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Connections: Church in Community

Shirl Christian¹

Core Questions

Do the inhabitants of these small, relatively rural and remote communities perceive that the churches add value to their communities? Does their presence bring life to the communities that would be missed if they were to disappear? Further to that, if it can be established that they are, indeed, perceived to add value, what are some of the contributions of the churches to the life of the community? What are the connections along which this life flows?

Abstract

A small community, especially one situated at some distance from larger centers, has a distinct life-story of its own. It consists of the families and individuals who inhabit it, the businesses that feed its economic well-being, the professions that care for it, and the churches that nurture its spiritual life. Its lifeblood is the network of past and present relationships that hold and transmit the stories; these stories are the lives that pass through the community, and the ones that stay. In fact, one could see each community as a living, dynamic story enacting its own narrative within the larger context of the region, the nation, and the world. Like any good story, the community narrative is complex, with many interactions, relationships, and sub-stories that move forward. However, unlike the typical story, the community story is not (nor should it be) ever finalized. Even when communities disappear from the ever-changing geographical and political map, their stories live on in the individuals and families whose historical and present lives help to shape the future reality of a new community. The core questions were explored by analyzing the roles played by the churches, not only in spiritual life but also in the social life and justice-making within the community. In addition, I examined the role of the churches as story-holders and place-anchors for the families both present and former.

Introduction

As the three-quarter-time rector of two small parishes in the Diocese of Niagara, and one in the Diocese of Huron, I am deeply invested in the life and ministry of small rural communities and their parishes. Except for time spent in university and seminary, I have always lived in small rural communities or on a farm. Travelling to an urban centre, even a small city, necessitated at least a two and one-half hour drive. I loved the relationships, and

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the sense of connection, that are characteristic of these communities. Neighbors and friends gather at community events, and multi-generational family roots go deep into the soil. However, through the years I have witnessed the decline of some of these communities, and with it, the disappearance of small churches. Even in towns where population was steady or increasing, churches suffered from declining attendance and diminishing energy, with corresponding financial challenges that in many cases jeopardized their ministry and their very presence. As a congregational member, then a lay reader, and finally an ordained priest, I wanted to explore ways of helping these congregations to be sustainable. The new STM program at the Saskatoon Theological Union seemed a good fit, and it came along shortly after I graduated with my MDiv—in other words, at exactly the right time for me.

I enrolled in 2008 in the first cohort of the Rural Ministry and Community Development program under the direction of the Rev. Dr. Cam Harder. When the program was first conceived, it was to be at the STM level, but when it morphed into a DMin program, we were offered the opportunity to elect the doctoral stream, and I made the switch.

Life has a way of sidetracking our plans, and I moved several times during the ten years it took to complete the DMin. Since a major component of the program is an in-community project carried out with the involvement of a research team, every time I moved to a new community I had to start over. The last move, to my current location in Ontario, was the most challenging because I had no ready-made inroads into the community and had to establish parish and community relationships before I could build a team. Encouragement from colleagues and former professors provided the final push I needed to resume and finish my program in my Mount Forest and area, Ontario, community context.

Project Goals and Design

- a) To offer to the community of Mount Forest and surrounding communities (including the churches within them) an appreciative portrayal of the assets resident in the communities, the contributions of the churches, and the networks of identified relationships.
- b) To build capacity in the research team, especially in the areas of research and data collection. Another important outcome was relationship-building among team members as well as between team members and their respective communities.
- c) To offer the completed project to the Dioceses of Niagara and Huron in an attempt to strengthen their awareness of the perceived contributions of these small parishes to their respective communities.

Underlying the above goals was a desire to highlight the contributions to community life and to show how these contributions of the local churches, often working together, are tightly interwoven with the fabric of the community, where people work together, play together, serve together, and worship together. While we did not wish to imply that community “togetherness” is absent in larger urban centers, we recognized that in our study at least, the smaller size of the community was a facilitating factor.

Small, rural, relatively remote parishes face numerous challenges: aging members, decreased energy for fundraising, dwindling attendance, distance to the next parish of the same denomination, coupled with ever increasing expenses for buildings, insurance,

assessment payments to the diocese, and more. The next (post-project) stage, which has already begun, is an ongoing conversation about how the ministry of these small parishes to their communities might be preserved, especially in the face of parish closures in the surrounding area. I have shared the project with the Right Rev. Susan Bell, current Bishop of Niagara, and will be sharing it with the newly elected Bishop of Huron, the Rev. Dr. Todd Townshend, once he assumes his office.

Theological Foundation

My project was grounded in the theology of story and the theology of place. While they may be considered separately, in my project the two are inextricably woven together, and each influences the other. Community is more than a dot on a map; story is more than a series of events, and place is more than location. Each of these implies meaning that is wrapped up in memories of the past, experiences of the present, and hopes for the future. Each embodies not only external events, but also emotional and spiritual meaning. We considered personal, individual stories, as set within larger stories of families, close relationships, parishes, community, and beyond, and these are set into the ongoing human story culminating in the overarching story of God's interaction with creation throughout the ages. Furthermore, every story is set in a "somewhere" – a locus – and that place itself becomes part of the story, just as a setting is part of a narrative. As "place" is a part of our human story, so our evolving story has an impact on place. Certain questions related to "place" were examined by this project. What is the meaning of place in relation to personal, community, and biblical story? What does it mean to "belong" to a place? What does "home" mean? Is "place" an important factor in the consideration of faith story, and if so, how?

Research and Methodology

A project located in community must take into account the unique aspects of that community. We analyzed the communities in this project in terms of their population (including age groups), language, and cultural identity. The population of the three towns is linguistically and culturally fairly homogeneous when compared with Canadian statistics: predominantly English, third-generation or more Canadian, and non-Aboriginal. The surrounding rural areas are home to a significant number of Mennonite families. These range from Old Order Mennonites who eschew conveniences such as electricity and motor vehicles, to "driving Mennonites" who use cars, trucks, and motorized farm machinery, to modern Mennonites who live a relatively modern lifestyle and who may or may not be distinguishable by a certain style of dress. The more traditional Mennonites usually have their own country schools. It is not uncommon to see horse-drawn buggies on the roads and secondary highways. Their presence is reflected in the towns by hitching rails and sheds in parking lots of larger businesses, and even the occasional road closed to motor vehicles and dedicated to horse and buggy traffic.

The primary community studied was Mount Forest, population 4,643, with input from Arthur (2,333) and Palmerston (2,624).² These small communities derive their livelihood from agriculture, small-to-medium sized industry, and support services and professions. They are located more or less in the center of the "circle" of southern Ontario

² All population data is from the Statistics Canada Census of 2016. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/index-eng.cfm>.

defined by Lake Huron to the west, Georgian Bay to the north, and Lakes Ontario and Erie to the southeast. The nearest large centers are Guelph, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Orangeville (each about an hour's drive from Mount Forest), and the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Areas (about two hours). Because of the distance, there is little growth pressure from workers who commute to these larger cities. An important consideration of the project was the closure of numerous Anglican parishes in the surrounding area. These parishes were no longer available as options for places of worship. Furthermore, we also noted in at least one case a "domino effect." Where several in a group of parishes decided to close, the rest were then unable to continue solo or with limited partnerships. Such was the case of St. Paul's Palmerston in the Diocese of Huron when the other five churches in their group closed. From that, a new cross-diocesan community of parishes was born, informally referred to as the "Tri-parishes." They function in a symbiotic relationship: Palmerston contributes financially to the other two, and in turn receives sacramental ministry twice a month and pastoral support. The three join in a combined service whenever there is a fifth Sunday in the month. The Tri-parishes arrangement is one locally-made solution to the problem of dwindling resources, serving to strengthen the ministry of the three churches: working together rather than closing. An ongoing focus of the conversations arising from this project will be the successful cross-diocesan nature of the arrangement.

The five members of the research team (four parishioners from St. Paul's Mount Forest and one from St. Paul's Palmerston and myself) discussed approaches to the topic of story and place and the connections between church and community. We planned and developed surveys and interview questions to elicit information and stories pertaining to the core question: Do the inhabitants of these small, relatively rural and remote communities perceive that the churches add value to their communities? Does their presence bring life to the communities that would be missed if they were to disappear? Further to that, if it can be established that they are, indeed, perceived to add value, what are some of the contributions of the churches to the life of the community? What are the connections along which this life flows?

We pursued this question with members of the community, congregations, and some specific people who are well positioned in their professional life to offer their insight. After hearing stories and analyzing the surveys and interviews, we concluded that the churches in the small rural communities are an integral part of the well-being of their communities, and are perceived as such by the survey participants. We also considered aspects of community – people in a defined geographical area, having shared attitudes or interests, and, in an ecological context, interdependent plants or animals living in a specified natural habitat. My project attempted to take all three levels of the definition into account.

I read numerous works on the subject of story and place, particularly those with a theological basis. Some of these were offered in whole or in part to the research team to read and discuss, and those discussions contributed some direction or focus to our work. Together, we developed two surveys: one quick two-page fill-in-the-blank, rank order of importance, or select from given options; the other a longer-answer format asking for personal stories. The longer-answer surveys were conducted along with interviews by team members. We discovered that the detailed research protocol and consent form required by the program was a deterrent to potential participants, and some refused simply on the basis of the consent form. In retrospect, perhaps we might have attempted to negotiate a more streamlined consent protocol, but we were already into the interview process. The quick,

anonymous, short-answer surveys were distributed among parishioners as well as to other churches and members of the public at large. From the longer-answer surveys and interviews, we were able to isolate words that spoke of emotions associated with the importance of place, and noted their frequency. We also explored the question with participants: What would you do and how would you feel if all the churches, or the church with which you identify, disappeared? The responses included words such as sad, lost, empty, devastated, lonely, anxious, chaos, bereft, fear, and others.

Conversely, stories of what church means to a participant elicited comments about peace, comfort, love, care, gather, welcome, and home. A significant and common thread running through the stories was relationship: the connections with other people in shared worship and service. Suggestions by the participants emphasized that churches work together more and be more visible or present at major community events such as fall fairs. Stories are important in relationship-building, and it is beneficial to hear each other's stories and to situate those stories in a larger context. The overarching goal of this project is to strengthen community not only by sharing, but also by hearing and exploring the stories and connections that constitute it. Cameron Harder's work on community, *Discovering the Other*, has been informative. In the book he says, "Building community means making time to hear each other's stories."³ Harder speaks of God's love for community and of God's Trinitarian nature as community. Our very being is created and formed in community.

An analysis of the 2016 Statistics Canada census information revealed that all three communities have a significantly higher proportion of seniors and widowed/singles than the general Canadian population (especially Mount Forest). This led us to consider a topic that became much more significant as our research continued: the importance of social capital, especially as it pertains to the work of the churches in the small community. Churches offer many events to the community such as breakfasts, teas, lunches, and suppers. On the surface, these are fundraising efforts, with the goal of contributing much-needed finances to support the church. However, their contribution to the community goes much deeper than sustaining the parish presence. Even a casual observer would notice the mixing and mingling of people of various ages, communities, churches, and workplaces as they move from table to table during and after the meal to chat with friends and neighbors and catch up with each other's lives. Eating together in community is, according to research, a significant contributor to mental and physical well-being. A study of the role of serotonin revealed that loneliness, including eating alone, depresses the "feel-good" effects of serotonin and has a negative impact on health. The many meals and events hosted in turn by the various churches do much to alleviate that problem of loneliness.

Hjalmarson writes "Bridging social capital is increasingly necessary as we seek to discover a new imagination for God's people in this new social location," and "Collaboration between diverse groups will be necessary for us to recover a thriving common life that is rooted in place."⁴ While no single church is able to provide all the opportunities for social engagement, the many such events in all community churches taken together promote wellness by providing a major social resource for the entire community.

³ Cameron Harder, *Discovering the Other: Asset-based Approaches for Building Community Together*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 3.

⁴ Leonard Hjalmarson, *No Home Like Place: A Christian Theology of Place* (Portland: Urban Loft, 2014), 165-66.

Stories gleaned from the participants highlighted the role of churches in spiritual care, especially around times of bereavement. The funeral luncheon was mentioned as a time for families and friends to gather, often in a place where their own faith-formation was nurtured, and to share memories and stories. Many of these funerals take place in the church, and the luncheon is often provided by the parishioners who may have connections with the deceased and the family.

Other groups and individuals were targeted for more specific interviews tailored to their profession or involvement. Members of the Mount Forest Ministerial were asked about their perceptions of church contributions to community life. An ongoing effort to coordinate community resources for emergencies such as storms, fires, accidents, and power outages was proposed by the mayor of Wellington North with participation by the Ministerial members. The local coordinator of Cancer Patient Services noted the importance of the churches working together to provide support and spiritual care. A specific example is a bereavement support group which was initiated in a collaborative effort between the coordinator and several members of the Ministerial. Other members of various denominations have been involved in bringing a refugee family from Ethiopia to the community, and supporting them financially and helping them navigate Canadian society, even beyond the required one-year sponsorship period.

Capacity-building was an important outcome of the project, and one of the ways in which the churches contributed to building strengths included hosting a postulant for ordination for a three-month period. The parishes of Mount Forest, Arthur, and Palmerston were specifically chosen to provide rural ministry experience. Education for Ministry (a four-year program for laypersons), enables participants to develop their own faith and theological stance, as well as to discern their role in the ministry of the baptized. The research team gained experience in creating and analyzing surveys, planning research, and conducting interviews. In some cases, they were able to step out of their own comfort zones to approach people. The ongoing discussion and negotiation enhanced their own appreciation of the church and community connections. They deepened their relationships with one another, and developed a keener awareness of the life of other churches, not just “my church.” The give-and-take, particularly around the survey and interview questions, allowed for honing of negotiating skills. As the work of the team progressed, they experienced a greater freedom to share their own ideas with confidence while listening to others’ ideas. This is a transferrable skill that will enhance their involvement in and contributions to any organization, not just in the church.

The final, formal work was to share the finished project and its findings with the community and beyond. At the local level, a room in the Mount Forest Library was rented, the event was advertised through posters around town and church bulletins, and the project was shared with those who attended. Over refreshments, questions and discussion took place. Some (including the Mayor) requested, and received, the report so that they could read it in more detail.

The second level of sharing the project took place in a meeting with the Bishop of Niagara, the Rt. Rev. Susan Bell.⁵ A copy of the report was given to the diocesan library. Our discussion highlighted the unique contributions made by the small, rural, remote churches (i.e. at a distance of an hour or more from large urban centers), and how they add life to their

⁵ This discussion took place October 2019, at the Synod Office in Hamilton, ON.

communities. I expressed a strong hope that our meeting was only the beginning of such discussions, and that I would be more than willing to be a part of future discussions on the contributions and sustainability of these small churches. I hope, and will do what I can, to ensure that these conversations continue for the benefit of not only small rural churches in the Dioceses of Niagara and Huron, but also for the benefit of similar churches across Canada and perhaps beyond.

Summary of Learning and Conclusion

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Eccl 4:9-12)

The story and place of the church in the small rural community is inextricably integrated into the ongoing story of God's work in the world of time and space. The presence of each of the churches, and of the individuals in the churches, strengthens the community cord. If any strand disappears, the community loses a set of spiritual and social connections, and the cord is weakened.

"We need a way to connect with place so that we can engage in place-making, enter the stories and rich potential of the places we live, and receive the world as a gift."⁶ Story is rooted in place, and place is enriched with the stories that it has embraced. As reported by some of the interview participants, the church building is, for them, infused with faith stories and prayer. In the bible, many places are significant not simply for themselves, but for the events that have taken place there. It is implied that the location of Moses' encounter with the burning bush (Ex 3:2) became "holy ground" not because it was always holy, but because he met and heard from God there. The Psalmist asks, rhetorically, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" (Ps 139:7). The implied answer is "Nowhere." Yet every place is "holy ground" because it is God's creation and God is in all of creation; however, the "thinness" of place and experience described and discussed in the project report coheres with Biblical accounts of specific encounters with God, such as the burning bush or Jacob's dream at Bethel, which are then marked by name or action.

Between the initial project proposal and the actual carrying out of the project, some evolutionary changes took place. This was not a bad thing; a community and its stories are dynamic, and its inhabitants are living, relational beings. Mary Clark Moschella acknowledges this and even asserts that it will happen, saying, "ethnographic research tends to evolve and shift as you engage in it."⁷ The major shift that occurred in my project since the proposal was a shift in emphasis. Through the team meetings, the interviews, the stories, and the surveys, it became obvious that there is more to the larger community story here than a collection of individual stories in a certain place. The stories are held together in a network of relationships, and it is the connections and relationships that rose more clearly to the surface. After all, relationship is in the very nature of God, whether expressed in the Trinity

⁶ Hjalmarson, *No Home Like Place*, 113.

⁷ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: an Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 61.

or in God's love for the world and for each one of us. Hjalmarson describes it this way: "...creation involves a relationship in which the whole cosmos is at every point dependent on the self-giving God whose very nature is love, involving community and relatedness."⁸

Designing and carrying out a project such as this one is a learning experience, and there are some aspects of the research that I would have developed further, given the chance to do the work again. I would have sought to collect more stories from a greater variety of sources. I would have gathered more data and interview material from the wider community in order to balance out the responses from churched and non-churched participants. However, one benefit of the project's focus is that the team and I are now more attuned to community stories.

The work done for this Doctor of Ministry project has benefits for the communities studied. The research team has shown that the time spent working together not only built relationships within the team, but was informative in understanding their congregations and communities. Such insight will be helpful going forward in planning for the life of the parishes in the long term. Discussing and negotiating in order to develop survey and interview questions generated deep thinking and sharing among team members. The work of the team in listening to stories was a gift-offering to the storytellers. "Listening can be a means of grace, as it brings forth stories through which people make sense of their lives and become aware of the larger reality."⁹

I have gained a great deal of insight both professionally and personally into the communities of Mount Forest, Arthur (Wellington North) and Palmerston (Minto). I have learned about networks connecting services and ministries provided by the churches, such as outreach, organizational ability, gathering places, spiritual care, social capital and more, but also about the stories that they hold – stories that are valued by the parishioners and the community. The prospect of formalizing and strengthening networks through a communications hub is exciting. The relational work accomplished in this project as well as the heightened awareness of the vitality of the life-giving networks in the small rural community can only enrich my ongoing work among the parishes and communities of Mount Forest, Arthur, and Palmerston.

My project cannot take credit for the benefits to the community accruing from the connections between church and community. The Cancer Patient Services program, the Education for Ministry seminars, and the Mount Forest Refugee Support Group were all in existence before the project began. The value of the project as related to these organizations lies in the gathering and analysis of information about the organizations and the ties, strong or weak, that operate between them; secondly, in presenting to the community at the final event the strength and reach of the networks in operation. The final public event presented to the community a visual demonstration of those networks as we celebrated together the capacity and possibilities enabled when individuals find new connections and work together to enhance the life-story of Mount Forest and surrounding area.

Secondly, a significant, and hopefully lasting, outcome of this project will be the clear picture of small rural parishes it offers to the Anglican Dioceses of Niagara and Huron. The surveys, interviews, stories, and analysis of the involvement of organizations and groups show a vast, interconnected network of relationships in the community: relationships

⁸ Hjalmarson, *No Home Like Place*, 58.

⁹ Moschella, *Ethnography*, 144.

enabling much to be accomplished in the rural communities of Wellington North and Minto when churches and community work together. The story is not finished, and each time it is revisited, it is a new story within the unfolding story of God's work in people, in communities, and in the world.

We shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.¹⁰

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¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019).