were limited for many years. Anglican Sunday School Caravan girls also offered resources for leadership, as did Presbyterian deaconesses. These women traveled the country providing assistance for Sunday Schools, house churches, and pastoral care.

Miss Grigor, a deaconess in the Presbyterian tradition, offers insights about the district in her report to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. Commenting on ministry in 1933 in the Wanham, Bad Heart, West Vale and Prestville areas of Peace River country, Miss Grigor says

Many families would come with their children, but the distance is too great and some have no means of conveyance; here then is our opportunity for personal work in the home and how those isolated families do appreciate a visit, Bible stories, Sunday School papers given to the children and a few words of encouragement and prayer with them. One wishes it were possible to get around oftener but it is slow traveling by sleigh.⁷

She concludes her report with a strong desire for the building of a 'proper' church. She goes on to say that, "Our great need here is a little church and for that we are definitely praying. Services are held in the Community Hall and it is impossible to teach children or even adults

reverence for God and His (sic) house when they know the hall is used for dances and other things." ⁸ Little churches of many denominations were indeed built in most towns and community areas of the Peace River region.

Characteristic of Peace River communities (and similar to most rural communities) has been the important role of the church presence in establishing and maintaining community. "Congregations have been a special part of the social glue.... They have been a center of community life. They have been an anchor, a place of stability, holding up a transcendent vision of the meaning of life as a new nation struggled to understand and build a society."⁹

As members of Northern Lights Presbytery, we are now increasingly concerned about how we can continue to be the church envisioned by people like Miss Grigor and the people she served in this region. At this point in time communities are experiencing depopulation, a volatile economy and survival threatening government cutbacks. Pastoral relationships in this Presbytery tend to be three years or less. When they are longer, they often end in conflict. The majority of these pastoral relationships are established through the placement of ministry personnel through the United Church Transfer and Settlement Committee. Many of these ministry personnel seem to be equipped for a limited functional style of ministry, lacking necessary skills and flexibility. As paid, accountable ministers and the pastoral charges they serve begin to grow apart, tensions increase and church life

becomes very frustrating for all concerned. Each new pastoral relationship tends to bring with it a new 'right way'.

Over the years the repetitive cycle of tensions and frustrations contribute to low self esteem for pastoral charges. Congregations with declining resources still see a full-time minister as the measure and standard of success. We believe rural ministry in this northern context is entitled to greater understanding and support than is readily available right now. We hope for increased appreciation of the capacity that congregations and communities of the Peace have to survive with grace. We observe the effect of a resource-based economy, of alienation from what are perceived as centres of power, of decreasing population, of increasing mechanization of agriculture, of growing divergence between church leaders and general membership, and of swiftly changing patterns of social, political and economic networks.

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- ⁸ Tansem, Wallace. "A Messenger From God", article undated, p.2., Wanham, Alberta.
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Chapter Five

Interviews and Findings

It is in the sharing of stories and experiences that common themes may be discerned, out of which comes our analysis of the life of the United Church of Canada in Peace River country. Our goal in this research is to learn with the participants about their perceptions, rather than simply to gather information. Our goal is to engage in the hermeneutical process of interpretation, to understand what their experience means to them.

We chose to do qualitative research which is experientially-based and provides rich data with extensive detail. This type of research focuses on developing descriptive depth. Qualitative research is concerned with knowing by being with people in their own context, and interacting with one another in a common language. "Qualitative research is grounded in the everyday lives of people and looks for explanations of social or cultural events based upon the perspectives and experiences of the people."¹ Qualitative research enables us to gather our lived experience, to explore it, and present it to others with integrity.

Qualitative research involves ongoing conversation with those involved in the process and is a very appropriate research technique by which to consider the rural church. In small communities people know one another well and qualitative research lends itself to continuing

interactions. Qualitative research provides "an opportunity for different members of the community to reflect on their experiences, to grasp better what they believe and how those beliefs impact their every day lives"². The interviews provide a means by which reflection on experience can be voiced. We want to know both what people experience and how they understand or interpret their experience.

It seems appropriate that those initiating the research are active participants in one such rural community. Asasi-Diaz believes that it is highly appropriate that the interviewers be an integral part of the community with which they are working.³ Everyone involved shares a common context, common language, and in our case a common commitment to the rural church.

Facilitating and engaging interview groups requires process skills. From a diaconal style of ministry, we have experience required for qualitative research. We are committed to enabling and encouraging all members of a group to find their voices and to share their stories.

The need for conversations about rural ministry and the rural church was reflected in the enthusiasm and commitment people showed when they were invited to be a part of the focus group or of an interview group. Northern Lights Presbytery executive also offered its support to this research. For some people there was anxiety about the experience, and about how they could contribute. In spite of the anxiety, there was a high level of energy and eagerness for the work at hand. The opportunity to participate in learning based on the principles of adult

education, valuing integrity, commitment and a spirit of mutual learning was greeted with enthusiasm.

We gathered a focus group of women and men, lay people and ordered ministry people, (diaconal and ordained), from our Presbytery. These seven people and ourselves represented a wide range of experience of the rural church. Together we clarified the motivation for the research, the focus of the research and the plan of action.

The focus group met several times to work through the planned process and the questions to be included in the research. We spent considerable time struggling with the many aspects of the question: What sustains, nurtures and enlivens rural congregational life and ministry? There was opportunity for the focus group to share our perspectives and experiences. After each meeting the focus group reflected on our responses in light of our experiences and the thesis question. We recognized that we each brought our own interests and biases to this work and it was in the naming that assumptions were clarified and our biases were acknowledged.

As a focus group we designed the questions that would direct our conversations with the interview groups. In fact, the focus group tested the questions as one of the ways of refining the process. The members of the focus group did not belong to any of the interview groups or congregations that the interview groups represented.

After interviews had been completed, the focus group gathered and examined the interviews for common themes. Looking at the transcribed interviews as a group we reflected on the themes that we discerned together. As a theme emerged the focus group checked the theme with our own experience and knowledge. As themes were discerned, we each reflected on our own relevant bias and experience.

The next step in the process was to work on the analysis and conclusions. In this way the focus group was an ongoing integral part of the research and offered critique, support, insight and challenge.

Our research considered five rural congregations from Northern Lights Presbytery. These congregations represent a geographical distance of approximately three hundred kilometres from north to south. Regular worship attendance in these five congregations ranges from twelve people in one congregation to seventy people in another congregation. The average age varies among these congregations. One congregation consists mainly of retired people while another has a large representation of young families. Other congregations reveal a wide mix of ages.

Interviews were held in these five congregations, with members of their respective church boards. The interview groups ranged in size from three persons to six persons. Church boards were contacted and interview times were established. The research with the interview groups centred on the questions determined by the focus group.

Participants of the five interview groups agreed to have the interviews taped. All of the interviews followed a similar pattern. As each group gathered, we began with an introduction to the thesis topic. This included a discussion about what qualitative research is. We then worked with the questions the focus group had determined as a guide for conversations with the interview group. As a means to engage in conversation, the following questions were used as a framework for the interviews.

Sustains

- why is your church important in your community?
- what is it that keeps your congregation going?

Nurtures

- how do you meet your spiritual needs as a congregation?
- what strengthens and encourages your congregation to respond and to live with changes? (either chosen or imposed)

Enlivens

- what is important in the life of your congregation?

-where is the excitement in your congregation?

Our focus for the interviews was gathering stories relating to these basic questions. Subsidiary questions helped people in the telling of their stories and were not prescriptive in 'getting answers'. Our questions elicited thoughtful responses and generated much discussion.

Following the completion of the five interviews we transcribed the tapes. We then began the process of identifying common themes. We will discuss these themes by addressing them in terms of the question that focused the interviews: What sustains, nurtures and enlivens rural congregational life and ministry?

All interviews generated lively discussion in which people shared personal histories and thus shared church history. There was a strong expression of accountability to the past as well as to the present and future. We heard about the role of mothers and grandmothers in establishing a church and about our responsibility as the following generations, to maintain the church, not only for the sake of our community but also for the sake of the foremothers. "We have a respect for the old people that started the church and we need to keep it going to honour them".⁴ "People who came before us started the church and we should keep it going, we are supposed to be here."⁵

Along with honouring the people of the past, who built and served the church communities, there are strong memories of the role of the church in lives and in the

communities in the past. "The church was the centre of life, the centre of everything, all of our activities took place at the church,"⁶ claimed one respondent. Sunday morning worship was a focal point of the week. "On Sunday we were to dress in our Sunday best. Nothing else happened on Sunday. Your housework was all done on Saturday so that Sunday was truly a day of rest."⁷ People shared that in the past "Sunday didn't end when worship did ... worship continued in family gatherings, visiting and playing."⁸ This practice of Sunday continues today for some families.

It was apparent that the family offers a strong image of how people experience the church and relate to others within the church. The ties and roots of families who homesteaded go deep. Part of the commitment of both family and church is to teach children about the faith. "Church is a means of setting down memories".⁹ The ties and roots of families involve a recognition that within family there is often conflict. In the midst of the conflict, there is commitment to working together. "We are here now and we have to go on."¹⁰ "If you want to come to church it shouldn't matter if somebody is mad at you."¹¹

In our interviews it was apparent that not only is the church important in people's personal lives, but it is also an important part of the life of the community. "The church is an important symbol for those who do not attend regularly. The church is there when life's circumstances drive them to it."¹² "The church is part of the presence of community."¹³ Implicit then is the sense that those who attend, provide this service to the community.

Church members reflected on their sense of responsibility to the local community.

"Knowing that people feel welcome is part of what keeps us going."¹⁴ "Our church offers more than a service group. At church there is fun and laughter, fellowship, controversy and yet Christ is the centre."¹⁵

The co-researchers in this study recognized the spiritual needs of the church community of faith as well as the needs of the local community. Church people commented on the significance of the format of worship, the need for a message, the joy of music and the mystery that is present in all of public worship. They expressed the need for others to come and join in worship and fellowship. "I think people are looking for something, but often the church is the last place they look for it. Our community knows we are here to fall back on in crisis time. People come to the church when the need hits them."¹⁶

Congregational members are strongly committed to being a presence in the community and yet this commitment raised questions. "It would be interesting to know what people would think if we told them tomorrow the church is going to close. What would their reaction be? Would they do something about it?"¹⁷ "Is the church important to others besides ourselves?"¹⁸

In all of the interviews the co-researchers noted that being faithful and present in communities does not seem to be dependent on size. "You know you are needed, especially when the church is small in numbers. There is an empty spot when you are missing."¹⁹ "We

are small enough that we certainly can't be complacent."²⁰ "In a small community you wear four hats: U.C.W., on the board ... to me this kind of involvement makes a vast difference from churches where there is more than one person per task."²¹ "It irks me when people get so wound up in statistics. It is just like all houses have four walls - four walls can make a prison or a very happy home. It is how you choose to live."²²

We were reminded that "Jesus' Great Commission to go forth and spread the faith never included the condition that there be at least one hundred and fifty people."²³ In the midst of celebrating the small church, each interview group also raised concerns about how stressful it is to feel overworked.

Nurturing often seems to happen both spiritually and physically at the same time. We heard that "the building up of the Spirit often happens around food, because lunch is an extension of the worship experience; lunch is a time to respond, to act."²⁴ One congregation which recently had to change the time of worship to an earlier hour was quite happy to declare that a shared lunch would always happen regardless of the time of worship, even if worship was very early in the morning.

Another member shared a story about the man who was not always able to be at worship because of work commitments. However, this man always tried to arrive in time for coffee so he could check-in with the 'family'.

The mutual support that church attendees experience from one another keeps people going. "Experiencing the support of community includes generating ideas, caring when others are down, and being there."²⁵ Co-researchers also spoke of encouragement for the church from the community at large. "Support from the outside community is here for suppers and fundraising."²⁶

People felt a sense of excitement about a strong sense of belonging, opportunities to learn and opportunities to share and to care. "When you are learning you feel good about yourself".²⁷ One co-researcher wondered, "Is our care and concern out of nosiness, or is it that we know each other so well?"²⁸ During the interviews, many expressed an appreciation for music. "Lots of music can give you a lift."²⁹

At some point in the last ten years all of the congregations that were a part of these interviews noted times when they were without ongoing paid accountable ministry. While this caused some struggle and much anxiety, it was acknowledged that this was also a time of growth. "Doing worship is a growing experience."³⁰ "Conducting our own worship services came out of necessity when we had no paid accountable minister. Some people developed gifts they never knew they had. Out of this came strength and independence".³¹ "We don't even think about doing our own services, we just do it. Nobody gets excited and says, 'Oh I thought there was a minister coming today'".³²

This chapter presents a flavour of the five interviews. People were engaged as they reflected on their experiences and beliefs about their faith and the rural church.

¹ Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. En La Lucha: In The Struggle
Elaborating a Mujerista Theology. Fortress Press, 1990, p.66.

² *ibid*, p.66.

³ *ibid*, p.66.

⁴ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

⁵ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

⁶ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

⁷ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

⁸ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

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¹⁰ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

¹¹ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

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¹⁹ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

²⁰ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

²¹ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

²² Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

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²⁴ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.

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- 25 Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.
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Chapter 6

Analysis

As discussed earlier, our questions for the interviews were framed in terms of what is sustaining, what is nurturing and what is enlivening in rural congregational life and ministry. That which is sustaining, nurturing and enlivening was expressed by the way people feel. In the midst of tough times and good times, the conviction to endure and to thrive continues to be evident. "Even when you're really down something happens to lift your spirits and you keep on going." ¹

During the interviews, we kept the topic areas fluid and responses flowed easily. It is apparent that responses to questions about sustaining, nurturing and enlivening have implications for choices and actions in all three areas and these are often interrelated. Music, for example, is found to be a part of congregational life that not only sustains people, music also enlivens as it nurtures the spirit. Common links such as these were interwoven throughout the interviews.

From the framework of our interviews, we identified some common themes. There were many possible themes, but we have chosen to address five in particular. These areas

include church as presence, spiritual needs, the stress of multiple responsibilities, leadership and self esteem.

The theme of church presence is expressed in differing ways. One expression of church presence is witnessing and service to the community at large. This witnessing and service is an essential element of the rural church. There is an underlying sense that people feel special because they care and respond to one another's needs. As well, people feel special because they know they are needed. The experience of being needed and involved in things that matter is valued by rural church people.

It is evident that people have made a commitment to their church for themselves as well as for the community at large. The church presence in the community is not a question but it is a fact. "The capacity of the church to survive, in spite of agonizing crises and changes in form and format, attests to an unquenchable human longing for spiritual experiences, for an understanding of the meaning of life itself and for ways of coping with the mysteries of evil, pain, creation and death."² This is an expression of commitment, obligation and accountability to both faith and community. "Our church is a presence and outreach in the community and to the community."³ One is held to account before God, within the church and within the community at large. "Intellectual assent to a belief system is not a primary determinant of faith, although it is important. The real determinant in rural churches is feeling rather than ideas."⁴

There is accountability to the past, the present and the future. There is a strong need to survive; the church "is supposed to be here."⁵ The church is 'supposed to be here', because our ancestors established the church and we need to and are expected to maintain the church in our day. The church is 'supposed to be here', because the community counts on us being here. The church is 'supposed to be here' for our children and grandchildren.

This commitment and expectation was implied and inherent in the interviews and yet not fully articulated. "We'd never think the church was without purpose. We're always striving for something else."⁶ Underneath there is a sense of unacknowledged commitment to both faith and the community. Faith is expressed in actions beyond words.

...small churches are not used to making goal statements, or articulating their purpose and mission. They are not used to following the detailed steps of a planning process. They tend to be more intuitive and brief in their discussions. However, Dudley affirms that though the people may not have clearly stated purposes or goals, they do have strong commitments. Generally, they want to spread the gospel, preserve community standards, bind families together, exercise a ministry to the community and be of service to God. ...They appear to be goal-less and drifting, and yet they are determined to survive, too stubborn to change, and quick to respond to a person in need. They may not have goals, but they surely have deep commitments to their church.⁷

This sense of church mission, another expression of church presence, certainly holds true in light of our interviews. Faith and the mission of the rural church tends to be written in the hearts of people. The mission of the church is seldom found on paper and appears so obvious that there seems to be little need to verbalize one's concept or practice of mission.

A third expression of the importance of church presence in a rural community is seen in providing support and encouragement and a sense of belonging for people. This nurturing varies from being at worship, to the importance of lunch and coffee and other activities. The church is a primary contact and resource in the community. For many church is a part of the personal, social and cultural fabric of the community. The church is present from birth through death. Often people claim a church connection that is not immediately visible.

A newcomer would have good reason to be surprised, for the person proclaiming proudly 'this is our church' never came, never gave and very seldom shared in the life of the congregation. It was only at special community-wide events that the church sponsored or special worship services, such as Christmas, Harvest Thanksgiving, or Remembrance Sunday, that they were seen. But it was very much 'their church' for them...even though they were not on the parish rolls. For they remembered when the church needed a new roof and they helped out, or when Grandpa Albert died and the church rallied around. It was their church. ⁸

The church both as a presence and a symbol offers a sense of stability in life. This stability is reflected both in the lives of the congregational members and for the community at large. The church in the community is not just another building. It is also an institution that symbolizes the promise of continuing life in that community. There is an understanding that, "this is a community on which I can count when the going gets rough."⁹ This represents an understanding and experience of church that includes belonging, interdependence, financial support for community crisis, and a willingness to listen and be there.

A second theme area centred on spiritual needs. Nurture for the spirit was named as happening in music, worship, and social functions. In the rural context, gathering to meet God, usually means gathering to meet neighbours. The presence of God is experienced in and through family and friends. This sense of community spirit reminds us of early Christian communities as seen in the Acts of the Apostles. Spiritual needs are nurtured when worship and work are seen and frequently experienced as one. Nurturing enables people to claim and to use their gifts with the community and beyond.

Spiritual growth and engagement take place in the context of community and togetherness with one another. "This strong desire to worship with one's community no matter what the quality of its worship minimizes the desire to shop around for better liturgy elsewhere."¹⁰ The significance of being in one's community for worship is very strong and central to the ethos of a rural church. This is a crucial point. The practice of community includes geographical, faith and family communities all in one. For rural people their

experience of faith community and community are the same and therefore people will stay in their local church even in hard times. This is a necessary expression of meeting their spiritual needs.

Some people have observed that if rural people can drive long distances for shopping and other services then they should also be willing to drive for worship services. This perspective fails to recognize the need to worship in the place of spiritual grounding. Co-researchers declared, "My church is my lifeline."¹¹ The church provides "a strong sense of belonging that is part of your identity."¹²

Part of what contributes to spiritual nurture in rural churches grows out of close relationships. Indeed the rural church is often a family church both because members tend to be related and also because of familial relationships with one another. In one of our interviews it was observed that "... just because someone is mad at you is no reason not to come to church ... after all we are all like family."¹³

Participation, an intimate knowledge of one another's lives, a sense of warmth and belonging, offer the rural church a strength of spiritual community. "The rural community sees religion as essentially communal and interdependent. Religion and religious functions do not depend on a hierarchy of experts. Decisions are made by consensus; action is not taken if a minority will be hurt by the results of a decision."¹⁴ This spiritual nurturing in community is lived in many ways. "We are a church that enjoys music. Lots of times music can give you a

lift that you can't always get from listening."¹⁵ Nurturing is expressed in music, worship, community suppers, visiting seniors, coffee time, projects, cleaning the church as well as in the everyday encounters in kitchens, stores and fields.

There is a strong link between what goes on in the church on Sunday and daily life in and around the church. The rootedness and interconnections found in a rural church both sustain the rural church and are sustained by the rural church.

A third aspect of nurturing happens with individuals, within the congregation and within the community at large. People find nurture in worship, music, Bible study, working with others on church and community projects and in the sharing of food. A strong sense of community nurtures church and people. This nurturing results in energy and excitement. Nurturing seems to be the key that offers the ability to sustain congregational life in an enlivened way. Nurture involves learning, growing, sharing, seeking and participating in God's shalom as we live and work as a community of faith.

It is evident from the interviews that the rural church offers ongoing opportunities for leadership by the people. These opportunities frequently enable people to be involved in things that matter. We recognize that opportunities for leadership result in feelings of being valued and important. However, when a congregation is small, there is a fine line between these positive feelings and feelings of being resentful and overworked. To maintain a strong sense of community, it is important that both positive and negative feelings be expressed. Sometimes a

rural congregation is so busy avoiding conflict that everyone is 'nice', avoiding speaking of either enjoyment or resentment in relation to providing leadership.

On the other side of the coin of nurturing was the feeling of being overworked or stretched beyond endurance. Sometimes out of this tension between being wanted and needed and the feeling of being overworked and resentful, come decisions to modify board structures and activities. These modifications often suit the context and energies of the people rather than perhaps meeting the standards set by the institutional church.

The need to modify board structures is one way of coping with the stress of limited human resources. However, such changes often result in feelings of inadequacy or failure. People in the rural church may begin to feel or are made to feel that somehow their church and their abilities to be the church are not up to the standards prescribed from outside the context.

When we say that we need to bring people on board...we are making a rather presumptuous claim: that we have all the knowledge and right understanding on our side, that we are in control of the ship and are throwing lifelines to those whose leaky old vessels are breaking up in the water. This attitude, which we've given up long ago with regard to people in other countries and disadvantaged groups in our own country, is still very much felt in the backwaters of the church's home port.¹⁶

Another way of coping with the stress of multiple responsibilities may be simply limiting the activities of a church. For example, some congregations who are overwhelmed by the need to raise sufficient funds to sustain a full-time paid accountable minister, choose instead to support part-time paid accountable personnel. Even though responsible decisions are made, again rural churches frequently feel not quite up to standard. These feelings of inadequacy come with the knowledge that a full-time pastoral relationship is considered the norm. These feelings of inadequacy also stem from the reality that the institutional church seems to have difficulty understanding and acknowledging the legitimacy of part-time ministry personnel who may be working in more than one part-time pastoral charge.

As the country has become increasingly urban, we have altered the structure, and methods of our institutions, including the church, to fit an urban way of life. Although the majority of United Church congregations still are in rural areas, our ways of doing, saying and even thinking have become increasingly inappropriate and almost irrelevant for rural charges.¹⁷

Fourthly leadership issues were also evident in all of the congregations interviewed when they experienced extended times with no paid accountable ministry. Out of necessity, people have learned that they can lead worship and that this may be a source of excitement. The excitement comes from insights gained from preparing worship and from the increased knowledge and experience drawn from actually doing this work. People felt both able and needed. "When without a paid accountable minister, we had to draw on our own strengths,

and dig deep within ourselves in order to share with others." ¹⁸ Another participant in an interview declared, "The thing I find exciting about our church is that we are small enough that we certainly can't be complacent." ¹⁹

On the other hand, the writers' perception is that while there is the excitement of finding and offering leadership skills and gifts, there is also the tension that somehow 'we are not good enough to have a paid accountable minister'. This self-view hurts the self-esteem of a rural congregation. There are similar implications when a rural congregation receives ministry personnel through the settlement process. Frequently, the person assigned to a rural congregation does not choose to be there. Consequently these churches have experienced a high turnover of ministry personnel. Low self-esteem then becomes a part of the persona of a rural congregation. This was articulated during the interviews when we heard, "change in ministry personnel brings on anxiety and emptiness." ²⁰ In the midst of such experience people also articulated tension in, "Knowing that you are losing a minister does not mean that the years together were bad." ²¹

In the interviews issues and concerns regarding changes in pastoral relationships were expressed. "Constant change in pastoral relationships causes withdrawal." ²² "People feel like they have been burned bad." ²³ "We are not going to open up too many times." ²⁴ This points to the reality that rural communities in this northern context have particular challenges for those in paid accountable ministry. Ministry personnel need to recognize that they begin a pastoral relationship in a situation where congregational members may be cautious and

anxious from the beginning about how long their pastoral relationship will last. Frequent changes in pastoral relationships and periods without ministry personnel also create a strong sense of self-reliance. "We don't want a minister who does everything."²⁵ It is important to be aware of the tension in congregations of wanting a pastoral relationship to last and the need to feel self-reliant.

We believe that issues related to congregational self-esteem and ministry personnel reflect a common experience for rural communities. We recognize that self-esteem also emanates from other aspects of context. This includes a sense of tradition, history, faithfulness and accomplishments. We would maintain that this northern context accentuates these experiences. Geographical isolation creates a physical and a psychological barrier. For example, requests for emergency services are routed through Vancouver or Edmonton. Help usually does arrive, but meanwhile the caller is required to share their story with someone who has little understanding or interest in the caller's context. Such experiences leave northern residents feeling discounted, frustrated and not respected. These feelings are also a part of the environment in which rural churches and rural ministry happen.

In this research project we wanted to know what sustains, nurtures and enlivens rural congregations and ministry. From our research and reading, we recognize that sustaining rural congregational life and ministry may happen without nurturing and enlivening. However, sustaining in and of itself is maintenance and is seldom life-giving for the congregation or the community at large. Nurturing seems to be the key that offers the ability to sustain rural

congregational life in an enlivened way. From our analysis one of the challenges facing rural congregations is how to experience and practice nurture when one feels tenuous or has a tenuous self-image.

In our conclusion we will consider implications of this analysis as it pertains to ongoing congregational ministry in the rural context.

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Chapter Seven

Conclusions

We began our thesis with a nostalgic quote about a little church; however, if we could be part of such a church in the wildwood would we really want to go? Do we claim this church in the wildwood as our home today? Perhaps this same question was in the minds of the Hebrew people during their time in exile. In the biblical story the return to Jerusalem for those who had been in exile was not what they expected. Longing for a return to Jerusalem was a part of their being and yet when the opportunity came, it was not an easy decision, nor was it a comfortable journey. Like the exiles who were faced with the long trek back to Jerusalem, is the little church in the wildwood what the rural church of today really wants? In our conclusions we reflect on how we as the rural church live with our ideals, and yet live in the present and with a vision for the future.

All of the congregations interviewed are part of an ongoing experience of sustaining, nurturing and enlivening, both within the church structure and within daily living in the rural community. No one of these elements appears to exist on its own; rather all three are interconnected and interdependent. However, as we identified in the previous chapter, in the minds of those we interviewed, nurturing seems to be a key ingredient for enabling sustaining and enlivening to happen.

The presence of the church through its building and its people in the rural community remains as a visible center of spiritual living. The presence of the church is an expression of the faith and commitment of the members, of their vitality and energy. The church symbolizes the spiritual dimension of our living. The presence of the church is also a source of comfort, compassion and encouragement. This is a core of strength that the presence of church offers to a rural community. We recognize that, ... "congregations represent more than the aggregate faith of assembled individuals. Congregations carry a corporate character that is developed in response to their experience in ministry."¹ This corporate character is also shaped by life and events of the larger community and the involvement of the rural congregation in the life and times of their community.

Even though people in rural areas live with much self-reliance and often in isolation from one another, there is a recognition of the need for community. Community represents that which offers "fellowship, comradeship and companionship."² Another comment reflecting the need for church community was, "You can always have fellowship with God but I need to do this in the church."³ Church community offers the means by which people are able to live in faith with vitality and mission.

From our research we recognize that the presence of church as BEING is the essence of rural congregational life and ministry. BEING represents the animation of life and soul.

BEING is the presence of God. We would conclude that the rural church as BEING is the expression of mission of the rural church.

Rural congregations are inherently aware of the seasons of life for creation, for themselves and for their church. This experience and sense of rhythm offers a comfort that comes out of predictability and the expectation that comes with living in 'next year country'. This is not a denial of reality rather it is a dynamic expression of expectation and faith. Tom Driver states: "Hope is always against. The best we can say of hope is that it is 'hope against hope'. Expectation leans into the movement it is with. Expectation is what Jesus called faith."⁴ With this ethos of expectation, there is a rootedness and a strength that goes deep and which sustains rural congregational life and ministry. Change is a reality of both small community life and church life. The experience of living with and through change whether seasonal or sudden provides a depth that gives life meaning, as well as the stamina to remain faithful.

For those living in the rural setting, even as they experience the changes happening around them, there is the expectation in the midst of all of the change that the church will continue to be strong. This expectation of church is based on the experience of being a sustaining, nurturing and enlivening church and the memories of such a church in their past. For people who continue to be a part of the rural church, incarnating the question of how to live and thrive in the present needs to be continually addressed.

We believe that a critical issue in what sustains, nurtures and enlivens rural congregations and ministry is a leadership style that would be nurturing, and valuing of the ministry of all people. From our interviews we heard a call for leadership that involves mutual caring and respect. "We need a minister that is committed to supporting, encouraging and participating with us. We don't need someone who will just take over."⁵ It is this kind of "being with" nurturing that is so crucial to the life of the rural congregation and community. This style of leadership reflects a diaconal approach to ministry.

Together people challenge and support one another to find ways to identify and express their ministry both within the local congregation, community and the world. Recognizing and appreciating the concept and practice of mission that is BEING is an important part of any leadership offered by those in paid accountable ministry with the rural church.

Leadership which provides challenge and support, involves walking with one another, accompanying one another through difficult times, learning with one another and sharing the power and responsibilities of leadership. A mutual relationship is where power is shared as we empower one another. This involves a willingness to risk vulnerability and open ourselves to minister "with", rather than "to". As was expressed in the interviews there is strong desire for this style of leadership.

As we indicated in chapter six, through necessity, people have experienced their own gifts of leadership and have a strong commitment to continuing. A mutual style of leadership

for designated leaders and congregations serves as a catalyst for the involvement of all the people of the faith community and often the involvement of people in the larger community as well.

From our research conversations, we heard expressions of congregational low self-esteem, of people feeling that they wanted their relationship with ministry personnel to be characterized by dignity and respect. They wanted to be able to tell their stories and in so doing share who they are and claim their concept and practice of mission locally and globally.

Part of the task for ministry personnel is to work with the rural congregation as they seek to discern and claim their identity as a rural congregation and to feel proud of their identity as a rural congregation. This also calls for leadership that is open to appreciating and understanding the rural northern context. The practice of rural ministry requires a commitment to being with people, appreciating their history and community. The mutual style of ministry that we referred to earlier and that our interviews pointed to, could also be described as a friendship model. A ministry style that is rooted in the friendship model is grounded in our understanding of God's choosing to befriend us and be God-with-us.

We would conclude that a style of leadership that is characterized by mutual respect, caring and dignity, often calls for a lengthy pastoral relationship. It takes time to build relationships. Trusting, nurturing, caring, being involved, being challenged, all of which are

important for self-esteem, take time. Out of this relationship grows a sense of mutuality and friendship, of being involved in something of importance together.

We claim that nurturing of a pastoral relationship is a mutual affair. We recognize that there may be creative tension in nurturing. The nurturance needs of a rural congregation and the nurturance needs of ministry personnel may be quite different. However, it is in the recognizing, respecting and caring with one another that an atmosphere is created where differing needs are discerned and addressed. A mutual ministry based in friendship creates an openness to new revelations of God in our midst.

Calling for a mutual style of leadership has implications for both ministry personnel, rural congregations and the institutional church. The institutional church seems to recognize some of the challenges implicit in the values, education, and experience of the rural context. In spite of this recognition, ministry personnel often find themselves struggling with these challenges.

...The rural minister has to listen as residents of the rural community define themselves and must not only respect but value that self-definition. The rural minister has to be on the watch to see where God's eschaton, God's hope, is breaking forth in the rural community."⁶

This quote reflects the challenges faced by many ministry personnel who find themselves involved with ministry in a rural pastoral charge. The rural church will continue to need

ministry personnel who receive training that values and supports the rural church and people. We believe that in education for church leadership the values of mutual learning, working together and experience are all important components. However, an essential component of readiness for ministry in the rural context is the openness to be always on the watch to see where God's hope is breaking forth.

The possibility of longer-term pastoral relationships also offers implications for rural pastoral charges. Allowing a pastoral relationship sufficient time to flourish presents some challenges to a rural congregation. A common experience of the rural congregations in our study was short-term pastoral relationships. Brief pastoral relationships raise issues of abandonment and rejection. Not only does this experience contribute to feelings of low self-esteem, it also means that many rural congregations may not know how to be a part of a longer-term pastoral relationship.

When pastoral relationships are short-term, congregational members miss the experience of giving and receiving nurture through the changing seasons of congregational life, personal life and the life of a pastoral relationship. A short-term pastoral relationship seldom moves beyond 'getting to know you'. Currently, the experience of pastoral relationships in the Peace River area tends to be about three years. Consequently, soon after year two, congregations begin, albeit unconsciously, to say good-bye. A necessary part of leadership in rural congregations is fostering the discernment of the many seasons of a pastoral relationship. The strong sense of BEING the church and of groundedness in the

community can be expanded if there is the security of a longer-term pastoral relationship. This security does not come from the arrival of 'the perfect minister'. This security comes with the ministry personnel who choose to work in rural communities and who reflect a commitment to being in ministry together for the long haul.

Rural ministry is indeed filled with excitement, challenge, holiness and energy. These significant times find expression in many ways. A longer-term pastoral relationship offers extended opportunities to participate in the evolving changes of congregational and family life. Such opportunities may be found in surviving a hard year economically, in celebrating births and grieving deaths, or in responding to the needs of refugee families or other outreach concerns. Much of the expression of holiness and energy comes from the breadth and depth of shared experience. Vulnerability and trust take time, energy and commitment and generally are the fruits of a longer relationship.

There are opportunities in a longer-term pastoral relationship for the church to be a stronger presence in the community and the world beyond. A longer-term pastoral relationship has the potential of not only being a stronger presence but also offers the security and energy for visioning. There is the possibility for the ministry of a church to move beyond maintenance of itself to being a stronger presence in the community and world beyond.

The possibility of longer-term pastoral relationships has implications for both congregations and for the institutional church. For example, if pastoral relationships are

longer-term, then ministry personnel will be in the higher salary categories. This puts stress on pastoral charges that may be struggling with a salary for the initial category. We would claim that it is unjust that many larger churches can afford to pay above minimum salary and therefore attract ministry personnel with experience. Congregations receiving Mission Support and rural congregations that are struggling to survive cannot pay above minimum. The rural church is then caught in a dilemma of wanting experienced ministry personnel who choose to be in rural ministry and yet not being able to afford such personnel. It is not enough for the institutional church to talk about interest and support of rural ministry if we're not prepared to put money and experienced personnel resources there.

This may also have implications for how we settle ministry personnel. Most of the congregations in our research had relied on settlement as a source of ministry personnel. While in many cases the pastoral relationship worked out, there was always the anxiety that it would end sooner than later. When congregations begin to say good-bye, because they expect the relationship to end soon, this signals to the inexperienced ministry personnel that they are not satisfactory or that their need to leave is being confirmed, when in fact this may not be the case.

The settlement process has served the rural church well. In the past when many of the new ministers had rural backgrounds, the settlement experience served to 'fine tune' their ministry skills as many people returned to the rural context. Today when few new ministers have rural backgrounds, there is a cultural gap that has to be considered along with the 'fine

tuning' of ministry skills. It is critical that this gap be addressed as part of the education for preparation for ministry. Particular preparation for, and recognition of rural ministry is a new necessary emphasis for those who wish to serve in the rural context. Settlement committees need to be encouraged to continue to seek new ways to respond to the ministry gifts and needs of the rural church as well as respecting the gifts and needs of new ministry personnel.

As rural congregations continue to seek creative ways to be the church in their communities, ministry personnel and the institutional church are challenged to be flexible in seeking ways to support and to work with these congregations. As resources are made less available our traditional value of providing one minister for each pastoral charge may require rethinking. With such a change comes the need for our structures and administration to identify and respect the particularities and specific needs of each situation. For example, our present definition of part-time ministry and the structures of pension and group insurance have difficulty accommodating a vision where ministry personnel may be called to two or more part-time pastoral relationships.

The present structures also do not have adequate categories for 'tent-making' ministries where leadership is provided by people whose primary income is obtained in other kinds of work. There seems to be an unevenness about the application of regulations around what is designated as ministry. Unevenness usually is an indicator of changes which may eventually make the present regulations irrelevant. In these changing times, the institutional church is called to be flexible about responding to the needs of the rural church and personnel willing to

serve with the rural church. This calls for creativity and courage as the rural church continues to discern its needs and resources.

We suggest that a diaconal style of ministry is well suited to ministry with the rural church. A main focus of diaconal ministry is empowerment through service. Throughout Christian history servant leadership has enabled the church to live the call of the gospel. This willingness to serve and mutual empowerment is explored as people work together building relationships that are life-giving to the whole community and all of creation. The rural church calls for ministry personnel who are willing to participate, to support and to serve with rural people.

From the Book of Jeremiah we hear the prophet offer us two comments that we believe speak to the needs of rural congregational life and ministry. In addressing the Israelites in exile, Jeremiah advises them to "build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce. ... seek the welfare of the city where you have been sent." (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Jeremiah's advice offers wisdom to both ministry personnel and the members of rural congregations. We are all called towards a ministry of mutuality with God, with one another and all of creation.

The vision and the hope expressed by the church in the wildwood is to be discerned and lived within the realities of the present. Our challenge as the rural church of today is to enable

ourselves to develop a new commitment to ministry that is grounded in the present. As a community of faith we are called to seek God's options for us today and in the future.

What is God's call in this new day and new time? The rural church in the wildwood and the rural church of today know what it is to live with limited resources. As forces in our society attempt to offer a redistribution of resources, the rural church may be able to offer to the rest of the church a model of how to live by faithfulness rather than by success. The rural church offers to the rest of society a vision that declares that financial measures are not the bottom line that determines viability and vitality. Faithfulness is expressed in meeting the needs of people and community.

The opportunity to be involved in this research has offered us further insights into rural churches and ministry. In the process of the literature review, we were disturbed to find few printed resources that celebrated the rural church and rural ministry. Being involved in this research has shown us the gifts of resilience and nurture that characterize the rural church. In the literature review, a common focus for some authors was how to make a small church grow in numbers. Our research interviews indicate that faithfulness is not dependent on size but rather commitment and action. Although all of the congregations we interviewed are struggling financially, we were surprised that none of them identified money as a necessary part of what sustains, nurtures and enlivens them as congregations.

Out of this research comes our conviction that an exciting and needed project is further work in exploring alternative models of grouping pastoral charges and sharing of paid accountable ministry persons. The institutional church has an opportunity to find creative ways to support churches and people where they are. As people and resources become more limited, closing churches is not the only answer. This creative support required from the institutional church would enable rural churches to continue to be a presence and active ministry in their local communities and beyond. Of course, the implications of such a study would have benefits for the whole church.

A further area for additional study would address the issue of how we as the church view ministry. Presently it seems that we describe some persons by the functions they perform and some persons by the formation and training they have received and we tend to ignore the ministry of the people of the congregations. How do we value the ministries of congregations, and those persons in paid accountable positions? How do we consistently describe the various ministries we undertake?

Our thesis project has been a time of listening and of affirming a shared vision of the gifts and challenges of the rural church. The value of knowing, taking seriously and respecting our stories and experiences of the rural church in Peace River Country, continues to strengthen relationships as we offer mutual support and caring with one another. It is a privilege to share in life and ministry with the rural church in the Peace. The experience of ministry is indeed a privilege because in the living and working together we find affirmation of

who we are and who we feel called to be. This experience of ministry offers continual opportunities to serve and be served.

This research has enhanced our commitment and love of rural ministry and reminds us of Jeremiah's commitment to the people of Israel. Jeremiah bought a piece of land as an expression of hope and vision. We offer this thesis and our work as an expression of our commitment, enjoyment, hope and vision for the continuing sustaining, nurturing and enlivening of rural congregational life and ministry.

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- ¹ Dudley, Carl S. and Johnson, Sally A. Energizing The Congregation: Images that Shape Your Church's Ministry. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1993, p. 1.
 - ² Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.
 - ³ Thesis Interview, Spring 1995.
 - ⁴ Driver, Tom F. Christ In A Changing World. Crossroad, New York, 1981, p. 115
 - ⁵ Thesis Interview. Spring 1995
 - ⁶ Hollingsworth, Richard, "Under Attack", Rural Ministry Issue, PMC, May 1988, p.16

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