Thriving Rural Communities Initiative Summative Evaluation Report

May 2014

Center for Assessment and Policy Development (CAPD)

for

THE DUKE ENDOWMENT

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Sally Leiderman
Stephanie Leiderman
May 2014

Chapter I: The Emerging TRCI Program

"*The most threatened and feeble congregations in my denomination are not like the small church [described previously in this book]. It's our middle-sized congregations and our large urban congregations that are in a slide. Small congregations have proved themselves to be doggedly resilient. They are the fastest growing segment, in sheer numbers of congregations, in all of United Methodism…When the denomination with all its creaking machinery has passed into oblivion, when bishops like me have faded into justly deserved obscurity, the good country folk …will still be there next Sunday, praising God, duking it out with one another after potluck suppers, passing faith on to their young, burying their dead, complaining about the District Superintendent, trying to put up with one another in the body of Christ, and will continue to be the face of mainline Christianity. "*

> —From an afterward by William H. Willimon to Jason Byassee's book, The Gifts of the Small Church, page 113

"*I don't have to put on my church face to be here; I bring my real and complete self*."

> —Member of a Thriving Rural Church

"*Of course we are open to change – just so long as you don't mess with my King James …*"

> —Member of one of the churches served by an appointed Rural Fellow

"*The Rural Fellows come with a plan*."

> —District Superintendent

Brief history and impetus

TRCI was formally created by a 2006 grant from The Duke Endowment's Rural Church program area to the Duke Divinity School. It grew out of conversations among leadership of TDE and DDS, and built on ongoing connections among four key institutions – TDE, DDS and the two North Carolina Conferences of the United Methodist Church – the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church (WNCCUMC) and the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church (NCCUMC). Initial funding was $3,790,000 over six years. Implementation began in a formal way in the 2006/7 academic year, with the selection of the initial Rural Fellows and other activities (described more fully below).[1]

Consistent with James B. Duke's indenture forming The Duke Endowment, and the goals and emphases of its Rural Church program area, TRCI was specifically created to contribute to the formation of effective leadership for rural United Methodist churches in North Carolina, in ways that will benefit the churches and the communities they serve. Or, to put TRCI's goals in spiritual terms, "*The Thriving Rural Communities Initiative works to foster thriving rural North Carolina communities by cultivating faithful rural Christian leadership and fruitful United Methodist congregations."*[2]

[1] Judicious use of funds allowed the initial grant to cover a longer period than originally anticipated. When funds were expended in 2013, TRCI was renewed for an additional five-year period ("TRCI 2.0") with grant of $3,850,000.
[2] See: http://divinity. duke.edu/initiatives-centers/thriving-rural-communities, accessed 10/16/2013.

As noted above, in supporting this goal, TDE is building on several long-standing partnerships and relationships. The partnership with United Methodist rural churches in North Carolina is codified in the 1924 Indenture of Trust that created The Duke Endowment.[3] The Rural Church Division of The Duke Endowment, one of its four major program areas, describes its relationship as follows:

> "*United Methodist Churches have deep roots across North Carolina and play pivotal roles within rural districts. In addition to being centers of weekly worship, baptisms, weddings and funerals, these churches are home to community events, food pantries and child care centers.*
>
> *By developing rural United Methodist churches and supporting their clergy and lay leaders, we aim to expand church outreach across North Carolina. We work collaboratively with the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conferences of the United Methodist Church and Duke Divinity School to help rural churches serve their neighbors"*[4]

The indenture also supported the transition of Trinity College into Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Duke and The Duke Endowment thus share a deep history of partnership and shared work and funding. The Duke Divinity School also has an important history and relationship with United Methodism. As L. Gregory Jones, Dean of the Duke Divinity School when TRCI began, noted in his annual report on the school when describing the value of strong connections with a number of denominations, "*Our ties to the United Methodist Church, from which we receive financial support and to which we have special responsibilities, are broadest and deepest…"*[5] TRCI was developed to take advantage of the opportunities of these existing relationships and to deepen and extend them, particularly in support of thriving rural churches, and especially via well equipped, formed and supported rural clergy.

Some of the precipitating rationale is highlighted in the quotes at the beginning of this introduction – ways of being that can make rural churches resilient and, at the same time, resistant to change. Another precipitating issue was the perceived value placed on these churches by themselves, other clergy, Conferences and the Duke Divinity School. Another was the vitality or lack of vitality of many rural churches – considering both traditional and non-traditional ways of understanding church vitality. A fourth was the extent to which rural churches were able to be important institutions for their communities, in practical as well as spiritual terms.

TRCI was also developed in a challenging context for rural Methodist churches, and mainline Protestant churches more generally. The partners were very aware of a general decline in Americans' affiliation with organized religion generally, and with mainline Protestant denominations in particular. They were also concerned about the ability of small churches to pay the costs (salary, insurance, etc.) for credentialed clergy with advanced degrees – a particular issue given the financial structure of the Methodist church, and an issue that got

[3] http://dukeendowment.org/sites/default/files/media/images/stories/downloads/tde/Duke-Indenture-MAR-16-2011.pdf, accessed 4/28/14

[4] http://dukeendowment. org/program-areas/rural-church, accessed 10/18/2013

[5] *The State of the Duke Divinity School*, Dean I. Gregory Jones Presents His Annual Report on the School, October 1, 2007

much more worrisome over time given the recession. In part as a result of those issues, TRCI's visioners were also aware that at least some potential and current clergy viewed rural charges more as career stepping stones than as deeply satisfying or vital places to serve.[6] They also were aware that some of the people helping to form clergy (congregations, Conferences and faculty) agree with or in some way reinforce those perceptions, deliberately or not.

Amidst these concerns, the partners also saw an opportunity. The opportunity is based on the idea that, while M. Div. students at Duke Divinity School are very theologically and academically trained, many are less trained to thrive in rural church settings, and to help rural churches and their communities to thrive. So, TRCI was developed with an eye to building leadership that could help address the value, vitality and contribution of rural United Methodist churches in North Carolina.

TRCI structure, strategies and components

To take advantage of these opportunities and address these concerns, TRCI has evolved to include the main program strategies or components below. Several of these were anticipated in TRCI's initial vision and proposal – most notably, identification and support of a cadre of DDS M.Div. students as "Rural Fellows", and identification and learning from a variety of models of thriving rural churches (TRCI Partner churches). Others were developed by the initiative's Director (2007-2013) in response to new opportunities and identified needs.

Structure

The TRCI Director and the TRCI office are housed at DDS. TRCI is organizationally part of Leadership Education at the school. The initiative was inaugurated with two experienced Duke Divinity School administrators serving as co-Directors. Both are ordained Elders in the United Methodist church, as is true for nearly all of the people at Duke Divinity School, The Duke Endowment and the Conferences most directly involved with developing and implementing TRCI. These Co-directors quickly began working with an advisory group that included high-level support from within the Divinity School, the rural Church Division of The Duke Endowment and both of the Conferences of the United Methodist Church in North Carolina. The evaluator was also selected and brought on board at this stage.

The Directorship of TRCI changed in 2007, to accommodate changing roles for the initial directors. One was promoted to a new position within the Duke Divinity School. The other was offered a different assignment by her Conference, as part of the regular appointment and itinerancy policies of the United Methodist Church.[7] At about the same time, the Duke Divinity School underwent an internal restructuring, which included having TRCI housed under the Academic Dean of the Divinity School. Duke Divinity School also used this opportunity to search

[6] The UMC's Glossary of terms defines a pastoral charge as "*One or more local churches organized under and subject to The Discipline, governed by a single charge Conference and to which a minister or a local pastor is appointed.*" Source: http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=258&GID=58&GMOD=VWD&GCAT=C, accessed 4/1/2014.

[7] "*United Methodism has a unique system of deploying clergy which dates back to John Wesley and which is different from any other denomination. The system by which pastors are appointed to their charges by the bishops is called itinerancy. The present form of itinerancy grew from the practice of Methodist pastors traveling widely throughout the church on circuits. Assigned to service by a bishop, clergy remain with one particular congregation for a limited length of time. All pastors are under obligation to serve where appointed.* " http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=16&mid=4810 (accessed 10/20/13)

for a full-time TRCI Director, who came on board as TRCI Director in 2007.[8] The new Director was an ordained Elder in the WNCCUMC and an alumnus of the Duke Divinity School. He was a Morehead Scholar while an undergraduate at UNC-Chapel Hill, and a Duke Scholar while at the Duke Divinity School. When he was appointed TRCI director, he was serving as pastor of Maggie Valley United Methodist Church in the western part of North Carolina. He was also raised on his family's farm in North Carolina; his father is currently North Carolina's elected Commissioner of Agriculture.

The new Director brought a combination of theological, academic and practical skills and experiences that were remarkably matched to the needs of TRCI at this stage in its implementation. He had what advisors spoke of as "*a genuine heart for the rural church*." He also brought preaching gifts, humility and a strong work ethic. The combination of those skills, experiences and gifts can be seen in an early sermon he preached to the Advisory Committee (the sermon, titled Nazareth, is included in Appendix A to this report). These gifts allowed the TRCI Director to model clear and affirming ways of connecting with rural congregations as well as with Rural Fellows and the TRCI partner churches. Benefits of that modeling come up frequently in interviews with Rural Fellows, as noted in the findings in the next chapter of this report.

The current management and staff of the Rural Church division of The Duke Endowment have also played an active role since TRCI began, serving as thought partners and a sounding board for the Director, in addition to their role as funders. For example, TRCI Directors, the initiative's supervisor at DDS (currently, the Associate Dean for United Methodist Initiatives and Ministerial Formation), the Director of TDE's Rural Church Division and a Program Officer of the Rural Church Division have met monthly by phone for the past seven years. The Program Officer and the Director of the Rural Church Division are also speakers or visible participants in other ways in many TRCI activities and events.

TRCI also draws on relationships with each of the Conferences for particular activities and events. For example, District Superintendents and/or Cabinet Members help identify TRCI partner churches. Most years, one or two District Superintendents have also helped interview and choose incoming Rural Fellows. In 2013, Bishop Goodpaster (WNCCUMC) and Bishop Ward (NCCUMC) both had prominent roles at the Annual Convocation on the Rural Church, an annual large-scale TRCI learning and retreat gathering for clergy of TDE-eligible churches.[9]

[8] He remained TRCI Director through June 2013, at which time he returned to serve a rural UMC church. The current TRCI Director began in the role in July 2013. The current Director is also an alumnus of Duke Divinity School. He joined the ministry after a career in business, and holds an M. B. A. He came to TRCI from the pastorship at Friendship United Methodist Church, one of the TRCI partner churches. Given the recent timing of his becoming Director, his contributions to the shape of TRCI and its implementation will be taken up in subsequent TRCI reports.

[9] The Duke Endowment "*determines eligibility using one of two approved definitions of 'rural.'"* Source: http://dukeendowment.org/faqs/rural-church-faqs, accessed 4/1/2014.

Emerging Theory of Change, Strategies and Components

Theory of Change[10] (*Figure 1, below*):

	Strategies	Direct and Indirect Intended Outcomes
Enhanced Capacity of Rural Clergy	❖ Special training for DDS MDiv students with a calling for and commitment to serving rural churches (Rural Fellows) ❖ Exposure to several models of thriving rural churches (TRCI partner churches) ❖ Peer (network) and program support for pastors placed with rural churches	Benefits to Rural Clergy: • Greater effectiveness of pastors working in rural settings • Increased number of pastors with calling and skills for rural ministry and who can be potential leaders among peers and effective advocates within stakeholder institutions
Thriving Rural Churches & Congregations	❖ TRCI activities and relationships infuse congregations with a sense of their gifts ❖ Conferences and DDS support and validate rural churches by promoting effective pathways to thriving and extolling successful examples	Benefits to Rural Churches: • More effective leadership • Rural congregations know and value their unique gifts • Measures of vitality increased • Models of thriving rural churches are known and valued by clergy, congregations and stakeholder institutions
Stronger Rural Communities	❖ Programs and activities that meet community needs are carried out by increasingly vital congregations	Benefits to Rural Communities: Churches contribute to: • Expanded child care • Increased social capital • Greater social well-being
Enlightened Stakeholder Institutions	❖ Encourage reflection and reassessment of policies and practices with regard to formation and ongoing support of rural clergy and lay leaders, and support to congregations, churches and communities	Benefits to Duke Divinity School: • A more clearly defined pedagogy for training in rural ministry Benefits to NC and WNC Conferences: • Rural congregations affirmed, resourced and supported Benefits to TDE: • More effective rural ministry and more effective, targeted grantmaking

TRCI's theory of change, summarized in Figure 1 above, was more implicit than explicit as the work began. Based on initial interviews with advisory group members and the TRCI co-Directors, the implicit theory of change asserted that rural United Methodist churches in North Carolina could better contribute to their communities, if:

- Clergy and lay leadership feel valued in their roles and efforts,

[10] A theory of change is a picture that identifies strategies, intended outcomes and how strategies are expected to lead to those intended outcomes (how change happens) in an initiative. Theories of change evolve through research, experience and learning. They also allow programs and evaluators to consider the extent to which the theory of change gets clearer and more complete over time – indicating that the choices of components are strategic and likely to contribute to the initiatives' goals if well implemented.

- Both are well trained for the opportunities and challenges they face in rural communities and rural congregations, and

- Together they exert effective leadership, which is expected to translate to impact in terms of mission, discipleship and growth.

In support of more effective leadership, the initial strategies focused primarily on identifying and supporting a cadre of students at Duke Divinity School with a calling for rural ministry. They would be chosen from candidates from the United Methodist Conferences in North Carolina, with the expectation and commitment to serve rural churches in those Conferences for five years post-graduation. These students would be designated as Rural Fellows. They would be exposed to several different models of thriving rural churches via field education and in other ways. This plan was implemented starting in the 2006/7 school year, with the initial identification of and support to the first cohort of six Rural Fellows.

Defining "thriving"

As noted above, the focus on leadership development was articulated, as was the expected investment in developing a cadre of effective leaders for rural United Methodist ministry in North Carolina from among Duke Divinity School students. The exact definition of "thriving" was not fully articulated at this early stage. This particularly has to do with how the denomination and its polity think about numbers, and is part of a larger debate in the denomination and in mainstream Protestantism and organized religion more generally. Can a very small church be considered thriving? Does a church have to be growing in numbers to be thriving? Does a thriving church inevitably grow? And what exactly does "thriving" look like in practice?

In addition, the initial, implicit theory of change did not fully articulate how to influence United Methodist rural churches in North Carolina at scale – that is, beyond the specific churches touched by the Rural Fellows once they were graduated and appointed. The theory of change also did not explicitly articulate a full set of strategies or expectations for how enhanced clergy leadership of rural churches might contribute to thriving rural communities. That is, at this earliest stage in the work, the implicit expectation was there around both of these issues – going to scale across rural churches and the variety of ways enhanced leadership might affect rural communities. Specific ways TRCI might contribute to those results were generally understood. At the same time, they were not articulated in a way that could help identify gaps to drive program evolution. The evaluator and TRCI Director worked together to create a clearer picture, and, over time, TDE also became engaged in this effort. Figure 1 offers a current version.

Strategies and Components

As noted in Figure 1, TRCI Theory of Change, TRCI contains the following major strategies or components:

- TRCI Rural Fellows

- TRCI Partner Churches

- Leadership and related supports to other TDE eligible clergy, and, to a more limited extent, lay leadership within TDE eligible churches

Some of the supports for TRCI Rural Fellows are also open to the wider DDS student body, particularly colloquium on topics relevant to formation of effective rural and small church clergy.

TRCI Rural Fellows

Rural Fellows receive a full tuition scholarship to Duke Divinity School to pursue a Masters of Divinity Degree. They are chosen based on qualifications and calling for rural ministry. A small number of the earliest Rural Fellows were identified from among matriculating students. Since that initial year, most, but not all, Rural Fellows have been identified as part of the application and selection process to DDS, and thus, are part of the program over their whole time at seminary. A few other Rural Fellows, post the initial group, are identified from matriculating students who excel academically and articulate a calling to rural places. Per the current Director, "*The Thriving Rural Communities Initiative Colloquia, Field Education experiences and conversations with Rural Fellows are significant in helping Staff identify promising candidates among matriculating students*."

Each Fellow signs a covenant agreeing to serve rural United Methodist churches in North Carolina for at least five years. They receive a variety of supports and have multiple additional expectations placed on them while students and once they are serving. The Rural Fellows also have a number of enrichment and learning opportunities available to them. For example, Rural Fellows have access to individualized mentoring from the TRCI Director and peer support while in school and after graduation through Fellows' retreats and in other ways. They have access to "Boot Camp," which offers practical advice to Fellows prior to their first appointment post-graduation. They also have access to supports through the relationship between TRCI and The Thriving Hispanic/Latino/a Communities Initiative (TH/LI).[11]

For example, Rural Fellows have access to *Encuentro*, a learning trip to Mexico or the United States/Mexican border, and *Caminantes*, a program to build Spanish language and culturally relevant worship skills. They may also participate in site visits to thriving Latino churches and/or farm worker camps.

As Table 1 indicates, as this report is being written, there are 46 people in the Rural Fellows network.[12] Of this total, 24 are currently students or student pastors at Duke Divinity School and

[11] The Thriving Hispanic/Latino Communities Initiative was created by a grant from The Duke Endowment to Duke Divinity School in December 2008. It operates through the Hispanic House of Studies at Duke Divinity School and through partial support of an academic position at the Divinity School. Its current Director, Ismael Ruiz Millan, is a graduated Rural Fellow (DDS class of 2010). The Hispanic House of Studies/Thriving Hispanic/Latino Communities Initiative and its Director work closely with TRCI in both formal and informal ways: through joint sponsorship and implementation of *Encuentro*, via the TH/L Director's guest preaching at churches served by Rural Fellows, and via his active participation in the Rural Fellows network of peer support and lesson sharing.

[12] That is, of the total 53 people who were ever named as Rural Fellows, 46 are part of the network as this report is written (22 alumni and 24 enrolled at Duke Divinity School). Six are no longer part of the network (4 withdrew from the program, 1 withdrew from Duke Divinity School; 1 was awarded a Rural Fellowship but elected not to matriculate at Duke Divinity School). In addition, one of the earliest Rural Fellows successfully completed and graduated. Her Bishop chose not to appoint her to a rural church, and she is not considered part of the Rural Fellows network at this

22 have been graduated (alumni). Of the 22 alumni, five were student pastors while at DDS, and the other 17 were full-time students. To date, 20 of the alumni were serving a charge that includes at least one TDE eligible United Methodist church in North Carolina.[13] Those charges include a total of 34 TDE eligible churches. One of the graduates is leading the Hispanic House of Studies; the other was appointed to a rural area but not a TDE eligible church.

Among the 24 current seminary students (scheduled to be graduated in 2014 through 2017), 16 are student pastors and the other eight are fulls time students. Eleven of the 16 student pastors are currently serving rural churches, per program records.

TABLE 1: Rural Fellows Counts, updated as of April 2014

CLASS	Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church				North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church				TOTAL
	ALUMNI				ALUMNI				
	Student Pastors	Students	Class subtotal		Student Pastors	Students	Class subtotal		Class total
2008						1	1		1
2009		1	1			1	1		2
2010		2	2		1	2	3		5
2011		2	2		1	1	2		4
2012	1	2	3		1	1	2		5
2013		2	2		1	2	3		5
Subtotal	1	9	10		4	8	12		22
	CURRENTLY ENROLLED AT DDS				CURRENTLY ENROLLED AT DDS				
2014	3		3		4	2	6		9
2015	3	2	5		2	2	4		9
2016		2	2		2		2		4
2017	1		1		1		1		2
Subtotal	7	4	11		9	4	13		24
TOTAL	**8**	**13**	**21**		**13**	**12**	**25**		**46**

time. About two-thirds of the program attrition occurred in the earliest cohorts, as the program was become clearer about how to identify Fellows likely to succeed.

[13] Those numbers have fluctuated a bit since this analysis was completed both because of a small number of reassignments and because of the new RUCA based list of TDE eligible churches based on the results of the 2010 Census. Given itinerancy, these numbers are going to continue to change over time, and will be updated in subsequent reports.

TRCI Rural Fellows – Complete List

TRCI Alumni (Graduated TRCI Fellows)		
Fellow	Conference	Year of Graduation
James Henderson	NCCUMC	2008
Leah Skaggs	NCCUMC	2009
Jodi Lampley	NCCUMC	2010
Jonathan Mills	NCCUMC	2010
Ismael Ruiz-Millán	NCCUMC	2010
Jane Almon	NCCUMC	2011
Jim Jones	NCCUMC	2011
Patrick Murphy	NCCUMC	2012
Dusty Sprouse	NCCUMC	2012
Howard James	NCCUMC	2013
Benny Oakes	NCCUMC	2013
Jason Villegas	NCCUMC	2013
Duncan Martin	WNCCUMC	2009
Nicole Jones	WNCCUMC	2010
Emily Kroeger	WNCCUMC	2010
Laura Beach	WNCCUMC	2011
Ken Spencer	WNCCUMC	2011
Kevin Miller	WNCCUMC	2012
Lucy Robbins	WNCCUMC	2012
Cliff Wall	WNCCUMC	2012
Brad Hinton	WNCCUMC	2013
Cindy Spicer	WNCCUMC	2013

Current TRCI Fellows (Students and Student Pastors) as of 2013/2014 School Year (updated as of April 2014)[14]		
Fellow	Conference	Year of Graduation
Regina Barrow	NCCUMC	2014
Adam Brinkley	NCCUMC	2014
Nate Hester	NCCUMC	2014
Debbie Matthis	NCCUMC	2014
Brock Meyer	NCCUMC	2014
Sara Beth Pannell	NCCUMC	2014

[14] As of October 2013, when survey and other data were collected for this report, there were 47 Rural Fellows that the program included in their network (22 alumni and 25 still in the program and students or student pastors). The list of Fellows was updated in April 2014. Two of the Fellows who completed the survey in October 2013 have since left the program and one Fellow has since joined the program. Thus, as of April 2014, there are 46 Rural Fellows including alumni and currently matriculating students. Data in Figure 1 have been adjusted to reflect these new counts. Findings based on the survey of Fellows in October 2013 reflect information from the 47 Fellows who were part of the network at that time.

Current TRCI Fellows (Students and Student Pastors) as of 2013/2014 School Year (updated as of April 2014)[14]		
Allison Delargy	NCCUMC	2015
Jason Dickerson	NCCUMC	2015
James Kim	NCCUMC	2015
Jabe Largen	NCCUMC	2015
Richard Booker	NCCUMC	2016
Gina Miller	NCCUMC	2016
David Joyner	NCCUMC	2017
Josh Britton	WNCCUMC	2014
Zack Christy	WNCCUMC	2014
Rebekah Shuford	WNCCUMC	2014
Kevin Bates	WNCCUMC	2015
Darrel Bowles	WNCCUMC	2015
Joshua Kurtz	WNCCUMC	2015
Allen Stanton	WNCCUMC	2015
Bryan Wilson	WNCCUMC	2015
Christopher Grimmett	WNCCUMC	2016
John Howard	WNCCUMC	2016
David Blankenberg	WNCCUMC	2017

TRCI Partner Churches

Eight rural United Methodist charges in North Carolina were asked to serve as TRCI partner churches over the phase covered by the initial TRCI grant: four from NCCUMC and four from WNCCUMC.[15]

- **Cedar Grove United Methodist Church, Cedar Grove NCCUMC**
- **Fairview United Methodist Church, Shoals WNCCUMC**
- **Friendship United Methodist Church, Newton WNCCUMC**
- **Hayesville First United Methodist Church, Hayesville WNCCUMC**
- **Sandy Plains United Methodist Church, Pembroke NCCUMC**
- **Solid Rock United Methodist Church, Olivia NCCUMC**
- **Tyro United Methodist Church, Lexington WNCCUMC**
- **Bladen Charge United Methodist Church (including Bethlehem, Live Oak, White Oak and Windsor United Methodist churches, Ammon) NCCUMC**

[15] The second phase of the initiative, TRCI 2.0, was launched in 2013 with a second group of eight rural North Carolina United Methodist charges. They include seven new charges and the Bladen charge, which had only been part of TRCI 1.0 since 2011. The experiences of the second group of TRCI churches will be described in future evaluation reports.

The TRCI churches were chosen to represent different models of thriving. They share their approaches and lessons with each other, and with the broader TRCI community, in retreats, at the annual Convocation on the Rural Church, and in other ways. Most also host Rural Fellows for field education. As intended, the TRCI clergy also develop and maintain mentoring relationships with Rural Fellows, and often stay connected with the Fellows once they are graduated and serving their own churches. TRCI churches also receive grants to support an aspect of their mission or similar work, in part to recognize the value of the work they do and, in particular, the value of their contributions to TRCI.

Additional experiences and components to broaden the reach of TRCI

When TRCI began, it was primarily focused on helping to form effective clergy leaders from among Duke Divinity School students via the Rural Fellows strategy. At the same time, there are more than 1,500 TDE eligible churches across the two Conferences. In addition, a substantial proportion of the churches are served by local pastors rather than ordained Elders. Given those numbers, TRCI was not likely to reach that broad group of congregations and communities directly or soon, an issue of scale. Thus, early on, it became clear to the partners that the reach of TRCI could be broader if activities were more fully infused within the Divinity School and via faculty and students (beyond the seven to eight Rural Fellows added to the program each school year), and/or to members of and clergy serving Duke Endowment eligible rural churches, beyond the 8 TRCI partner churches.

The program added several ways of reaching out more directly to more churches and pastors, through the Convocation on the Rural Church, Come and See Activities that connected TRCI partner churches with other UMC churches for learning and connection, the Nazareth Project in the Waynesville District (a nine month prayer, study, mission and coaching effort for five to seven smaller churches), and frequent guest preaching at different rural UMC churches. The TRCI Director is also invited to present each year at the Convocation and Pastors' School. Rural Fellows and TRCI partner church pastors are invited to attend as part of their connection with continuing education, per the program. Separate meetings are also held during that time for them. In the past, the TRCI Director has also taught at the Course of Study for local pastors.

The TRCI Director also added strategies and activities to embed TRCI more fully into stakeholder institutions. Some took hold; others did not. For example, Rural Fellows were required to attend monthly TRCI colloquia. TRCI Director made these available to the broader Divinity School community. He also invited Divinity School faculty to present. Many took advantage of these offers; the colloquia were well attended and considered useful by those who did participate. The program also worked with DDS faculty and the administration in 2008/2009 to create a Certificate in Rural Ministry. The proposal passed the Curriculum committee. It was not approved by the Faculty Council, which did not feel there was enough faculty participation to ensure that the school could offer enough courses each year to support the Certificate. In hindsight, some of those involved note that it might have been too early in the life of TRCI for a certificate proposal to be introduced. Its fate also suggested a need for additional faculty champions for TRCI, particularly since the TRCI Director is a staff rather than faculty appointment.

New connections and forms of communication were also established between TRCI and the two North Carolina Conferences. For example, District Superintendents were brought more fully into the process of identifying, recruiting and selecting Rural Fellows.[16] At a later point, the Director also began writing very detailed letters to the relevant Conference about each Rural Fellow's experiences while a student or student pastor. These letters became part of the packet of information available during the appointment process.

The first change (expanding the recruitment process) was specifically intended to increase the number of qualified Rural Fellow candidates. The second change (the letters) was specifically intended to increase the likelihood that graduated Rural Fellows who met eligibility requirements would be appointed to serve rural churches, per the TRCI Covenant. Both changes were also intended to increase awareness and understanding about TRCI at within the Conferences, fleshing out an important part of TRCI's theory of change.

[16] District superintendents (commonly referred to as DS's) are "*ordained ministers appointed by a bishop to oversee the pastors and local churches in a district…Primary responsibilities relate to overseeing the work of the local churches, including presiding at Charge Conferences, and supervising the work of the pastors, including participating with the bishop in the making of appointments*." http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=258&GID=76&GMOD=VWD (accessed 10/20/13). As this report is being written, the WNCCUMC has re-organized into 8 Districts (transitioning from 15 Districts in 2011). The NCCUMC also has re-organized itself into 8 districts (transitioning from 12 in 2012).

Chapter II: Findings based on Rural Fellows' Experiences and Perceptions

Considerable evidence has accumulated over the past five years to indicate that TRCI is making progress towards the outcomes anticipated by its Theory of Change. Data come from multiple sources, including:

- In-depth discussions with 10 Rural Fellows who were graduated and appointed as of 2011 (5 as part of site visits to the charges and 5 via in-depth telephone interviews),
- A 2013 survey of all Rural Fellows (students, student pastors and alumni) (n=47).
- Interview with representative of stakeholders institutions
- Interviews with lay people during site visits to churches served by Rural Fellows and gathered via site visits to TRCI partner churches. Data sources are noted in the figure.[17]

This chapter of the report focuses on Rural Fellows' perceptions of their experiences and the benefits of being a Rural Fellow.

Cohorts and Status

As noted in Table 1, 10 cohorts of Rural Fellows have been enrolled as of this report. To date, there are 46 current Rural Fellows; 22 alumni and 24 currently enrolled in Duke Divinity School. Rural Fellows have been graduated from Duke Divinity School starting in 2008. At this point in the initiative, attrition is very low – nearly all Fellows graduate as planned, and nearly all of those who do are subsequently appointed to a rural church.

Who are they? Not surprisingly, all of the Fellows are college graduates with sufficient academic achievements to be admitted to Duke Divinity School. They are homogenous with respect to race/ethnicity – two are Hispanic and one is African-American. They are diverse with respect to several other characteristics. For example, the Rural Fellows include 14 women and 32 men. They vary in age from approximately 23 to 54 years old. Some went directly from undergraduate school to seminary; others spent many years in other careers before hearing or responding to a calling to ministry. Some are second, third or fourth generation United Methodists in North Carolina; a few are the first in their families to join the denomination. Twenty-one are members of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church; 25 are members of the North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

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[17] Detailed findings are included in an appendix:

- Memo: Appointed Rural Fellows Interviews, CAPD for TRCI, September 2011 (Internal memo to William Bacon, Jeremy Troxler, Robb Webb (pages 9-21 of the appendix)
- Survey Table 3: Formation of Rural Fellows – Fellows' perceptions of the contribution of being a TRCI Rural Fellow to 13 potential areas of growth
- Survey Table 4 – Fellows Perceptions of Benefits they have experienced

[17] In the 2013 survey, Fellows were asked "*At this point in your formation, how prepared would you say you are to serve a rural United Methodist church in North Carolina? What are the things you have encountered or will encounter in living and serving in Rural Communities for which you feel most prepared? What are the things for which you feel least prepared*? Verbatim responses are included in Appendix A of this report, separated for alumni Fellows, students and student pastors. The selections above reflect only alumni Fellows. One Alumnus noted in 2013 challenges in particular with "*deep issues of what it means to be a thriving rural church in a Conference and state that looks to numerical measures of success."*

FIGURE 2: Accumulating Evidence towards Outcomes anticipated by TRCI Theory of Change

Rural Clergy: more pastors with calling and skills for rural ministry and more effective once serving

- **92%** of all TRCI Fellows (and **100%** of Fellows who are student pastors) say TRCI contributed to a deeper sense of their calling to the rural church (Table 4, item 4.8)
- **92%** of all TRCI Fellows credit TRCI for providing practical worship experience (Table 4, item 4.10); **90%** of graduated and appointed TRCI Fellows said that TRCI contributed enormously (33%) or somewhat (57%) to their ability to create effective sermons for rural congregations (Table 3, item 3.2). Similarly, **90%** of graduated and appointed alumni said that TRCI contributed enormously (30%) or somewhat (60%) to their ability to help rural congregations develop meaningful worship (Table 3, item 3.3)
- **74%** of all TRCI Fellows credit TRCI with contributing enormously (**36%**) or somewhat (**38%**) to their ability to engage across cultures and race/ethnicity for worship or service (Table 3, item 3.4).

Rural Churches: more congregations that value their gifts, increased vitality, known models of thriving rural churches

- **87%** of all Fellows and **95%** of graduated and appointed Fellows, credit TRCI with providing them exposure to different ways rural churches thrive (Table 4)
- Appointed and graduated Rural Fellows name specific and multiple gifts they recognize in the rural churches they serve and describe ways they communicate the value of the churches in sermons and their own actions. Fellows also note ways in which their charges feel valued by the fact that TRCI exists and the investment in Rural Fellows who are then assigned to them (2011 memo, Oct 2013 Fellows survey)
- 12 common elements of the TRC partner churches have been identified and incorporated into a tool to help pastors and congregations assess and reflect on their gifts and challenges. Fellows have fruitfully used this tool to reflect on each of the churches in their own charges (via the 2013 Rural Fellows survey).
- There are qualitative indications of movement towards thriving as described in the tool – e.g., three were exploring issues of diversity; two were coming to terms with their history; two was building lay leadership
- Worship attendance was increasing markedly in at least two of the churches served by the first round of graduated and appointed Fellows

Rural Communities: more child care, social capital and greater well-being

Not yet systematically assessed – to be reviewed in TRC 2.0 evaluation

Indications that TRCI may be on a trajectory towards these goals include:

- **72%** of all TRCI Fellows credit TRCI for providing practical mission experience (Table 4, item 4.11); **100%** of graduated and appointed Fellows (alumni) say that TRCI contributed enormously (67%) or somewhat (33%) to their ability to engage with communities for mission (Table 3, item 3.8)
- **94%** of all TRCI Fellows for contributing enormously (75%) or somewhat (19%) to a better understanding of the resources and supports available through The Duke Endowment; **100%** of graduated and appointed Fellows say TRCI contributed enormously (90%) or somewhat (10%) to this increased understanding. (Table 3, item 3.10).

Stakeholder Institutions: affirmation, resource and support for rural congregations and rural clergy, via pedagogy (DDS), grant-making (TDE) and within the Conferences

- Findings are mixed

  Examples of infusion and change (positive):

  Nearly all Rural Fellows who are graduated are appointed, on a track to elder ordination and serving TDE eligible rural churches
  - Both Conferences have celebrated rural clergy and churches in recent annual sessions and important gatherings
  - Two former senior pastors of TRCI partner churches have been appointed as District Superintendents (as the overall number of District Superintendent's has declined) – their experiences and voices in support of rural churches are in an enhanced position to be heard
  - Gifts and training of Rural Fellows are being considered important in the ordination and appointment processes by Boards of Ordained Ministries and Cabinets of both Conferences
  - TDE is rethinking some aspects of its grantmaking to align with lessons learned from TRCI (e.g. purposes to which church buildings are being put)

Examples of challenges and barriers to infusion (negative):

- Participation in cross-stakeholder institution gatherings waned over TRCI 1.0
- There is increased pressure on rural churches by the Conferences to demonstrate quantitative measures of vitality

Sustainability of TRCI learning and institutionalization of its functions beyond TDE funding has not yet been a responsibility

Of the 24 who are currently pursuing their Masters of Divinity Degrees at Duke Divinity School, 16 are also serving as student pastors. This puts them on a fours year track to graduation. The other eight still in school are fulls time students on a threes year track to graduation.

The remainder of this chapter describes the Rural Fellows' experiences and the results of those experiences (early outcomes). Data come largely from three sources: interviews with Rural Fellows, often several interviews while they are students, and for some, after they have been graduated. Data also come from Fellows surveyed in October 2013. For some, we also have completed site visits to their initial post-graduation charge. Early interviews focused on their calling to rural ministry and their expectations of the program. Later interviews focused more on Fellow's experiences and their perceptions about the value added, if any, of being a Rural Fellow, how prepared they felt they were for the opportunities and challenges of rural ministry and feedback and recommendations to strengthen the program, if any. Site visits included another round of interviews with the Fellows, plus focus groups with laity who also commented on the formation and preparation of Rural Fellows now serving these churches. In a few cases, we also were able to be present for a worship service.

Rural Fellow experiences

All Rural Fellows are expected to fulfill the requirements for a Master of Divinity degree at Duke Divinity School, to maintain a 3.0 grade point average, to participate in required components of TRCI and to take advantage of as many of the optional supports and experiences as they can. M. Div. students who are student pastors simultaneously serve a local church. Most Fellows and other stakeholders interviewed for the TRCI evaluation note that the burden on M. Div. students at Duke is high in terms of time, effort, the standards set by faculty and the standards they set for themselves. Rural Fellows must work hard and effectively to keep up, and that is even more the case for Rural Fellows who are also student pastors.

Table 2, below, displays the proportion of Rural Fellows who have participated in the main TRCI activities available to them while they are in school and post-graduation. The fifth column in the table shows the total proportion of Rural Fellows who participated at least once in that activity as of September 2013. The second column shows participation for currently enrolled Rural Fellows who are not student pastors (on a three year track to graduation). The third column shows participation for currently enrolled Rural Fellows who are also student pastors (on a four year track to graduation). The fourth column provides the same information for graduated Rural Fellows. As you review the table, please keep in mind that not all activities are open to every category of Fellow (some are just for alumni). In addition, the time period elapsed for participation varies from a few months (for the newest cohort of Fellows) to six years (for the first cohort to enroll).

TABLE 2 (2.1 – 2.10) – PERCENT PARTICIPATION

BENEFIT		PERCENT PARTICIPATION			
		Current students (other than student pastors)	Current student pastors	Alumni (n=21)	ALL (N=47)
2.1	Field Education TRCI partner church	75%	8%	76%	57%
2.2	*Encuentro*	8%	31%	67%	41%
2.3	*Caminantes*	--	15%	19%	13%
2.4	"Boot Camp"	--	8%	67%	33%
2.5	TRCI Colloquia	100%	100%	95%	98%
2.6	TRCI Rural Fellow Retreats	75%	85%	100%	89%
2.7	TRCI Rural Fellow Alumni Retreats	--	--	76%	35%
2.8	Visited with Migrant Farm Workers	25%	23%	48%	35%
2.9	Convocation and Pastors School	--	31%	81%	46%
2.10	Convocation on the Rural Church	8%	46%	95%	59%

Participation in TRCI activities

Alumni

By the time Fellows are graduated, the vast majority have participated in core TRCI experiences and opportunities – for example, colloquia (95%), field education in a TRCI partner church (76%) and TRCI Fellow retreats (100%). By the time they are graduated, many have also taken advantage of some of the optional experiences, for example, a field trip to be with and learn from migrant farm workers (48%) and *Encuentro* (67%). As a reminder, *Encuentro* is a guided trip to Mexico or the Mexico/USA border, an activity on which TRCI and The Thriving Hispanic/Latino Communities Initiative (TH/L Initiative) partner. As noted in previous reports, many participants report *Encuentro* as a powerful and, often, "*life changing*" experience.

Graduated Fellows stay connected and also continue to participate at very high levels in TRCI activities open to them post-graduation – for example, the annual Convocation on the Rural Church. Interviews confirm many of the alumni also see themselves as active participants in an ongoing Fellows network that calls on each other for support, advice and Fellowship. One interesting example is that many appointed Fellows (alumni) have called on the current Director of the TH/L Initiative to help them think about ways of helping their congregations more actively engage with Hispanic and Latino community members – including asking the TH/LI Director to guest preach. That level of understanding about the full range of the gifts and possibilities of TH/LI is partly because the current Director is himself a graduated and appointed Rural Fellow active in the Fellows network.

Students and Student Pastors

To date, a majority of the Rural Fellows still in school are student pastors (15, of 24 total student Fellows). In interviews, student pastors cite a number of benefits of being a student pastor and Rural Fellow while in school, particularly in terms of having a practical frame of reference into which to fit academic information and direct opportunities to apply what they are learning while they are learning it. Table 2 suggests that they are also finding time to participate in TRCI activities at about the same rate or more often than other Rural Fellows students who are not also student pastors, with one important exception.

The one important area with less participation is field education in a TRCI partner church. As of October 2013, only 1 Rural Fellow who is a student pastor has done a field education placement in a TRCI partner church; this is compared to 75% (9 students) of other student Rural Fellows, and 76% (16) of Rural Fellow alumni. This makes sense, since most student pastors at Duke Divinity do not also do a field education placement. It presents a challenge to the program however, in trying to make sure student pastors get the same exposure to thriving rural churches and connections with TRCI pastors and lay leaders as other Rural Fellows.

Fellows' perceptions of the benefits of being a Rural Fellow

As Figure 2 (page 14) and Tables 3 and 4 (in the Appendix) show, Rural Fellows note a wide variety of benefits of being in the program. For example, TRCI has been very successful at helping Fellows see and value the gifts of rural churches. TRCI has also contributed to Fellows' perceived abilities to make disciples for Jesus Christ, to better understand how to engage with communities for mission and to provide practice and training for worship. All of these benefits are anticipated by TRCI's theory of change, and the evidence from TRCI 1.0 indicates they are being achieved.

TRCI is also achieving some other benefits, not explicitly anticipated in TRCI's initial theory of change – particularly in terms of creating a network among Fellows, the TRCI program office and TRCI partner churches, and via support and mentoring through the ordination process.

Thus, findings to date indicate Rural Fellows formation work is doing well.

It is still too early in the life of the program to know whether the Rural Fellows strategy will benefit congregations and communities over time. Approximately half (24 of 46 enrolled to date) are still in seminary. The majority of TRCI 1.0 Fellows who were graduated and appointed as data were being collected for this report were still relatively early in their appointments. Data to look at quantitative measures of church growth are gathered from churches annually and available for research a year later. In addition, Fellows (and other UMC NC clergy) generally start their appointments in July. So, there is a lag time of a year or more before Conference data can be associated with new clergy. Further, it takes times to see resultant changes in church behaviors and characteristics from the point new leadership introduces them.

Or, as one Fellow noted "*I am just starting my third year at this current appointment. I am just coming to see that there are some deep-seated issues this congregation needs to deal with. All*

the easy changes have been made. Now the hard work begins. I feel we need to do a better job of preparing our graduates to deal with this next level of challenges."[18]

What is known is that appointed Rural Fellows can point to specific learning from TRCI that they are applying once they are appointed.

Key learning is highlighted below. Major themes have stayed quite consistent over time. Thus, the statement of key themes comes from site visits and interviews reported in the 2011 internal memo (part of the Appendix to this report). The supporting quotes (in italics) come from verbatim comments of Rural Fellow alumni, captured in the 2013 Rural Fellows survey.[19]

- Sermons are important. One must allow sufficient time each week to prepare. Story-telling is a powerful tool, and people need to understand what the sermon is asking them to do, and your goal is to be understood – so language should be clear

- Worship is important – and it is possible to make changes if you keep people informed and present a theological basis for changes you are making

"*I felt most prepared to "think theologically" as they say at Duke, and out of that to lead worship, preach, and teach in ways that help the congregation see how and where God is active in their lives, where God's story and their stories intersect*."

"The program stressed the importance of preaching as story telling – preaching with illustrations that meet people where they are – using parables, etc."

- The centrality of relationships cannot be overstated – it shows up in how a pastor spends his/her time. Visiting is the number one priority

"*The TRCI program prepared me in a variety of ways to serve in a rural church. TRCI emphasized the importance of building relationships in the rural church. I took Jeremy's advice to find ways to work alongside the members of my church (going to their workplace, visiting their homes, working with them at church functions*)."

"I am serving two congregations that have been neglected and I am prepared to serve them because I believe modeling Jesus' love and erring on the side of grace is what I'm called to do. This behavior was modeled by leaders and presenters associated with TRCI. "Just love them." Jeremy Troxler said it more than once, "Just love them."

- There are many narratives within the church; you will learn them through relationships – taking time to be with people, to let them be with you, and to let them know you love them will establish the kinds of relationships that allow you to understand the various narratives. There is no short-cut for this process, so be patient and avoid acting on a

[18] From 2013 Rural Fellows Survey

[19] In the 2013 survey, Fellows were asked "*At this point in your formation, how prepared would you say you are to serve a rural United Methodist church in North Carolina? What are the things you have encountered or will encounter in living and serving in Rural Communities for which you feel most prepared? What are the things for which you feel least prepared*? This was an open-ended question. The verbatim responses are included in Appendix A of this report, separated for alumni Fellows, students and student pastors. The selections above reflect only alumni Fellows.

particular narrative if you can, until all of them have revealed themselves through your growing relationships

"I believe I was best equipped to listen to the people and to value the small places."

- A rural church is often embedded in a community differently from a suburban or urban church. People interact with each other in and outside the church; people care for each other in ways that don't always show up in the church budget (they raise money to help folks in the parking lot; they step in to help each other without discussion, planning or necessarily taking credit; community members not part of the church are often named in prayers within the church);

"I feel most prepared to engage in "life together" with my congregation. I understand the importance of daily living with the congregation both in and outside the church building. I am also very aware of the resources and opportunities available to my congregation and myself as we continue in ministry together."

"I feel very prepared to serve a rural UMC church in NC. As a rural fellow I learned to value and appreciate more how important is the role of rural churches. For instance, I have learned to appreciate the faithfulness of many members who have been faithful to their church in despite of all the changes their church and community has experienced"

- Consistent with the points above – the numbers don't tell the whole story[20]
- There is a great deal of love in rural churches – Rural Fellows can understand why rural churches might be great places for spiritual growth and healthy, vibrant ministry

"*As prepared as I possibly could have been. I think the largest benefit of the program was expanding my love and passion for the rural church, rural places, and rural people. The beauty I see in where I am helps me to better live in the present and is felt by my congregation, which in turn inspires them to more fully live into who they really are*."

"*People in rural churches may value humility and quiet ways of helping others. They may also be struggling economically as individuals, and to pay their apportionments as a body. Consistent with these values and realities, people in rural churches may not see their individual or collective strengths, and they may not perceive themselves as valued within the connectional system – especially if they are also small churches*."

It is also helpful to note that of the 21 Alumni who provided open-ended responses in the 2013 survey about their preparedness for Rural Ministry, 6 volunteered that they felt least prepared for the administrative tasks they encountered. In addition, one of those six said, "*I have searched for continuing education and training in this area throughout 4 years of ministry and have found no programs geared toward small church administration*." Three volunteered that were either surprised by the level of pain, conflict or dysfunction in their initial charges, felt ill prepared to address them, or both. As one Alumnus noted, "*talking about it and living it are two different things."* Please see the full set of verbatim responses in Appendix A.

[20] One Alumnus noted in 2013 challenges in particular with "*deep issues of what it means to be a thriving rural church in a Conference and state that looks to numerical measures of success."*

Chapter III: Additional Findings: Churches and Stakeholder Institutions

This chapter summarizes briefly some additional findings developed as part of the evaluation of TRCI over its first phase. Key points are summarized in the earlier figure (Figure 2) on page 18.[21] The chapter is organized into three sections: common elements of TRCI partner churches; early indications of benefits to charges and churches being served by graduated and appointed Rural Fellows and early infusion of learning from TRCI within stakeholder institutions. Information on each of these has already been shared in earlier Dashboard reports or memoranda to The Duke Endowment and the TRCI program. Summaries are provided here to round out the summative report and for the convenience of the team overseeing TRCI through its transition.

Common Elements of TRCI Partner Churches

One of the evaluation's goals has been to learn more about what "thriving rural churches" means in practice. Many people believe church leaders are effective only if they grow their churches. While TRCI is not working counter to that goal, its specific goal has been to help more people and groups value the gifts of rural churches and have the capacity to lead churches toward a broad set of goals – as they are, and if they grow. Early on, the Director for much of TRCI 1.0 preached a sermon at a convening of TRCI's institutional stakeholders, the Nazareth sermon, which speaks to what that might mean. The text of that sermon is included in Appendix A to this report. In some sense, this approach to TRCI 1.0 was based on an idea that spiritual depth and vitality are both a means to an end and an end in themselves. For some, that means that more spiritual depth and vitality may lead to growth in terms of traditional measures, and it may. For some, that means that spiritual depth and vitality drive growth; growth does not necessarily drive spiritual growth and vitality.

The evaluator did a series of interview key stakeholders at TDE, DDS, WNCCUMC and NCCUMC to get their perspectives on what "thriving" meant. We did several of these early on, as part of developing the evaluation design, as well as throughout the evaluation both to deepen our understanding and as part of learning more about infusion of TRCI learning within stakeholder institutions. We also reviewed some of the literature about clergy leadership and thriving along with some of the tools that people developed to help churches describe their values, habits and characteristics. Much of that information informed the TRCI reflection and assessment tool, described in a separate document. Appendix A to this report includes a summary of some of that literature (in the annotated bibliography).

To learn more, the evaluator conducted a series of site visits to the first group of TRCI partner churches. The purpose was to learn more about what these churches had in common. This made sense, because the TRCI partner churches were expressly chosen to represent several

[21] Findings in this section pull together information from several sources, including site visits to TRCI Partner churches, site visits to some of the churches being served by graduated and appointed Fellows, interviews with members of each of the stakeholder institutions, and multiple rounds of interviews with Rural Fellows. The findings are thus largely based on qualitative information.

different models of thriving.[22] So looking at what they had in common seemed a useful way to help articulate what "thriving" means in practice in rural North Carolina UMC churches. Results were shared in a memo to the program. They have been used to help design TRCI technical assistance, been shared at the Rural Convocation, and are the basis for a tool to help UMC rural churches in North Carolina reflect and assess themselves around elements of thriving. A draft of that tool was delivered in a separate document to The Duke Endowment.

Briefly, the common elements of the TRCI partner churches include:

- Awareness of their history and identity and drawing strength from that awareness
- Resilience – weathering change, conflict, helping others do that
- Awareness of the richness of the church's resources of talent, spirit and energy – regardless of its material well-being
- Embracing change – honoring traditions *and* willing to do things differently as change is called for
- Looking inward – attending deeply to people's spiritual growth
- Grounding the life of the church in scripture
- Inspiring worship that helps people feel God's presence
- Regular hands-on, face-to-face service and mission work
- Appreciation of young people – considering youth as assets, whether or not the church has a large number or a few
- Finding ways for each member of the congregation to serve – helping people discern and live in their gifts
- Knowing that the church is not the building, but something greater, more spiritual and harder to articulate
- Inclusive and engaging
    - Focused on welcoming people into the church
    - Engaging – having something for everyone
- Seeing the strength and opportunities for itinerancy
    - Accepting a responsibility for building relationships with each new pastor

There were also several important differences among the TRCI partner churches – suggesting that a particular configuration of these does not necessarily contribute to or inhibit thriving. The TRCI partner churches varied with respect to: clergy roles, roles of lay leadership, their specific gifts and talents (for example, one TRCI church offered its considerable construction skills locally where needed; another was particularly loving; a third knew how to manage conflict well), and levels of material affluence (average affluence, mix of affluence within a congregation and in the communities from which the churches draw). Please see pages 29-30 in Appendix A for the fuller list. Also reference the questionnaire in its own appendix.

[22] As a reminder, the TRCI advisory committee nominated TDE eligible churches they saw as thriving. The advisory committee included faculty and administrators from Duke Divinity School including several very familiar with UMC churches in North Carolina, members of both Bishop's Cabinets and other's from each Conference, and the Director and Program Officer of the Rural Church division of The Duke Endowment. One or two members of the TRCI advisory committee visited each nominated church. They usually participated in worship service, and spent time visiting with the pastor, lay leaders and others in attendance at worship. Information from those site visits was brought back to the full advisory committee who eventually selected the 7 initial TRCI churches.

Benefits to Charges and Churches Served by Fellows

TRCI's theory of change asserts that Rural Fellows will directly or indirectly benefit their charges, congregations and the communities they serve. A round of site visits with the first 10 graduated and appointed Rural Fellows suggested a number of early benefits, of the kind intended. Below is some of what we heard from lay people and/or observed directly in site visits.[23]

- Congregations feel more valued
    - Congregations greatly appreciate having clergy who express a deep calling and love for rural ministry – they are "amazed" given other past experiences
    - Congregations are heartened to learn about the existence of the TRCI Initiative – they believe the investment signals a connectional interest in their survival and gifts
- A few of the churches are already experiencing early indications of thriving – as described in the common features of TRCI churches
    - At least two churches are working to come to terms with their history, including past conflicts or potential serious transgressions, as part of what they will need to establish a vision for moving forward
    - At least one is altering its worship service to reclaim a more Wesleyan and Methodist theology, another has added worship services – attending to their spiritual work
    - At least one that was previously turned inward is now turning outward toward mission
    - At least one is building leadership among the laity – considering how to sustain its leadership in the face of itinerancy
    - At least two were already reporting markedly increased attendance at worship
    - Three are in the beginning stages of an intentional exploration of diversity in their congregations – one with respect to race, one with respect to ethnicity/immigration and one with respect to economics/income

These findings are consistent with those noted in Appendix A in Tables 3 and 4, based on the more recent Rural Fellows survey. For example, all of the Rural Fellows alumni (100%) report that being a Rural Fellow strengthened their abilities enormously (86%) or somewhat (14%) to articulate rural church gifts and values; 81% of alumni credit TRCI with strengthening their ability enormously (43%) or somewhat (38%) to engage across cultures and race/ethnicity for worship or service. More than half (55%) of Rural Fellow alumni report the ability to call on the resources of the Hispanic House of Studies as one of the TRCI's benefits.

As noted above, we hope to continue to track the contributions of TRCI to churches served by Rural Fellows in the next phase of evaluation.

[23] This section is excerpted from 2011 Summary memo, and updated via site visits to pilot TRC tool and information from 2013 Rural Fellows survey.

Infusion of TRCI Learning into Stakeholder Institutions

TRCI hopes its work and learning benefits its partners (the four stakeholder institutions). Long-term, the implicit theory of change, described in Figure 1, suggests that "*The Conferences, Duke Divinity School and The Duke Endowment will demonstrate deepened and renewed appreciation of the distinctive gifts and vocations of rural congregations."* The theory of change further asserts TRCI can contribute to this result in part through stakeholder institutions reviewing current policies and practices, and aligning with TRCI lessons, where warranted.

Evidence is still accumulating to assess progress towards this goal. Findings to date are mixed. For example, while there were new and more frequent forms of collaboration around TRCI goals early in TRCI 1.0, formal collaboration wanted mid-way through. Quarterly meetings among the Dean of the Divinity School, the two Conference Bishops, and the Rural Church Division of The Duke Endowment had slowed. Advisory committee meetings were less frequent and somewhat sparsely attended. Aldersgate was also on hold. Some of these activities have picked up since that time, but not to the extent originally anticipated. In addition, TRCI's attempt to develop a Certificate for Rural Ministry did not succeed. Further, the pressure on rural churches to grow remains a clear expectation of both Conferences. Growth measures are also still used by both Conferences as the primary indication of "thriving" so far as we can tell from recent interviews and/or workshops offered by the Bishops, and by current Conference and District level focus on evangelism and building membership reported by Rural Fellows.

At the same time, attention to raising up the gifts of rural churches appears to have increased since TRCI began. Both Conferences have highlighted rural ministry in recent annual sessions and other important convenings. Two former senior pastors of TRCI partner churches – Amy Coles and Gil Wise—have been appointed as District Superintendents, Reverend Coles in the Smoky Mountain District of the Western North Carolina Conference and Reverend Wise in the Beacon District of the North Carolina Conference. As a result, both are in positions to share lessons from TRCI broadly. Also, it should be noted that both were elevated to their current positions, even in an era when the total number of District Superintendents was dramatically reduced in both Conferences. In addition, as noted earlier, Boards of Ordained Ministries are now fully aware of TRCI and its value to Rural Fellows, which was not previously the case. The Rural Church Division of The Duke Endowment has been rethinking its approach to rural church grants, particularly in terms of what it means to fund buildings and how that relates to the purpose to which those buildings are put. Several of those involved and some observers see that shift as an outgrowth of positive learning from TRCI.

Some questions and challenges remain. Each of the stakeholder institutions has multiple goals and priorities, of which TRCI is only one. For example, DDS is primarily an educational institution holding itself accountable to the support and formation of effective and skilled clergy particularly while they are in seminary. It has always been active outside the institution, particularly with UMC clergy, lay people and churches. But, its main focus remains its students. As described earlier, TRCI expanded in its early years beyond students to include substantial supports to graduated and appointed Fellows, TRCI partner churches, and to some extent, lay people and North Carolina UMC clergy, and particularly rural clergy, more generally (via the annual Rural Convocation, technical assistance and support in Districts that requested it, etc.)

These activities are valued and their implementation expanded the reach of the TRCI initiative. At the same time, they also are working in spheres more directly under the umbrella of the two Conferences. Tough discussions about accountability haven't really happened yet around how to align and/or share ownership of potentially overlapping work.

In addition, the Rural Fellows strategy is focused on creating leadership primarily via Ordained Elders. Both Conferences are concerned about the ability of many UMC rural churches in North Carolina to afford to pay Elders. In addition, TRCI 1.0 was helping Fellows think about "thriving" in terms of churches and congregations feeling valued and recognizing multiple areas of strength. That is not incompatible with growing membership, but it is not the same as a primary focus on growing membership. So, while all of the stakeholders want excellent clergy and thriving rural churches, and all of them recognize growth as important, the emphases and understanding about how that happens are not always aligned. That is both a challenge in terms of collective ownership of TRCI, and a fundamental issue for its theory of change and what would constitute its success.[24]

Fundamentally, these challenges are about ownership and sustainability, something the partners tend to talk about somewhat differently. For example, interviews and observation suggest that TDE's goal has been to share ownership of TRCI with each of the North Carolina UMC Conferences as well as with the Duke Divinity School. TDE tends to talk about shared ownership as including, for example, Conference attention to appropriate appointments for Rural Fellows post-graduation, something that is happening. However, they also tend to consider sustainability of TRCI post TDE funding as something that might be shared among the stakeholder institutions. In TRCI 1.0, it has not been at all clear that either of the Conferences or DDS are planning towards that end.

For example, in cross-institution meetings where the issue of sustainability or joint ownership has been raised (for example, Aldersgate, advisory committee meetings, planning meetings) and individual stakeholder interviews, the conversations usually focused on what the TRCI program, or TDE, might do to sustain the program. Those conversations generally did not reflect thinking about collective responsibility for sustaining TRCI as a program or initiative. They also did not generally focus on how to institutionalize key TRCI functions or strategies, or other ways in which effective initiatives are sometimes sustained post initial or philanthropic funding.

The first excerpt below comes from a graduated and appointed Rural Fellow (October 2013 survey). The second comes from an interview with a person from one of the stakeholder institutions, conducted in 2013. Together they describe the complexity of infusion of TRCI learning within stakeholder institutions, including some of the factors that contribute to or inhibit success.

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[24] For the evaluator, one area of interest has been the how UMC clergy serving at TDE or DDS are expected to relate to their Conferences in terms of decision-making or authority. As noted in Chapter I, there is a strong legacy of collaborative work among DDS, TDE and each Conference. That legacy also includes some institutional power struggles, which should not be surprising given issues of money and power, traditional town/gown issues, and common issues within hierarchical religious denominations and structures. The individual partners work together often and well, so this is more about the structural power dynamics than any personal ones. A question for me has been who "speaks" for the rural UMC churches. To my knowledge, this issue is not discussed openly as it relates to TRCI, though aspects of it come up in interviews at all levels and across the stakeholder institutions.

"One of the key issues I see in rural ministry is the rural church's own self-identity crisis. Rural churches have been marginalized in many ways in recent decades. They often feel inadequate to meet the needs of younger families or people moving into the rural communities as commuters. They tend to compare themselves to the larger "booming" churches in town and feel they don't measure up. Part of this is the fault of our connection. Whenever church leaders are asked to attend Conference or district training events, they are exposed to models and examples of city churches and large membership churches. They tend to leave these events dejected rather than encouraged and feel they cannot implement the ideas to which they have been exposed. This is an injustice. The rural church has many gifts that those other churches do not have."

"*The challenge is the work of TRCI is in many ways grassroots work – church to church, pastor to pastor, community to community – TRCI has done really amazing things, percolating up to Boards of Ordained ministry – they recognize a TRCI person because they stand out…but that has not filtered up to the highest levels, not a leading priority for the Bishops and Cabinets…they live in a different world with different pressures. Across the years at Duke Divinity School rural ministry does have a kind of visibility that it didn't have before TRCI started. Rural ministry is held up as a vocation that some really aspire to…[but] real infusion would look like rethinking everything we do…you would spend time at every meeting to look at this*."

Chapter IV: Conclusions and Implications

Overview of Key Findings

As demonstrated in previous chapters, TRCI is doing its intended work, implementing core strategies at quality and producing many of its early-intended results. Findings from evaluation of TRCI from its early days through 2013 indicate that it is identifying and enrolling Fellows "*with a heart for the rural church*" who benefit from the learning, supports and experiences that TRCI makes available to them. Those opportunities have been expanded over time to meet identified needs in the formation of Rural Fellows, with few exceptions. Early issues related to attrition have been resolved. In addition, early issues related to appointment of Rural Fellows to TDE eligible churches have been addressed.

22 Rural Fellows are graduated and the vast majority of them are serving rural churches. There are also 24 Rural Fellows in the leadership pipeline, 8 of whom are full-time students and 16 who are student pastors. In this first phase of its work, TRCI also identified and partnered with 8 different rural churches, each of which provided a model of thriving and opportunities for field education to Rural Fellows. Together, those churches have provided field education opportunities for 25 Rural Fellows so far. Rural Fellows routinely cite their field education experience; along with the support they have received from the Director, as among the most powerful of their TRCI experiences.

The program has also extended its reach – particularly to the broader group of rural United Methodist clergy and churches in North Carolina. During his tenure as TRCI Director, Reverend Troxler created a number of peer learning, technical assistance and capacity building programs and consultancies, not originally anticipated, for supporting rural ministry and thriving rural churches. Participants routinely rate them highly in terms of their direct applicability and effectiveness. The Convocation on the Rural Church, for example, routinely books up as soon as the opportunity is made available each year. In part in response, TRCI and TDE are considering offering more than one Rural Convocation each year, and have instituted changes to enrollment policies to make sure clergy who have not been able to attend to date will have priority going forward.

Evidence on the infusion of TRCI lessons into stakeholder institutions is more mixed. Conference leadership is aware of TRCI, values the Fellows and celebrates rural churches more so than in the recent past. Observers note a growing sense of the value of rural ministry among Duke Divinity School students, not just Rural Fellows. The Duke Endowment has continued to support TRCI in recognition of its progress to date and perceived value. At the same time, "the conversation has not changed" and rural UMC churches in North Carolina face considerable pressures to grow in ways that may or may constitute "thriving" as modeled in TRCI.

Implications of Key Findings

1. As intended, TRCI is producing a cohort of clergy who have and are applying leadership skills to United Methodist rural churches in North Carolina:

> *"What I've noticed is that the newly appointed Rural Fellows have been good leaders. They have been willing to get to know the congregation and build trust, and, at the same time, not just willing to settle for the status quo. They take some risks, they think of some way to reach out into the community. There is a willingness to infuse some energy. They come with creative new ideas so a rural church thrives even more. [I see they are] using ideas that they heard from others [within TRCI]. They are a breath of fresh air…have leadership skills that are different from ordinary DDS students. Others [DDS students who are not Rural Fellows] floundered for a while – didn't know how to get any traction. The Rural Fellows came with a plan."*[25]

It is too early to track the impact of the graduated and appointed Rural Fellows in a quantitative way (in terms of worship attendance, number of missions, growing membership, etc.) since most have been in their charges for a short time, and good quality comparable data are not yet available given the time lag to access Conference data. At the same time, the qualitative evidence is quite positive. Fellows routinely report the value-added of TRCI in their formation while students at Duke Divinity School, particularly in terms of giving them a valuable frame of reference for translating academic and theological learning into applied leadership skills. They cite individualized and group mentoring/coaching and field education in TRCI churches as particularly relevant and effective aspects of their TRCI experience while students. They also value the relationships formed among the Fellows, along with the opportunities TRCI provides for them to preach, lead worship services, visit farmworkers, the *Encuentro* experience and monthly colloquia. Once Fellows are graduated and appointed, they also cite being part of the TRCI network as a key leadership support – both in terms of providing resources for their ministries and for reducing their personal and professional isolation.

Site visits and interviews with graduated and appointed Rural Fellows indicate they are well prepared for multiple aspects of their initial assignments – leadership, worship, mission, ways of growing and strengthening their churches and how to find support/resources when appropriate. Laity interviewed confirms that impression, as have institutional stakeholders (for example, as in the quote above).

At the same time, Rural Fellows would appreciate and are likely to benefit from more specific support around the administrative and fiscal tasks they will face as clergy. They might also appreciate deeper inquiry and support around conflict, dysfunction and how to help churches deal effectively with the circumstances that lead to those issues.

2. Rural Fellows are aware of the challenges that Conferences are facing in terms of apportionments, church growth and vitality. They come prepared to their work with a sharpened imagination and love for thriving rural churches cultivated and expanded through TRCI. Individual interviews with Rural Fellows suggest they are concerned about how church

[25] Per UMC District Superintendent overseeing a number of recently graduated and appointed clergy from Duke Divinity School – some who are Rural Fellows and some who are not.

growth is currently measured, and wonder what kinds of risks they can take in the short term to foster thriving and growth in the long term. When asked if they feel they are being formed to maintain the status quo or interrupt the status quo, answers vary considerably.

It might be important for TRCI to enter this discussion explicitly with all of the stakeholder institutions – to gain more clarity for the program and for the Fellows.

3. Over the past six years, the initiative has expanded beyond the Rural Fellows component to engage with a broader group of North Carolina United Methodist rural clergy and churches/charges. There are also some examples of learning from TRCI being infused within the stakeholder institutions. The expansion and infusion of learning from TRCI sets a stage for impact beyond the Rural Fellows and the charges and communities they serve.

One impressive aspect of TRCI is the extent to which it has stretched its boundaries of support beyond Rural Fellows to the broader group of Duke Endowment eligible rural churches and those serving them. For example, as of 2011, more than 300 clergy from these churches had participated in at least one of the annual Convocations on the Rural Church and more than 300 clergy from these churches had participated in a workshop or worship service led by the TRCI Director. Mean ratings by participants of the effectiveness of all activities sponsored by TRCI are above 3 on a 4-point scale. The range and depth of available supports is also beginning to get national attention (based on inquiries received).

Some learning is also being infused into stakeholder institutions, another intended outcome, though more could be done in this regard. As intended, TRCI identified 8 Thriving Rural Churches to serve as resources and learning centers for Fellows' field education. Two of the initial pastors of these churches are now District Superintendents, contributing their "voice" on rural churches at the Conference level. At least one believes the visibility from serving a TRCI identified thriving church accounts in part for the welcome that voice is receiving. In addition, over the course of the initiative, both Conferences have become more aware of the strengths and skills of Rural Fellows as a result of program efforts, and are making placements post-graduation more in line with that understanding. The Rural Church Division of The Duke Endowment has been rethinking its approach to rural church grants, particularly in terms of what it means to fund buildings and how that relates to the purpose to which those buildings are put. Some observers see that shift as an outgrowth of positive learning from TRCI.

4. TRCI can't be all things to all people. The TRCI Director during much of the time period covered by this evaluation left mid-2013 and a new TRCI Director, formerly pastor of one of the first group of TRCI partner churches, has come on board and begun to shape TRCI for the future. This transition can be a good moment for the program and its partners to revisit the evolving theory of change for TRCI, and to review goals and the extent to which program strategies are likely to be sufficient to achieve those goals in the current context and based on learning to date.

This recommendation is not based on "fixing" anything about the program, but more so, on taking the time to make sure all of TRCI's partners share a vision for the program, know its goals and are clear on the priority strategies most likely to achieve those goals. For example, does TRCI have a goal to contribute to building lay leadership for thriving rural churches? If so, are there strategies in place that are likely to contribute to making that happen? Given fixed

resources of time and money, would something else have to give way to implement those strategies well in ways that reach broadly into the churches? Similarly, what are the goals for TRCI related to supporting thriving communities via church leadership? Does that imply a different or more extensive set of experiences for Rural Fellows related to mission design, implementation and accountability for results? Also, the Rural Fellows are fairly homogeneous with respect to race/ethnicity – is it important for that to change in order to meet program goals? If so, what strategies are most likely to contribute to diversifying the pool of qualified applicants by race/ethnicity?

One key question for evaluation going forward is the role of the TRCI partner churches. To date, the evaluation has thought of the partner churches as resources to TRCI and for learning, but not one of the units of analysis for evaluation. This would be important to clarify as well.

Opportunities and Challenges

Outcomes to date also suggest several other opportunities and some challenges for TRCI going forward.

TRCI is doing what it can, within its own control, to create strong and able leadership for thriving rural churches. The climate for this leadership is challenging. The North Carolina and Western North Carolina United Methodist Conferences are facing declining interest in mainstream Protestant religions in the U.S. generally, plus increased interest in mega-churches among some of the available segments who are mainstream Protestants. While it is certainly possible to create mega rural churches, it is not easy or necessarily the best way to thrive. The Duke Divinity School is facing declining seminary enrollments nationally, and more competition for seminary students within North Carolina as a result of Hood's expansion. Churches that Rural Fellows serve are often taking a leap of faith to bring on a full-time pastor on the elder track, given the associated costs. And, over the course of the initiative to date, there have been transitions in leadership of all the stakeholder institutions (the TRCI Director and the person to whom the TRCI Director reports and the Dean at DDS, the Bishop of the NCUMC and WNCUMC and leadership of the Rural Church Division at TDE).

TRCI has walked a very thoughtful line through these challenges to date. It has reached out to Conferences to nominate potential Rural Fellows and TRCI churches. It has shared its lessons in workshops and by serving on various committees and workgroups. It has also encouraged Rural Fellows and other rural pastors to think about thriving in terms of spiritual and mission depth, continually making the case that enlivened worship and meaningful missions will bring worshipers and disciples – major church goals. It has stimulated the imaginations of rural congregations and clergy about ways to do that through exposure to a number of different models of Thriving Rural Churches and customized supports. And it has consistently encouraged the Duke Divinity School and the Conferences to take seriously rural ministry as a valid and satisfying calling and taught classes, offered colloquia and built networks among students and pastors to generate an early sense of what that feels like.

As TRCI goes forward through its own leadership transition, it can continue to be thoughtful about how to form effective leadership in challenging times. Given the current number of Rural Fellows who are also student pastors, it will be important to figure out how to support their formation, including in ways other than field education at TRCI churches (which student pastors

generally cannot do). As more student Rural Fellows are graduated and become pastors, it will become even more important to find ways to support that network as they take on their first and subsequent appointments. And, as the Conferences and the Duke Divinity School wrestle with their own pressing challenges, it will take skill, persistence and real partnership to embed attention to rural ministry, rural churches and rural communities more fully within those institutions, if TRCI's values and priorities are to be sustained.

Annotated Works Consulted

1. Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1998. Print.

Very helpful compendium (256 pages) that includes a parish profile inventory tool, lists of variables for measuring congregations, multiple bibliographies and seven contributed chapters. Edited by Nancy Ammerman, Jackson Carroll, Carol Dudley and William McKinney. Contributed chapters cover multiple aspects of "church" and ways of understanding them. They include how a congregation "does" theology, how to view a congregation in context (ecology), understanding congregation culture and identity, ways of capturing aspects of the life of the congregation (e.g. ways of describing different levels of conflict; a typology of congregational life cycles); different ways of looking at church resources of money, commitment, membership, etc. and leadership. There is also a chapter of why to study congregations, and another on methods for studying congregations. Many chapters include examples of scales, typologies and questions that can be used to study the aspect under discussion.

2. Byassee, Jason. *The Gifts of the Small Church*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2010. Print.

Described by the author as a "this memoir of two short years of pastoral ministry, as a sort of narrative argument. I want there to be a book where the small local church isn't just the problem. It might be part of God's solution. No, not "might." It just is. If there's anything good in what I do now, it's because of these small local churches that loved me far more than I deserved. That is, they loved me like God loves all of us." At the time this book was written, Jason Byassee was Executive Director of Leadership Education and Director of the Center for Theology, Writing and Media at Duke. His wife has pastored at two-point charge.

3. Carroll, Jackson W., and Becky R. McMillan. *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. 2006. Print.

One of the products of "Pulpit & Pew" described as "a large research project on pastoral leadership in the United States" funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc. The project included attention to, among other research questions, "What does excellent ministry by a congregation and it(s) pastors look like? And what can be done to nurture and sustain excellence?" (page ix). Findings come from multiple qualitative and quantitative sources, including national surveys and focus groups. In some cases, data from clergy can be compared with data from their lay constituents.

4. *Faith into Action Resource Guide*. Malibu, CA (7039 Dume Dr., Malibu 90265): Outreach Extensions, 2001. Print.

A companion guide to This Far by Faith (PBS series), which is part of the Making Connections Media Outreach Initiative. The workbook is designed to be part of "engaging faith-based organizations with residents, civic groups, and public and private

sector leadership in efforts to transform even the toughest neighborhoods into family supportive environment." The workbook includes scriptural support, strategies and resources for outreach ministries around: economic development; criminal justice; health, leadership development, diversity and identity formation. It includes a number of best practices and discussion questions.

5. Fowler, Susan. *Leading with Spirit: Transforming Leadership for Social Change*. Mishawaka, IN: Victoria, 2009. Print.

Describes the theoretical framework, early implementation and results of the Community Leadership Program in New Haven, an effort to support non-profit leaders on a path of individual transformation leading to social transformation. The book was written by one of the programs' founders. It draws on a five year evaluation of the program as well as the founders' own theological training (Yale Divinity School and the Graduate Theological Foundation). Part I of the book provides the theoretical underpinnings, and part II is a manual for the program as it was configured at the time the book was written. It includes a bibliography and some evaluation tools.

The main assumptions of the program at the time this book was written are (page 3):
"1) Individual transformation and social transformation are integrally lined: internal spiritual transformation will result in changes in consciousness, relationships and behavior that empower persons to effect social change;
2) Individual transformation and social transformation are realized most profoundly in relationships and communities of compassion and struggle.
2) Developing a program to help leaders do this requires a different starting point for visioning (spiritual transformation as a condition for social transformation), a different model for leading (transformational, servant and prophetic leadership), and a different methodology for teaching (liberating education).

6. Goodpaster, Larry M. *There's Power in the Connection: Building a Network of Dynamic Congregations*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2008. Print.

Larry Goodpaster is currently Bishop of the Western North Carolina UMC Conference. This book is based on his six years of experiences serving the Alabama-West Florida Conference. The Alabama-West Florida Conference saw itself as thriving – "the hope and excitement that is alive in this area is contagious" (page 1). Bishop Goodpaster notes: "it has shown sustained growth" (page 3). The book offers Bishop Goodpaster's prescriptions for church vitality and growth as well as his analyses of what maintains the status quo or contributes to church decline or dysfunction.

7. Hoge, Dean R., and Jacqueline E. Wenger. *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2005. Print.

Part of "Pulpit & Pew" "*a multi-year research project on Protestant and Catholic pastor leadership underway at Duke University Divinity School with support from Lilly Endowment, Inc. (page viii). The research in this book "was to describe as accurately as possible the situation in several denominations and to gather feedback and*

recommendations from ministers and judicatory officers as to how policies might be updated."

8. Oswald, Roy M., and Barry Allan Johnson. *Managing Polarities in Congregations: Eight Keys for Thriving Faith Communities*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2010. Print.

Describes the concept of "polarities" and how to use this concept to look at ways to manage two seemingly opposed, but actually interrelated, aspects of any situation. Shares a specific process for helping groups use polarities to identify the benefits of each side of the polarity and to develop warning signs when one is occurring to the detriment of the other. (The two classic examples used to help teach the concept and process of managing polarities are inhaling and exhaling, and, rest and activity).

Applies the concept and process to congregational life – identifying 8 common polarities and giving examples of how to better understand them and manage them, including indicators of over-reliance on one or the other.

Approach to Evaluation

Background and Methods

This report is based on information collected from 2006 through 2013. CAPD began our work on this evaluation via interviews with some of TRCI's key stakeholders at The Duke Endowment (TDE), the Duke Divinity School (DDS) and each of the two United Methodist Conferences in the state of North Carolina: the North Carolina United Methodist Conference (NCUMC) and the Western North Carolina United Methodist Conference (WNCUMC). The purpose was to better understand their intentions for TRCI, and what they thought might constitute reasonable markers of progress and success during its initial years. We also did a modest and targeted literature review, looking at indicators of thriving churches and effective clergy leadership. From this process, we developed an evaluation design, including a phased set of evaluation questions.

To answer those questions, over the course of the evaluation, CAPD:

- Completed at least one and usually several in-depth interviews and/or site visits with most of the Rural Fellows while they were students, during their field education placement and/or in their appointments post-graduation. Site visits during field education and/or in appointments also included interviews or focus groups with church lay leadership and members.

- Completed at least one site visit to 7 of the 8 initial TRCI churches (the exception is the Bladen charge). These visits included an in-depth interview with the pastor, a focus group with lay leadership and congregation members, and a site visit within the church and the community – all with the goal of better understanding the context and contributions of the church.

- In late 2010/early 2011, conducted a survey of 1305 active North Carolina United Methodist clergy, yielding a response rate of 76.6% of the total eligible list. The survey collected data on clergy sense of competency for rural ministry, familiarity with thriving rural churches/charges and other baseline information. It also collected data on clergy participation in and perceived value of TRCI activities and supports. The questions were added as an optional component of a clergy health survey being conducted for the Clergy Health Initiative, via a grant from The Duke Endowment to the Duke Divinity School. We thank the Clergy Health Initiative for their support to this aspect of the evaluation.

- Conducted a survey in 2013 of Rural Fellows, focused on their perceptions of the value of TRCI for them to date. The final response rate was 100%. We thank the TRCI program and the Fellows for their outstanding cooperation in providing this level of response.

- Participated in and observed TRCI and partnership activities and planning sessions, including annual Convocations on the Rural Church, Aldersgate meetings, meetings in which the TRCI churches were identified, discussed and selected, and colloquia.

- Completed in-depth interviews with the TRCI Director, and participated in monthly update and discussion calls among The Duke Endowment, the TRCI Director, evaluation and the Thriving Hispanic/Latino Communities Initiative; and

- Completed one or more in-depth interviews with a few other key people from the TRCI stakeholder institutions, including the Bishops, several Cabinet members and several District Superintendents from the North Carolina Conference and the Western North Carolina United Methodist Conference, and the Dean, Director of Admissions, Director of Field Education and Director of Leadership Education at the Duke Divinity School.

The synthesis and analysis of these data undergird the descriptions and findings included in this summative report. Because this is a summative report, some of the findings were reported in earlier Dashboard reports and supporting materials, shared with The Duke Endowment annually beginning in 2008.

The evaluation will also produce two other products. The first is a tool that rural United Methodist clergy and congregations in North Carolina can use to reflect on the strengths, gifts and challenges of their churches in ways that might contribute to thriving rural churches in service to thriving rural communities. The tool reflects lessons drawn from the experiences and commonalities of the TRCI partner churches. The second product is a report on the early implementation and results of the Thriving Latino/Hispanic Initiative over its first five years (2009 through 2013). Both will be available in the third quarter of 2014.

Phases of the Evaluation

Phase	Dates	Evaluation questions:
Phase One Impetus and Start-up	2006-2008	• What is TRCI's theory of change – that is, has TRCI articulated its goals and how its strategies are intended to contribute to its goals? • Are core strategies being implemented at quality? • Are they reaching their intended audiences? Are modifications being made based on early learning, identified needs and gaps?
Phase Two Implementation, Early Expansion and Early Results	2009-2011	• In addition to the questions above what are the early benefits to participants in TRCI strategies? • Is there evidence that those benefits are likely to contribute to the valuing and vitality of United Methodist churches in North Carolina and to their contributions to their communities? • Are good strategies being expanded and reaching additional beneficiaries? • Are ineffective strategies changed or eliminated?
Phase Three Continued Expansion, Early and Midterm Results and early Institutionalization	2012-2013	• In addition to the questions above, to what extent are promising practices and lessons from TRCI being infused and/or institutionalized within the stakeholder institutions? • Is ownership of the goal of thriving rural churches and communities shared among the partner institutions?

Appendix A

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION REPORT

Thriving Rural Communities Initiative First Six Years (2007- 2013)

Contents

1. Jeremy Troxler Sermon

Nazareth, delivered at Aldersgate, May 2007

2. Summary – Appointed Rural Fellows Interviews

CAPD for TRC, September 2011

3. 2013 TRCI Survey, Question 1 Responses

4. Early Indications of Thriving Churches

(Per site visits to TRC partner churches)

5. TABLE 3: Formation of Rural Fellows

6. TABLE 4: Perceived Benefits of Being a Rural Fellow

Jeremy Troxler Sermon

Nazareth, delivered at Aldersgate, May 2007

Reprinted in Faith & Leadership, offering of Leadership Education at Duke Divinity January 5, 2009
http://www.faithandleadership.com/sermons/nazareth (accessed 10/20/13)

Nazareth

Don't underestimate the possibilities of small, rural churches. After all, Jesus' hometown was an insignificant agricultural village, says Jeremy Troxler

"January 5, 2009
Editor's Note: This sermon was preached May 21, 2007, at the Thriving Rural Communities Aldersgate Gathering at Duke Divinity School.
John 1: 43-50 / Luke 4: 16-30
"Can anything good come out of Nazareth? . . .

'Come and see.'"

Jesus finds Philip, so then Philip goes and finds Nathaniel to tell Nathaniel that he has found Jesus, forgetting exactly who found whom in the first place.

(We do that sometimes.)

"Nathaniel," Philip says, "we've found him, we've found the one, the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote, the Savior, and, are you ready for this, it's Jesus, son of Joseph from . . . Nazareth."

And Nathaniel looks at Philip as if Philip has just told him that really, the Chicago Cubs are really, actually going to win the World Series this year.

"Nazareth? Can anything good come out of Nazareth, much less the Savior of the world?"

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

I did some reading about Nazareth. It didn't take long, because we don't know much at all about Nazareth in Jesus' day. Nazareth is barely, if ever, mentioned in first century documents outside of Scripture. The little we do know is largely speculative and wholly unremarkable. Apparently scholarship suggests that Nazareth was a small community of anywhere between 500 and 2000 people: likely just about the size to qualify for funding from the Duke Endowment's Rural Church Division. Nazareth was likely located not far from a major East-West trade route that ran from Egypt to Asia called the Via Maris: picture it as one of the small communities you see exit signs for off that major trade route from East to West that we call I-40. Specifically, Nazareth was situated in the hill country of Galilee, a region of fishing and farming that was also known in Scripture for its distinctive regional accent and for having a large population of Gentiles, a high number of immigrants, foreigners, resident aliens.

Archaeological evidence also shows that Nazareth may have sat somewhat in the shadow of the nearby city of Sepphoris, which was being rebuilt as a regional capital around the time of Jesus. Sepphoris was the place where the action was. Sepphoris was the place with the multiplex cinema- or at least Roman theater. Sepphoris was the place where the young people went off to work and find jobs. Nazareth . . . well, apparently nothing much happens around Nazareth. Nothing to make the news. They apparently don't even have a sign on the edge of town that says, "Welcome to Nazareth, home of . . ." and then the name of some small-time celebrity or state champion high school basketball team.

Even the HarperCollins Bible Dictionary describes Nazareth as, quote, "an insignificant agricultural village." Of course, it would probably say the same thing about Brown Summit, where I grew up, and about most of the rural communities represented in the Thriving Rural Communities program.

So when Philip says we've found the Messiah and he's from . . . well, the insignificant agricultural village of Nazareth, Nathaniel can only say, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Maybe Nathaniel said that not only because of Nazareth's seeming insignificance, but maybe Nazareth also had something of a reputation. After all, Jesus didn't always have the easiest time in Nazareth. Mark says that Jesus could do few healings in Nazareth, because of the residents' unbelief and lack of faith. Matthew suggests the people of Nazareth won't listen to Jesus because they still just think of him as the carpenter's son, Mary's boy. Or we think back for a minute to Jesus' first sermon in front of the home folks, that we read about in Luke 4. Remember how Jesus returns to the synagogue in Nazareth to preach homecoming, and he stands up to read and chooses the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, the let the oppressed go free, the proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then Jesus sits down to teach, and tells them, "Today, now, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing: here, in Nazareth."

At first everybody is proud of him, amazed at his gracious words. They pat each other on the back and say to themselves, "Get a load of Joseph's kid; maybe something good's going to come out of Nazareth after all for a change."

But Jesus' homecoming sermon doesn't go too well after that: it's amazing how much things can change in the course of one sermon. Jesus knows his people so well that he knows what message they most need to hear, and he loves them so much he is willing to preach it. He's said he was anointed to release captives and open the eyes of the blind, so that is what he will do.

Jesus is aware that the people of Nazareth are clamoring for him do the same kind of healings and miraculous cures there as he has done elsewhere. And they probably think that since Jesus is from Nazareth, and that they are his own people, that they'll receive preferential treatment: after all, they're from Israel, and believe they are more important than those Gentiles living across the border.

"Doubtless you will quote to me the proverb, 'Physician, cure thyself," Jesus says. (Not a bad proverb in reference to the clergy health initiative, by the way: 'Physician, cure thyself.' "Minister to the body of Christ, minister to thy body."). But what Jesus is referring to is the fact that the people of Nazareth believe Jesus the physician should heal his own people first: them. But Jesus opens the eyes of their

blind provincialism and tries to set them free from their captivity to racism by reminding them that God's love extends beyond them, that it was to an immigrant widow whom God sent Elijah, and not a widow in Israel, and that out of all of the lepers in Israel, Elisha only cleansed the foreigner Naaman.

At which point the congregation offers to take Jesus cliff diving without the water to soften the landing.

Those of us who've grown up in Nazareth know that it has its challenges. We've seen some of the violence that simmers beneath the surface of civility, the willingness the draw hard lines between insider and outsider, the family identities that can crush true expression of self, the thinly veiled prejudice propped up with a Proverb. Jesus has had to rescue some of us from that. And it's not the last time a congregation in a rural community would try to run a preacher out of town who dared to preach the truth of God's word.

Hearing those stories about Nazareth, you can understand why maybe Nathaniel might have heard enough about the village to ask skeptically, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

And yet the amazing thing is, Nathaniel is about to discover that something beautifully, wonderfully, salvifically good did out of Nazareth. Jesus came out of Nazareth. It was in Nazareth that Jesus was raised. It was in Nazareth that he likely attended synagogue and recited Torah and learned the words of Scripture. It was in Nazareth that Scripture says Jesus "increased in wisdom and in stature and in divine and human favor." And as Lawrence Wood reminds us, all the rest of his life, Jesus would carry the name of his home community with him: on the lips of crowds, demons, and angels, he would be called, Jesus of Nazareth.

There is a sense in which the greatest gift the world has ever received, Jesus, was the gift of a rural community.

The Thriving Rural Communities Initiative has, at its heart, God's love for Nazareth, and for those rural communities that Nazareth is a symbol of. It is an initiative that believes that those communities still have great gifts to give to the world and to the church.

For some people, Nazareth and communities like it are just exits on the highway, undeveloped land, the boondocks, pretty pastorals on the way to somewhere else, or even just a field ed placement or a first appointment.

But God loves Nazareth. As it is. And as it will be. And God cares about the suffering of Nazareth.

Nazareth and the rural communities it represents have gone through a time of great change and suffering over the past 60 years. When I was a pre-medical student, I learned that whenever a baby or small child fails to grow or mature in the proper way, a doctor formally diagnoses the condition as "Failure to Thrive." Usually the condition happens because of bad eating habits, a lack of economic resources, poor parenting practices, emotional stress, or the presence of a genetic defect.

Many rural communities and churches have failed to thrive for some or all of the above reasons. Rural Communities have been the ones who have borne the changes of industrialized agriculture,

and as family farms have disappeared, rural communities have suffered for our insatiable appetite for cheap and highly processed food. Bad eating habits. Rural Communities and small towns have born much of the brunt of globalization's impact, as mills have closed, jobs have been lost, and the textile industry has all but disappeared in North Carolina. Rural school systems, with their smaller local tax base, often have less funding available for schools than their urban and suburban counterparts. Lack of economic resources. Rural Communities have been at the front-lines of the difficult issue of how to welcome the sojourner or foreigner in our midst. Rural counties have struggled with plagues of poverty and hunger; and many in rural areas have tried to address their spiritual emptiness with methamphetamine instead of Methodism. Rural leaders, including rural church leaders, have often lacked courage or proved ill-equipped in facing these challenges in a visionary way. Lack of resources, emotional stresses, innate problems, poor parenting. And a recent newspaper article showed that a disproportionate number of the military casualties and human cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been borne by the people of rural America.

God loves and cares for these communities, and calls upon Christ's church to respond to these challenges creative and faithful ways, so that they can thrive in the abundant life of Christ, and be what they were created to be.

And yet for all of the current struggles, and for all of the real challenges facing our churches in rural areas today, Thriving Rural Communities also believes Nazareth, as it once did, still has great gifts to give the world: gifts of genuine human community, true appreciation for the Creation, a rich storehouse of practical skills and wisdom, a beautiful image of what Christ's church can be.

Nazareth can still offer Christ to the world.

Nathaniel asked Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

And do you remember what Philip said? "Come and see."

To a world and a church that wonders, sometimes skeptically, sometimes hopefully, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?," we hope to say, "Come and see."

I believe that the church of Christ is meant to be a preview of the future, a kind of prequel to the kingdom of God, that shows people now what the heavenly life will be like when Christ's new world comes. We are a kind of visual aid for the kingdom, because people have to see it before they can believe it, and they have to believe it before they can be it.

It is my hope that God will use Thriving Rural Communities to be a preview of renewal in the rural church. I hope that the pastors and students and churches who are a part of this initiative will allow people to see a new future, and seeing that future, to believe in it, and believing in that future, to one day be that future, by the grace of God.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? "Come and see."

Come and see Solid Rock and Sandy Plains and Cedar Grove. Come and see Friendship and Hayesville and Tyro and Fairview. Come and see Disciple Bible Studies' Prison outreach, where the

captives are set free and prison staff are ministered to. Come and see Courage to Serve, where pastors draw upon their communion with each other to lead others to communion with Christ. Come and see students whose lives have been changed by their ministries with country people. Come and see pastors who realize that rural churches are places where the risen Christ is transforming lives and where they can live out a deeply fulfilling vocation.

Come and see the gifts of rural areas.

Or, in those moments when you doubt that anything good can come out of rural communities, come to the cross, come and see there the sign above the head of the crucified Savior of the World, the sign that proclaims him the King of the Jews and be reminded that the sign begins, "Jesus OF NAZARETH . . ."

Thanks be to God. Amen."

Summary – Appointed Rural Fellows Interviews

CAPD **Center for Assessment and Policy Development**

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www.racialequitytools.org

INTERNAL DOCUMENT - 2011

To: **William Bacon, Jeremy Troxler, Robb Webb**
cc: **Ismael Ruiz-Millan**

Fr: **Sally Leiderman**

I am pleased to forward this memo summarizing findings from discussions with the Rural Fellows who are graduated and serving rural North Carolina United Methodist churches.[1] The discussions were held either as part of site visits to the churches (5) or via in-depth telephone interviews (5) in 2010 or 2011 – generally within a few months after the Rural Fellow had begun the appointment. The discussions were wide-ranging, but usually included reflection of what the pastors felt they had learned about rural ministry from the TRC experiences while at school, how they were applying what they had learned, how they viewed their level of preparation and calling for rural ministry at this point in their formation, what they perceived as benefits of having been a Rural Fellow and ways in which the experience might be strengthened, if any, and what they were observing in terms of the opportunities and challenges for leadership in their current appointments. Thus, the interviews contribute to understanding the outcomes of TRC for the first group of Fellows to be appointed to churches, and also provide some baseline information about their ministry now – to enable us to track qualitative changes over time.

All of the Rural Fellows interviewed for this memo were also interviewed while they were seminary students at Duke Divinity School – offering an opportunity for me to observe some of the stability and changes in their formation, calling and capacities with respect to Rural Ministry.

This memo is intended to:

- Provide back-up information for some of the outcomes reported in the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative (TRC) and Thriving Rural Hispanic/Latino/a Communities Initiative (TH/L) 2011 Dashboard reports; and

- Provide some of the depth and flavor of what the Rural Fellows shared, to inform the program and to help all of you tell its story to various audiences.

[1] Findings come from interviews with Leah Skaggs, Jonathan Mills, Jodi Lampley, Jane Almon and Jim Jones (North Carolina Annual Conference) and Duncan Martin, Nicole Jones, Emily Kroeger, Laura Beach and Ken Spencer (Western North Carolina Annual Conference). One other Rural Fellow has been graduated and appointed to a Rural Church – Ismael Ruiz-Millan. He is currently serving as the Director of the Hispanic House of Studies and The Thriving Hispanic/Latino Communities Initiative, so is not included in this set of interviews.

As indicated in the Dashboard report, the information in this memo supports the conclusion that the Rural Fellows aspect of the TRC initiative is achieving its short-term intended outcomes, that is, those that can be observed while Fellows are students and in the early part of their post-graduation appointments. As a reminder, the Rural Fellows aspect of the initiative includes being selected as a Rural Fellow, and the impact that has on the Fellow's formation and access to support from Jeremy Troxler, monthly colloquia, retreats and other gatherings throughout the year, the opportunity for Field Education experiences in TRC churches and other ways of connecting with the pastors of healthy rural churches that are thriving in different ways, opportunities to connect with Robb Webb and Joe Mann not available to other DSS students, encouragement to participate in Encuentro and, for those with sufficient language ability, Caminantes, and other similar opportunities, experiences and supports. Being a Rural Fellow also offers access to the community and network of other Rural Fellows as well as exposure to the intentional ways of fostering relationships that TRC uses to build that community and network – one of the skills important to ministry, and particularly to rural ministry in the Wesleyan tradition.

Information in this memo is also among the evidence supporting the value of the TRC church component of the initiative – particularly in terms of using those pastors and churches as places for Field Education of Rural Fellows. The information in this memo also supports findings related to the value of The Rural Convocation, Joe Mann's class at the Divinity School, Encuentro and Robb Webb's and Joe Manns' efforts to help the Rural Fellows understand the resources of The Duke Endowment. Thus, the memo provides back-up information to support the conclusion, noted in the Dashboard report, that as of September 2011, TRC is meeting its goal to create a cadre of able and committed clergy leaders who are in place to serve North Carolina United Methodist rural churches.

Findings are organized into the following sections: Value-added of TRC as (benefits to Rural Fellows and congregations); Take-aways (key program learnings according to Fellows); and Application (how those learnings and other TRC resources are being applied in Fellows' current appointments). The next section notes some challenges and observations. I hope you will find these useful for reflection. Excerpts from the discussions are included in the last section of the memo. They are organized by topic.

Please note – one of the Rural Fellows asked me if the information from the interviews could be shared in some way with the Fellows. I encourage us to think about some way of making this information available to them, if you think that is appropriate and useful.

ADDED VALUE OF TRC (benefits to Rural Fellows and congregations)

<u>Rural Fellows</u>

All or nearly all of the Rural Fellows who are now serving rural churches report the following specific benefits, which they attribute to their participation in TRC activities, experiences and supports:

- Supporting the accuracy of their discernment that they are called to serve the rural church -- strengthening the clarity and depth of their calling to serve the rural church

- Deepening their understanding of the value of rural churches –
    - their gifts,
    - their place in the body of the church,
    - the opportunities they present to live out Methodism,
    - what rural churches provide to the Methodist connectional system

- Fostering optimism about the possibilities for rural churches – through exposure to healthy rural churches (through Field Education in TRC churches, TRC colloquium, the Rural Convocation and in other ways

- Strengthening the capacity of the Fellows to minister effectively in rural churches and communities – including among those with considerable experience in those settings before they became Rural Fellows. (See examples of ways those capacities are being applied in a later section of this memo). Specifically, TRC helped Rural Fellows:
    - Develop language to express the gifts and values of rural churches
    - Develop their capacities to direct worship and offer sermons in ways that are tailored to their rural congregations – incorporating sound theology and straightforward and understandable language
    - Learn new ways of "being plugged in to" the local community to increase the effectiveness of mission work – through Field Education in TRC churches, Encuentro, visits to migrant worker camps and in other ways
    - Understand more about the resources available through the Duke Endowment, through exposure to Joe Mann's classes and presentations, and Robb Webb's participation in Rural Convocation and other sessions
    - Build their abilities to manage the administrative tasks of a rural church – through Senior Boot Camp, Field Education in the TRC churches, ongoing connections with TRC pastors, Joe Mann's class (particularly discussion of the way to mine church data) and in other ways
    - Enter their initial post-graduation appointments feeling prepared for much of what they will encounter – a perspective that was solidified by conversations with other newly appointed clergy in their districts or communities, who were not part of TRC – who did not have the same awareness, practice and resources on which to draw

- Validating or expanding their vision of church membership , and ways to diversify the membership of rural churches in terms of race, ethnicity and/or income (see examples of ways that vision is being applied in a later section of this memo)

- Being part of a community and network of others called to rural ministry – one in which they can call (and do call) for support, advice and fellowship while in seminary and once they are graduated and appointed. This network includes the other Fellows, Jeremy Troxler, Ismael Ruiz-Millan – both as a Rural Fellow and in his new role as Director of TH/L and the Hispanic House of Studies, TRC pastors, and to some extent, others involved in TRC at the conference, Divinity School and the Duke Endowment.

- Adding to the learning at seminary, by creating an ability for the Fellows to assess and incorporate what they were hearing at school through "the lens of the rural church," as one of the Fellows expressed it.

Congregations

TRC's theory of change assumes that all of the benefits noted above for the Rural Fellows will directly or indirectly benefit their charges, congregations and the communities they serve. Information will be

collected more systematically over the next twelve months from representatives of those sources to explore the extent to which that is true. However, there are already a few positive indications in that direction, noted below. These findings are based on the discussions with Rural Fellows, plus my own observations from site visits, which included conversations with laity.

- Congregations feel more valued
    - Congregations greatly appreciate having clergy who express a deep calling and love for rural ministry – they are "amazed" given other past experiences
    - Congregations are heartened to learn about the existence of the TRC Initiative – they believe the investment signals a connectional interest in their survival and gifts

- Appointments of graduating Fellows seem to reflect deeper understanding of what TRC offers in terms of formation and capacities for rural ministry than was true early on
    - Some Fellows believe that having a former TRC Pastor on the Cabinet has been helpful in this regard
    - Many Fellows feel their appointment was a particularly good fit to their TRC training and formation – they feel very prepared for the particular opportunities and challenges in their setting

- A few of the churches are already experiencing early indications of thriving – as described in the common features of TRC churches
    - At least two churches are working to come to terms with their history, including past conflicts or potential serious transgressions, as part of what they will need to establish a vision for moving forward
    - At least one is altering its worship service to reclaim a more Wesleyan and Methodist theology, another has added worship services – attending to their spiritual work
    - At least one that was previously turned inward is now turning outward toward mission
    - At least one is building leadership among the laity – considering how to sustain its leadership in the face of itinerancy
    - At least two are already reporting markedly increased attendance at worship (this is something we will gather more systematically from data once TRC Fellows have been at their churches longer)
    - Three are in the beginning stages of an intentional exploration of diversity in their congregations – one with respect to race, one with respect to ethnicity/immigration and one with respect to economics/income

TAKE-AWAYS (Major insights about being a rural minister)

I asked the Fellows to highlight what they thought they learned from TRC that was most helpful to them once they were leading a rural church. I asked this question of all of the appointed Rural Fellows – so the points below come from both those who served as student pastors and those for whom their current appointment was their first appointment. The question was intended to help raise up useful parts of the TRC experience and, and also, to help the program as it also seeks to identify priorities going forward. Responses were quite consistent.

Fellows note that the same lessons are reinforced throughout TRC components, which likely contributes to the consistency of response. I was told that the particular lessons were reinforced via mentoring or other supports that Jeremy Troxler provided, Field Education experiences, or for student pastors,

discussions with Jeremy and other Rural Fellows including those who are student pastors and Joe Mann's class (not a TRC component but aligned with TRC).

Fellows also noted they learned from modeling provided in worship services and other TRC sponsored activities – which tend to include intentional relationship building, preaching and reflection opportunities and experiences. In some cases, Fellows said that the basic lesson was also stressed in DDS classes – particularly on preaching – but for the most part, the lessons are part of the value-added of TRC to the DDS seminary experience.

Most important TRC learnings (themes I heard over and over) are:

- Sermons are important – allow sufficient time each week to prepare, story-telling is a powerful tool, people need to understand what the sermon is asking them to do, and your goal is to be understood – so language should be clear

- Worship is important – and it is possible to make changes if you keep people informed and present a theological basis for changes you are making

- The centrality of relationships cannot be overstated – it shows up in how a pastor spends his/her time – visiting is the number one priority

- There are many narratives within the church – you will learn them through relationships – taking time to be with people, to let them be with you, and to let them know you love them will establish the kinds of relationships that allow you to understand the various narratives – there is no short-cut for this process, so be patient and avoid acting on a particular narrative if you can, until all of them have revealed themselves through your growing relationships

- A rural church is often embedded in a community differently from a suburban or urban church – people interact with each other in and outside the church; people care for each other in ways that don't always show up in the church budget (they raise money to help folks in the parking lot; they step in to help each other without discussion, planning or necessarily taking credit; community members not part of the church are often named in prayers within the church);

- Consistent with the points above – the numbers don't tell the whole story

- There is a great deal of love in rural churches – it is an ideal place for spiritual growth and healthy, vibrant ministry

- People in rural churches may value humility and quiet ways of helping others. They may also be struggling economically as individuals, and to pay their apportionments as a body. Consistent with these values and realities, people in rural churches may not see their individual or collective strengths, and they may not perceive themselves as valued within the connectional system – especially if they are also small churches.

APPLICATIONS

<u>How Rural Fellows are applying the lessons above in their current appointments</u>

- Several of the Rural Fellows are taking specific steps to help their churches see their own gifts and to counter feelings that they are not valued. They share their passion and love for rural ministry in all of the ways they can. They also share information about TRC (as evidence of the connectional system's investment in rural churches in North Carolina). In addition, at least one has established prayer meetings for congregants to pray together to hear God's calling for their church. Others are helping their churches heal – having identified "deep hurts of the body of the church – not just individual hurts" – using skills they learned in their Field Education, Encuentro and in the colloquia to address this issue

- The Rural Fellows attend seriously to relationship building – they emphasize listening, being with and visiting with people on the member's "turf" – not just inside the church. They apportion a great deal of their time to this activity.

- As noted above, at least two are focusing on establishing vibrant worship and most are trying to develop worship, and sermons, that reach standards of theological soundness, clarity of language and story-telling they believe TRC set for them. Several have also introduced additional Bible study and/or worship services.

<u>Other applications</u>

There are also some specific examples of Rural Fellows applying TRC resources for the benefit of their ministry and congregations, in ways intended by the program.

- **TDE grant resources** – I have begun asking Rural Fellows about their awareness of the availability of grant resources from the Duke Endowment for eligible rural churches, and whether they or their congregation is currently making use of this resource. I will follow-up on this more systematically next year. Preliminary findings are that:
    - Appointed Rural Fellows are aware of the availability of the funding – they cite Robb's presentation at the Rural Convocation, Joe Mann's class on philanthropy as important sources of that information
    - One take-away from the presentation at the Rural Convocation this year is that most who might consider requesting support would "pick-up the phone and call Robb" early in the process. Another is that some would only look for funds if the church felt called to do something for which those funds would be useful – that is, the money is not driving their decision

- **TRC network** – nearly all of the Fellows are taking advantage of the relationships they have formed with other Rural Fellows. Most are also taking advantage of the continued support being provided by Jeremy. Several also note relationships they formed with TRC pastors that continue to be a source of mentoring or support for them. Examples include:
    - Formation of a covenant group that includes three of the graduated Rural Fellows
    - Calling Jeremy Troxler to ask how to handle a particular issue coming up and/or where there might be resources to help the congregation address a particular community need – many Rural Fellows report having done this at least once since being appointed
    - One Rural Fellow is establishing a leadership coaching relationship with one of the TRC pastors, who is being trained to be one of the coaches
    - Two Rural Fellows serving similar churches – both healthy, about 100 in worship, in the same Conference – are informal peer supports for each other

- **TH/L and Hispanic House of Studies** – a few of the appointed Fellows are also connecting with Ismael with questions or for specific support. For example, he will be preaching one of the Fellows' revivals. Another fellow called Ismael for ideas about how to respond to the needs of a church member, and also, how to address issues about immigration that surfaced during Bible study arranged to help a family integrate itself into the church.

- **Prison and re-entry ministries** – at least one of the Rural Fellows is trying to use information and resources on prison ministry highlighted at the Rural Convocation, and also emphasized by Bishop Carder at the Divinity School, to bring together existing mission work at the church with new ideas about how to better help people address issues of poverty once they are released from incarceration.

OBSERVATIONS AND CHALLENGES

As should be clear from the findings above, considerable evidence is accumulating that indicates the TRC components aimed at helping to form Rural Fellows for leadership in the rural church are having their intended effects. Rural Fellows are bringing considerable passion and knowledge about rural ministry to their post-graduation appointments, taking good advantage of the resources of TRC available to them and applying what they have learned. Some of the churches are already showing early indications of increased vitality, included movement towards diversity and inclusion and openness to deeper spiritual growth and mission. The email you shared with me from David Christy, chair of the Town and Country Committee of the Western Conference, which he shared with TRC, TDE and Bishop Goodpaster, is another source of evidence of the growing benefits of TRC – in exactly the directions intended. All of this speaks very well for TRC.

My observations, and the findings noted above, also suggest that we are beginning to know more about the particular aspects of the program that are most helpful in developing the leadership – in helping to form the Rural Fellows and build their knowledge and skills for Rural Ministry, and in serving as resources for them once they are graduated. These are the things that seem to contribute substantially to the "value-added" of TRC, over and above the seminary experiences provided to all students at Duke Divinity School. Particular ones that come up over and over include:

- Being part of a community of other students and pastors also called to rural ministry;
- Mentoring and modeling provided by Jeremy Troxler;
- Field education at TRC churches – that is, field education in healthy and thriving rural churches
- The opportunity to connect with TH/L experiences and resources
- Joe Mann's classes
- Hearing about the resources of the Duke Endowment and building relationships with Robb Webb
- Being able to let their congregations know that rural churches are valued – citing the existence of TRC as evidence of that

It is also useful to remember that TRC was established in response to a perception that clergy do not always value rural churches, and that small membership rural churches in North Carolina do not always value themselves. Some of the findings above speak directly to that perception, as well as ways in which the Rural Fellows feel called to lead from a different understanding.

Below are just a few observations and reflection questions. They flow mainly from the two points above – our growing understanding of the components of TRC that are particularly important to forming and building the capacities of Rural Fellows, and the context in which TRC was established and its longer term goals.

- Field education in TRC churches is an important program component. It is particularly difficult for student pastors to participate in TRC field education placements – and in most cases, not possible for them to do the traditional summer or year-long placements once they are student pastors. Many of the Rural Fellows in the classes of 2013, 2014 and 2015 are student pastors. Thus, it will be important for the program to figure out a way to make sure the most important elements of Field Education in a TRC church are available to them. As a reminder, important elements include:

    - Relationships with TRC pastors
    - Experiencing different kinds of vital worship
    - Experiencing different examples of preaching that are all theologically sound and clear
    - Learning about different ways in which rural churches are thriving – and the different ways that laity and pastors contribute to making that happen

- As the findings in the body of this memo indicate, TRC is doing a good job preparing Rural Fellows for their post-graduation ministries. This is true for Rural Fellows raised in the rural church or rural communities, and for those not raised in the rural church or rural communities. At this point in the life of the initiative, TRC seems to be doing a very good job at identifying students with a genuine calling for rural ministry, and then in providing both common and more individual supports to help those students build on their strengths and fill in gaps in experience.

- Rural Fellows note that the existence of TRC is one sign that United Methodist rural churches in North Carolina are valued. The Rural Convocation is one tangible expression of that and there are others (for example, the day devoted to rural churches and ministry at one of last year's annual conferences). However, there are also a number of people – laity and pastors – who are concerned that TRC is "swimming upstream" – that rural churches are not part of the future of United Methodism in North Carolina. They point to the recent Call to Action from one of the conferences, and to continuing emphasis on money and numbers within the connectional system. It would be useful for the partner institutions in TRC – the Duke Divinity School, the Duke Endowment and the North Carolina and Western North Carolina United Methodist Annual Conferences – to find ways to talk productively about these concerns, so they can communicate a common message to churches and pastors.

- Many of the Rural Fellows are investigating or putting in place ways to diversity the membership of their churches --- to help their congregations connect to people of different ages, races, ethnicities, income and wealth, for both theological and practical reasons. TRC and TH/L seemed to have helped the Rural Fellows think about how to help their congregations challenge themselves to open up a bit more to people not like them. They may benefit from even more support to navigate this challenge – since they seem willing to take it on.

SELECTED EXCERPTS

All of the excerpts below come from discussions with Rural Fellows after they were graduated and appointed. The excerpts are grouped by general topic. These groupings are not exactly the same as the

ones in the previous section of the memo. That is because many of the excerpts are stories that cross several areas of findings – for example, things learned from the TRC experience while Fellows were in seminary, and how that learning has been applied in their early appointments to rural churches.

Valuing the rural church; helping rural churches recognize their gifts, feeling valued

- ***They are incredible and don't even know it…every single person, whether employed or retired, go, go, go to provide for their families…it is a kind of attitude…if could replicate in larger churches and larger cities, incredible to watch, amazing to me***

- From a Rural Fellow serving a church that had recently experienced internal conflict leading to several members of one family leaving just prior to the appointment. ***This was a church in conflict…people who suffered deep moral hurt ..– [it seems the congregants who observed the conflict were thinking] if that is the way people act in church, don't want any part of it…people who stayed after the split are good people…little by little coming back..they were committed to keeping this church together and keeping it going…they are pretty good students of the Bible…understand that this is what they are called to do***

- ***The rural church – I've seen this in all the placements I've had, has this kind of low self-esteem. Rural churches feel very abandoned by the Methodist church in some way—because they are not large, or not doing a lot of defined program ministry, that they are not important enough in the eyes of the conference – even I got into full-time ministry – it was very shocking, very raw – the pain that folks had about that. But I was prepared, I knew what I was seeing***

- ***So amazing to them that the rural church is where I want to be – I take every opportunity to share with them when I participate in a TRC event – when I went to the Rural Convocation – let them know his was put on by TRC and TDE – make sure that people know – this is primarily for the rural church – planting a seed***

- ***What TRC does very well – each church you serve is a jewel in and of itself***

- ***A person in her late 40's joined the church, amazed that if I had my druthers, I would spend my entire pastorate at a small, local church – she said she had never heard a pastor say that before—that [other] pastors just intimated that I'm here for a little while, and then off to bigger and better…what TRC does very well…each church you serve is a jewel in and of itself…each church has the potential to become the congregation you want to serve…if you want to serve a congregation that has 1000 members, or has a food pantry ministry…start it***

- ***One of first things I did here…so many people came with so many stories, expectations for me and what I would do for this church…without coming right out and saying, but with actions [wanted to help them focus on] what God thought…started a weekly prayer time every Wednesday…7:15 in the morning and 6:15 in the afternoon…open the sanctuary for a time of prayer…be in prayer for the future of [this] church…to focus the entire congregation on praying for guidance…made a huge impact…one regular in the morning and 5 come regularly in the afternoon…if can't make those times, ask people to take the prayer guide and be praying for the church…definitely getting guidance, church moving together***

- ***A concern of the lay people – the people out of the local congregation from which a person is called…they recognize the call of God before anybody else does, and sometimes before you do..the laity has a concern that you will lose that natural sense of call and become indoctrinated into something else...can easily happen when you go to Divinity School…Duke takes itself very seriously, proud of their reputation, a certain amount of arrogance…put forth the idea that they have this all figured out—for example, like something controversial – homosexuality… they feel they have a way to present this to local church, all will be fine …but local church is not a seminary class – it may lead to the same place, but you have to journey with them to get there – I've seen one of my colleagues tout, if Duke said it, it must be right – and he got into a lot of trouble with that, and frankly, he should have..that arrogance can really get in your way if you think you have nothing to learn from the local congregation…on the flip side, in TRC, they go to a lot of effort to make sure you know the local church is a gift… [how]…commitment of the Endowment, not just Jeremy – you know you can learn from the local church and rural congregation…Robb Webb, at the Rural Convocation...you could hear in his voice the passion that he believes.***

- ***I'm thinking TRC leadership can spread beyond the Fellows...one of the things that was a big focus [for TRC while we were in school] in a world all about numbers and size – never going to be a mega-church, the people are made to feel that because their church is small, their church is a failure. Jeremy stresses that is not the case – if small, can impact the community and change lives. Whatever the church, these people are important, gifted, it's part of my calling to help them realize their can impact their community…they can become leaders in the church and ministry.***

<u>Staying grounded in the reality of the rural church</u>

- ***I don't think I can overemphasize how helpful the direction of the [program] was…it helped me understand the differences between rural and other churches. So when I was sitting in class, and hearing about church structure, ethics – I would hear what was being taught, but then, would say to myself, okay, that's okay for a 500 member church, but this part is not applicable – having that lens of the rural church to look through throughout my time at Duke really helped my learning curve***

- ***I loved what I learned at seminary – the intellectual excitement – but the congregation doesn't really care about the Greek or Hebrew text – they want to know if you love them, will be there for them, can they trust you to be a representative of God in their lives.***

- ***Another great learning at Duke – you always need a story as well as numbers. For example, in Joe Mann's class – we had to write up a report about a small membership church – look at data, so I looked at information from one of my field ed placements – a church I know about – confirmed for me that if you make certain assumptions about what is going on in the church – if you don't know the back story – you can make really erroneous assumptions about what is going on in the church -- for example, if you see spikes in attendance, money coming in staying the same – if I didn't know that attendance was related to a particular thing going on with one of the missions – I would make erroneous connections between the attendance and the money – numbers tell one story – but nothing like interviewing live bodies to get the true picture***

- ***What I have learned is that a lot of local mission doesn't get routed through the budget, any need …they collect cash at Sunday School…or, another example, a family in distress in the community – father serving in Afghanistan, mother end the hospital, 12 children in the home with older siblings, family in the church knows about the situation because children are in school with their children…helps out with food, cash…the helping family had to go out of town, passed the word to [the Rural Fellow] and another family at church…United Methodist Woman helping out, then a person comes from the church hands me a wad of cash with hundred dollar bill on top…took this up at Sunday School—that's how mission work gets done***

- ***Jeremy's senior boot camp day was helpful – going over church budgets, paperwork***

- ***Tex Sample at the Rural Convocation was also useful – traditional vs. conservative values – that was helpful in thinking about how to approach political issues – it's a challenge, we talked in different settings and workshops [in TRC] it takes practice and discernment – folks in my church like to talk about political issues in Sunday School***

Worship

- ***We have been drilled by professors and the program [TRC] on not moving too fast, building trust, [but also] drilled on the most important thing is to establish a good worship service, theologically sound and vibrant worship service – that's been my focus – to get that back…I had seen a picture of the old chancel, could see a huge difference in the way the chancel was arranged [compared to now]..theologically made a tremendous statement...a communion rail that had been handmade by a congregant was lost [in the previous picture, but not currently in use].. handmade lectern also not in use. [Rural Fellow suggested to congregation]let's put that back up there.. I am uncomfortable with current configuration…doesn't support Wesleyan theology…don't want to be serving communion to you from the side of the table…let's put the altar back up on the chancel…big change to make in first month (I was worried) but by second service, we had put the lectern and pulpit back up there – moved the altar table to the center of the chancel---making a statement about the centrality of the Eucharist, plus the importance of laity in worship… having the laity come up and do responsive reading from the lectern – showing Word and Table at equal levels…Wesley more centered on the Eucharist….people saying "we feel we are in a Methodist service now" ….. reinforced for me – just tell them what you are doing – in most cases, changes, new ideas, new procedures will be accepted if you explain the theological words behind it (don't use Duke words) – just trying to tell God's story—and narrate them into the story—explaining the story every step of the way***

- ***Value-added? One thing – while DDS prepared me really well for preaching – specifically the combination of Biblical studies, theology courses, Methodist history and theology—the Rural Fellows initiative really pushed the importance to make sure the worship planning and sermon, not a last minute thing every week. So many people, only to going to see them one time a week. Through Rural Fellows, I learned sermon is something you need to something you start on Monday or Tuesday of every week, one of the top things you do, came up time and time again in our colloquiums and Rural Fellow retreats… [also] speaking in a language not too academic, too high church – use practical language – what's the response, what is the point – so when people leave, they don't have to ask "so-what" about the sermon... Randy, at Tyro, was the perfect [example] – he brings together the pastoral care aspect and worship aspect – you know he is educated, you don't leave thinking he is academic or elitist, has a way***

of being conversational in preaching, using common language—not shying away from his education or theology, but making clear how it intersects with everyday life. David Reeves, at one of our retreats, he does sermon as story-telling. Jeremy's preaching, he's extremely smart in terms of theology, has a way of preaching to his audience. I've seen him preach at Duke Chapel, takes his message and speaks to his audience. In a rural setting, he doesn't dumb it down, but clear, simple.

Benefits of Field Education at TRC churches

- ***Field education at the TRC churches was important. I got to meet incredible pastors, and I got to see churches who were healthy even they didn't define healthy the same way as a large church – it was like getting to see the best possible scenarios starting out, gave me a lot of hope and encouragement***

- ***Through all of my field education experiences, I learned a lot about how to lead well and develop leadership among church members – I am still learning how to use those skills, but I have more confidence to think about doing those thing – I don't know that I would have been able to do a year-long field education placement without TRC, and I developed by having the time to put into practice what I was learning***

Benefits of being part of the TRC community, network

- ***A lot of TRC was validation …what I saw as a gift and calling to rural church. Others also felt calling, passionate about serving the rural church…didn't feel I had to dampen my passion for the rural church, didn't feel I had to only respect a Joel Osteen church***

- ***TRC was where a lot of my community developed [at Duke]...they are wonderful people that I have gotten a chance to spend time with…can call now [that I am pasturing a rural church] – it really does make a difference, I don't feel I am alone out here, we [the Rural Fellows network] are a team***

Benefits of Encuentro

- ***I did go on Encuentro—transformative, so much so I think something like that should be an experience for every pastor – not just seminary students. Incredibly humbling experience, to be in a culture different from yours, and to see how a denomination is treated outside a friendly environment…to meet people where they are – it takes you out of the American mindset, and all of your perceived assumptions…see behind the veil…see that these people believe so strongly in the Methodist way that they are willing to suffer for that…can't vote, can't run for office…buildings defaced, and they continue to meet and worship***

2013 TRCI Survey, Question 1 Responses

Q1. ***At this point in your formation, how prepared would you say you are to serve a rural United Methodist church in North Carolina? What are the things you have encountered or will encounter in living and serving in Rural Communities for which you feel most prepared? What are the things for which you feel least prepared?***

GRADUATED RURAL FELLOWS – Verbatim Responses

- I have been serving Rural Churches for 13 years as a P/T student pastor and F/T. I have learned lots from the Rural people of North Carolina. They are passionate about their communities and family life. They support their communities, but are little shy of getting involved with the poor. I feel most prepared for preaching and teaching the word of God, but least prepared for leading folks to get outside the walls.

- After 2 years serving a small rural church, I have learned a great deal that will be of help in the years to come, whether in this church or another one. I felt most prepared to "think theologically" as they say at Duke, and out of that to lead worship, preach, and teach in ways that help the congregation see how and where God is active in their lives, where God's story and their stories intersect. I was not prepared for many things--administration and finance, conflict mediation, moderating meetings, passive-aggressive hostility to female clergy, and social isolation. Talking about it and living it are two different things.

- The TRC program prepared me in a variety of ways to serve in a rural church. The TRC emphasized the importance of building relationships in the rural church. I took Jeremy's advice to find ways to work along side the members of my church (going to their workplace, visiting their homes, working with them at church functions). Another way the TRC prepared me for the rural church was in the area of preaching. The program stressed the importance of preaching as story telling - preaching with illustrations that meet people where they are - using parables, etc.

- I have been in my first appointment for just over two months and most of what I have been doing for the 2-point charge is something for which I've been prepared by my life experiences: fixing broken systems (orders of worship) and loving discouraged people. Both congregations are guarded and are reluctant to trust me, not so much as a person, but as clergy. I have encountered remnants of youth groups that were allowed to disintegrate in favor of a stated preference for a visitation ministry of the elderly and shut-in population. I've encountered the elderly, who were never (not an exaggeration) visited by clergy claiming to be their pastor. I am serving two congregations that have been neglected and I am prepared to serve them because I believe modeling Jesus' love and erring on the side of grace is what I'm called to do. This behavior was modeled by leaders and presenters associated with TRCI. "Just love them." Jeremy Troxler said it more than once, "Just love them." I was least prepared for the barrage of emails that come from the district and conference that always seem to take time away from rebuilding two broken churches. In each email there is a need: send in this report, prepare this form, come to this event, meet with these people...when am I to be a pastor to these two churches that have a spiritual deficit? Because of Jesus, I have the capacity to love that surprises even me. Because of Jesus, I also have the capacity for a disdain for church hierarchy that tolerates pastoral neglect. As for the two congregations, I am just loving them,

praying with and for them, and visiting them. I was not prepared for the emotional responses of parishioners to simple, unadorned, sincere worship, communion, and my desire to build pastoral relationships. Adult men and women unable to speak with tears streaming down their faces, because they hadn't experienced church in such a long time. I was very prepared to "do church" and to worship in the rural communities, I wasn't prepared to follow someone who had "un-done church." Nor was I prepared for the paper pushing and self-evaluations of clergy that I must prepare. I now suspect the paperwork and clergy evaluation of being a value-less time consuming exercises. If there is real value in the paperwork, meaning the evaluations and its information are acted upon - neglectful clergy would be dealt with more promptly before a church's spirituality is sucked dry and their coffers drained by a clergy person who doesn't make the effort to love them. I asked to be sent to a church that was broken, I expected fractures created from in-fighting, not a church with a faint pulse because of pastoral neglect. Teach the Rural Fellows that they may have to clean up someone's mess and put the piece of a broken church back together, and apologize for the lapse in care.

- Upon graduation at DDS, I felt as best prepared as possible for serving a rural UMC congregation. Having completed several field education experiences, I had confidence in my pastoral care and administrative skills. I knew my preaching and teaching needed some work, but I think my seminary experience prepared me adequately. For me, making the transition to a rural community on a social level was much more challenging than learning the skills associated with ministry. This has improved, but taken time. Overall, I'm very pleased with how my expectations of ministry and my preparation for ministry align.

- I believe my experience in the TRC program at Duke Divinity School was vitally important in preparation for rural ministry. I believe I was equipped to be an effective pastor in a rural place. I believe I was most equipped to listen to the people and to value the small places. The hardest part of rural ministry is isolation.

- I am currently serving a rural Duke Endowment church. I am in my fourth year. I came out of long storied career in higher education and taught public administration and urban administration courses. This gave me great incite into context analysis and the importance of collaboration in regards to scarce to non existent resources in a rural context setting. The compartmentalization is an issue that is a detriment oftentimes in rural ministry. Denominational "turf" and protectionism with competition for a super star mission or ministry was somewhat disenchanting.

- After graduating from seminary and serving my appointment for over a year now, I've encountered enough on the ground in ministry to say that I feel confident in my call and preparedness to serve a rural United Methodist church and "speak their language." My own upbringing and context, coupled with my theological training, has been very helpful in joining with the people I'm serving in ministry. However, I still run across the challenge of honoring their own deep-rootedness in the local culture while offering the challenge of the Gospel, not to the point of conflict, but as far as balancing the two in a healthy way. Negotiating these relational dynamics has been life-giving and challenging.

- I feel most prepared to engage in "life together" with my congregation. I understand the importance of daily living with the congregation both in an outside the church building. I am also very aware of the resources and opportunities available to my congregation and myself as we continue in ministry

together. I feel less prepared to address the deep issues of what it means to be a thriving rural church in a conference and state that looks to numerical measures of success.

- I feel very prepared to serve a rural UMC church in NC. As a rural fellow I learned to value and appreciate more how important is the role of rural churches. For instance, I have learned to appreciate the faithfulness of many members who have been faithful to their church in despite of all the changes their church and community has experienced. I was not prepared to deal with the administrative part, like putting together committees, meetings, etc.

- Very well. People skills in working with a culture unlike my own & knowing the sacramental life that enables me to minister and be atuned to the Lord's voice. I was not prepared to deal with some people who let fear, control and hate be their life compass, yet they believe themselves to be Christian.

- I feel very prepared to serve a rural UM in North Carolina. I feel most prepared to assimilate into the community - to help use the gifts of the rural church and graft those into the evolving world and community. I feel least prepared to handle overwhelming demands - essentially, I still struggle to say "no" when I'm already stretched thin.

- As prepared as I possibly could have been. I think the largest benefit of the program was expanding my love and passion for the rural church, rural places, and rural people. The beauty I see in where I am helps me to better live in the present and is felt by my congregation, which in turn inspires them to more fully live into who they really are.

- I was prepared for some of the challenges faced by the rural church. Don't feel I was as prepared for administrative duties (a weakness of mine anyhow)

- I feel adequately prepared to serve as a rural UM pastor in NC. Going into rural ministry, I felt as prepared as possible for understanding the uniqueness of a rural context--common themes of what is and isn't important to a rural congregation, how to be an effective leader and do the work of bringing the gospel message to this specific context. One thing I am still working on figuring out is how much and how soon to push for change; how to balance being authentic to my understanding of the gospel with honoring their traditions/understanding. How do we all grow more faithful in being the body of Christ together? I think this is something we have to continually be learning.

- I consider myself very prepared to serves a rural UM church in NC. I am most prepared in administrative tasks, worship and motivation of the laity. I am least prepared for personal devotion time and spiritual renewal.

- My time in ministry, my time at Duke Divinity School and the TRC have led me to feel very prepared for ministry in my current context. I feel most prepared to interpret and frame rural life theologically. I feel prepared to preach, teach, and order the life of the church. I feel least prepared to accomplish church administrative and executive tasks such as financial administration. I have searched for continuing education and training in this area throughout 4 years of ministry and have found no programs geared toward small church administration.

- I was least prepared for managing the administrative aspects of the church - and the conflict that naturally comes with church. It would be helpful to flesh out some of those bits with the group before launching - perhaps not as part of field ed, but as a retreat topic - giving access to resources for such things.. web building, conflict resolution strategy, leadership strategy.

- At this point in my formation I feel well prepared to serve a rural United Methodist church, specifically in North Carolina. I cannot express enough how prepared I feel to address the challenges of ministry within the life of our rural communities. The TRC Initiative, specifically through the field education placements, the annual retreats, and the monthly colloquiums, provided invaluable times for learning, reflection, and growth. I've been in my first appointment for three months presently and I daily encounter situations where I've relied on my training through the TRCI to guide and inform my faithful attempts to respond. The feedback I've received thus far from my parishioners has been very generous and affirming. I can take credit for very little as it is by God's grace and the excellent training I've received which has allowed me to perform my duties as God's servant. I'm eternally grateful.

- Very prepared. Most prepared for preaching and teaching and story telling. Less prepared for community building and organizational skills.

- I am currently serving my 4th year as pastor in a Rural UMC church. The program has helped me to identify the particular strengths of these rural congregations and to appreciated them for their own gifts and witness. The challenges I encounter are those that many rural communities face: economic decline, racial division, community drain, etc...This program helped to make me aware of those issues and be prepared to but there are no simple solutions.

CURRENTLY ENROLLED RURAL FELLOWS -- STUDENT PASTORS – Verbatim Responses

- I would say that I am quite prepared. Much of that preparation is thanks to the time I have been blessed to spend as a student pastor. I feel the most prepared for pastoral leadership in its many forms. At this time, I do not know of any specific area in which I am not prepared in some sense. I am sure as time passes, more will be revealed.

- As I have only been a fellow for the last month, I have not had many opportunities to explore all of the benefits that this program has to offer. However, I do feel that some of the early leadership training has been helpful.

- I am blessed to be serving already in a Rural Church as a student-pastor. Certainly, all that I am learning through the TRC is applicable NOW and very beneficial. Last year as part of the TRC we visited Anathoth Community Gardens and this was a wonderful opportunity to experience and be exposed to this type of ministry. I have a few people at the church I am serving who want to look into this type of project and ministry and I feel somewhat equipped to help lead them in this area.

- I am currently serving a rural church as a Student Pastor. I have encountered and will encounter a deep sense of family and community that is often not afforded a larger more urban setting. Conflict resolution is something that I feel least prepared to deal with, however, I have experienced conflict within congregations and have navigated it with God's help several times at this point in my ministry.

- I am currently serving in two rural churches as a student pastor and have learned a great deal over the last 8 months. Always looking for more ways to grow the churches though.

- Currently I am serving in a rural United Methodist church in North Carolina. I have been serving the Silk Hope Charge for over a year. I feel that TRC has been very helpful serving the rural church. TRC has helped me to prepare meaningful services, prepare sermons that focus more on stories and parables, understand how to administer the Sacraments. TRC has helped give me ideas on how to bridge the gap with racial and ethnic tensions in the community.

- I've been serving rural churches and communities for a good while now. I'm in my 12th year. You never know what will come up that you have never encountered, but I feel well prepared for all that you can prepare for and the rest, you hope your experience, education, and last but NEVER least, God will help you with the rest.

- After serving in a rural church as a student pastor for the last two years, I feel very prepared. There are still unanticipated things that come up once that seem to require more than my experience provides, but as a rural fellow, I had resources to help me. Within the broader circle of the RMF, I have a small group of similar gender, age, and experience people that have committed to an ongoing covenant group. While we also need to pay attention to voices other than our own, this smaller group provides a source of support that helps me to feel confident as I serve a Rural Church.

- "1.1 -- I have my feelings in context, the evaluative statements of others, and my comparison to others who graduated from DDS alongside me to go by. I would say that I am well prepared to begin in ministry (while not having many of the tools that I will eventually have and also need to thrive in the future).
  1.2 -- I am most prepared to peacefully be in relationships with others and listen to their stories. Jeremy Troxler superbly emulated a presence of peace and listening, and when he needed to chastise, it was always in a spirit of love. Also, many of the speakers and teachers he brought in for us embodied a communal need to know and be connected to one another. These experiences and the connections which they made have made a lot of difference in my relationship building.
  1.3 -- Administration: i.e. Charge Conference, running meetings (more specifically, making sure they don't devolve into cross-talk and story telling or ""smack"" talking), and stepping up to claim the authority given me, when I need to solve problems, by being in charge."

- Having served two rural appointments prior to my current urban appointment, I feel extremly well prepared because of three primary factors. First, practical experience has played a huge role over the last ten years. Second, being in my last semester, I feel that my thelogical education has been shaped and developed in such a way that I feel empowered to serve in the future. Lastly, and what I consider to be the most important, my faith hope and trust are placed in Jesus Christ and powered by the Holy Spirit. I am excited about the opportunity to move back into a rural community and become fully emerged within that community.

- I feel very prepared. I have encountered migrant workers, poverty-stricken families, undocument immigrants, hungry people--all filled with love. Leading a staff is what I am least prepared for.

- I feel very prepared to serve in the rural context. Part of my preparation has been the opportunity to serve as a student pastor in a rural setting. However the TRC program has provided me with a great system of support and guidance. I feel prepared to meet the people where they are and I feel prepared to translate the things that I have learned in seminary to the rural setting so that the scriptures may be applied to their (and my life as well) lives. I feel prepared to use narrative and story to connect with the lives of people and I feel prepared to connect with the community where I will live. I feel least prepared with things such as following the Discipline or other admin matters, however these things are learned from experience.

- I'd say I am fairly well prepared. I have been serving at Rock Creek UMC in Snow Camp, NC since June 2011. One major expectation for rural pastors seems to be that the pastor will visit a lot. This was something I both expected and for which I felt prepared. Visitation of the sick, the shut-ins, and around the community is an important function in becoming part of the community and building relationships.

- The situation I encountered for which I was least (or not at all) prepared was that the church's 175 year old cemetery was not mapped. So when a prominent member of the community died he was buried in the wrong plot and had to be moved. I was not prepared to deal with that situation or with the subsequent need to survey, plot out, and map the cemetery. Just one of the many idiosyncrasies of an old country church.

CURRENTLY ENROLLED STUDENTS OTHER THAN STUDENT PASTORS – Verbatim Responses

- I don't yet feel prepared.

- I feel fairly prepared to serve a rural United Methodist church at this point in my formation. I feel most prepared to meet people where they are at. The two churches that I have served through Field Education were hungry churches, they were hungry spiritually, emotionally, and physically. In my experience many realized that the way they had done things over the past 45 or 50 years were no longer working, and they were looking forward to moving into a more engaging discipleship. None of the churches that I have been around in my 2+ years in Durham have wanted to die, they want to change, they just need some guidance. I have seen this exemplified by some TRC allums who are doing great work, and I have also seen pastors who don't know where to begin with a congregation of 60 year old activists.

- I feel least prepared to deal with administrative issues. I have had the opportunity to sit in on meetings and things of that nature, but I have never served in a directly administrative capacity.

- I feel prepared to enter into different contexts and to absorb such contexts, but I need more preparation on how to effectively lead in a rural setting.

- This is a difficult question for me to answer at present. After having been removed from my first appointment to a rural parish, I am in a season of clarifying my call to the rural church. At present, I feel unprepared to assure my family that their needs will be met by either the local congregation, the surrounding community and the Conference.

- I feel pretty prepared, but still uncertain about the administrative responsibilities I will have as a pastor.

- I have yet to have a field education in a rural parish which will help. Certain colloquim have helped to think about spiritual disciplines and the emotional health of both the congregation and myself.

- Through interacting with others in the Rural Fellows, I feel very confident in serving a rural United Methodist church in North Carolina. Through networking with other Fellows, I find strength and courage to serve the rural churches. While I feel confidant, I do believe that I need more experiences from working in rural churches to be more confidant.

- Building relationships with church members and people in the rural communities is the area that I feel very much prepared. Through the field education, I learned the importance of building valuable relationships with the church members and how those relationships help the church members to grow more spiritually in God.

- One of the major areas that I feel like I lack in preparation is logistics of the church and conference. From my experiences, the most important job of the pastor is to communicate (be the middle person) between the conference and the church. The more effective the communication, the more healthy the church becomes. I don't think the thriving rural fellows has gone through practical things that senior pastors should know. Other practical things that I feel lack in is how to manage budget of the church, how to figure out pension payment, insurance payment, and even tax processes. While it may seem like it is the ""treasure's job"", it mostly fall under to the rural pastor. I believe I can learn more by the rural community addressing the real-down-to-earth issues of being a rural pastor."

- At this point, I feel adequately equipped to serve a rural UMC congregation in North Carolina. My theological formation at Duke Divinity School has been excellent, and the Thriving Rural Communities initiative has helped to intentionally tailor my formation toward future ministry in rural congregations. In addition to classroom learning, Duke's field education has provided practical ministry experience. I have been blessed to serve two wonderful congregations, one of which was intentionally selected for me through the TRCI. I was able to experience and learn from a healthy rural congregation, and hopefully I will be able to model the good practices of this congregation for years to come.

- Much of my own theological reflection has dealt with agrarian communities and the inherent connectivity within such communities. I was blessed to grow up in such a community in rural Union County, and my education at Duke has helped me to articulate and appreciate the gifts of rural communities. I feel prepared to live in and adapt to rural life. I am ready to celebrate the gifts of these places, rather than lament their isolation from larger cities.

- Of course, there is only so much for which three years of theological education can prepare me. I will graduate with experience in preaching and worship leading, but I expect that my first years in ministry will involve a learning curve of sorts. Still, I feel that Duke Divinity School, and particularly the TRCI, has equipped me with a theological framework and practical tools to do ministry in rural North Carolina"

- I feel adequately prepared, but I am only a month into the divinity program. I do feel I will be pretty prepared by when I leave. The areas I feel most interested in being guided more in is the administrative side to being an Elder and providing helpful guidance in how to pour into a rural community while also helping lead these communities to new areas in which they may have never gone before. (Ex: opening church up more for service to the community, making service to other parts of the community besides ones similar to themselves).

- Are we ever really prepared for ministry? Probable not, but TRC has provided me with more practical advice than any of my classes. I have learned a great deal, especially due to my field ed placements in partnering churches and at Hinton Rural life Center. I have learned a lot about pastoral care and how to handle situations that arise in a parish. The only places where I feel less prepared for are preparing for weddings and funerals, but again, can anything really prepare you for that. If anything, the TRC has brought me more in love with the life of the rural church and rededicated my call to ministry and to the service of the rural communities.

- I feel well prepared for ministry in the Rural Church, I'm just feeling nervous about being a lead pastor in general right now. The TRC has done well to prepare me for understanding the unique mindsets, cultures, and challenges which this kind of setting will hold. In addition to growing up in rural NC, I have also taken classes in Leadership of a Small Membership church with Joe Mann, Introduction to Christian Education, and I am in Care of Creation with Dr Norman Wirzba. All of these classes have helped me understand some of the realities of rural church ministry.

- After my most recent field education experience with one of the [former] TRC partner churches, I would say that I have made great gains in feeling confident to serve a rural parish. I have developed a deeper commitment to the rural church, and have deepened pastoral skills, in part due to my field education placements, participating in TRC events, and conversations with TRC directors.

- I lack some competence in administrative areas, but mostly because of my inexperience within the local church. Some things, such as how to effectively run a charge conference, are really answered within the parish."

- I am a first year student so I feel that I still have some growing to do.

Early Indications of Thriving Churches

- There is a clear articulation of identity
    - People know the stories of the church, of the place, of themselves as a community – they draw strength and connection from these stories

- There is an intentional and tangible sense of inward focus – on people's individual spiritual growth and the spiritual foundation of church activities

- There is a similarly intentional and tangible outward focus, on mission and community contribution

    - Clergy are thoughtful and intentional about both of these areas of focus
    - The members of the church feel that current clergy has "filled the gap" in inward or outward focus, whichever they felt to be less prevalent before the appointment of the current clergy

- The church holds itself accountable for the active welcoming of new people. This is reflected in activities, the design of worship services, specific strategies to embrace and connect with newcomers (prayer groups and assignments, visiting, study groups, social activities and the way church buildings are physically arranged and the materials that are in the vestibule).

- The church sees itself as rich in resources

- The members see the strength and opportunities in itinerancy

    - They expect to invest prayer and effort in building a relationship with new pastors
    - They take seriously their responsibility to interns and students
    - At the same time, many of the TRC church clergy have been at their current appointments longer than the average for previous clergy at that same church (the time period varies quite a bit by church)

- Youth education and youth involvement are considered assets

    - This is about a value and aspiration – not the extent of programming – youth education and youth involvement are considered assets both in the churches with very active youth and a great deal of youth programming and worship opportunities, and the churches whose youth activities are much less fully developed

- Similarly, missions, mentoring, relationship building across generations and outside of one's own family are valued by members

- Members value their pastor's ability to help them call forth their own gifts

    - Each member is a minister

- They feel supported and not pushed

- In several instances (though not all), the church sees itself as resilient (or building resilience) because of difficulties they have moved past

    - They have weathered conflict and are still together
    - They are formed or drawn together because they see themselves as outsiders or in rebellion or resistance to the status quo (including the hierarchy of the church)

- The church is busy – there is something for everyone

- People feel a sense of competence as an institution – for example, they are accomplished at financing and erecting a new church building; establishing and growing missions; and/or see themselves as good stewards of money and fiscally sound.

- There is a core group (about 30%) of the church who are very active

- At the same time, there is a sense (or a growing sense) that the church is not the building – or the particular community of people – but something different, greater, less able to be articulated and more spiritual

<u>Important areas of difference noted so far</u>

- Clergy roles
- Roles of lay leadership
- Specific gifts noted (we are very good at putting roofs on buildings; we are very loving to one another; we know how to manage conflict)
- The extent to which people use scriptural or theological language as they describe who they are as a church – some clergy and churches are very spiritual in their language and some are less so – though they tell stories that demonstrate their belief and interest in sprit
- Size
- Levels of material affluence (average affluence and the mix of affluence within the church, and in the communities from which the churches draw)

TABLE 3: Formation of Rural Fellows

Perceived contributions of being a Rural Fellow in 13 potential areas of growth[2]

3.1 Ability to articulate rural church gifts and values	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	46%	46%	8%	--
Current student pastors (n=13)	69%	31%	--	--
Alumni (n=21)	86%	14%	--	--
ALL (N=47)	70%	28%	2%	--

3.2 Ability to create effective sermons for rural congregations	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	15%	62%	8%	15%
Current student pastors (n=13)	54%	38%	8%	--
Alumni (n=21)	33%	57%	10%	--
ALL (N=47)	34%	53%	9%	4%

3.3 Ability to help rural congregations develop meaningful worship	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	31%	31%	23%	15%
Current student pastors (n=13)	46%	46%	--	8%
Alumni (n=21)	30%	60%	10%	--
ALL (N=47)	35%	48%	11%	7%

3.4 Ability to engage across cultures and race/ethnicity for worship or service	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	31%	31%	15%	23%
Current student pastors (n=13)	31%	46%	23%	--
Alumni (n=21)	43%	38%	19%	--
ALL (N=47)	36%	38%	19%	6%

[22] Numbers do not always add to 100% due to rounding

3.5 Ability to invite others to profess faith in Jesus Christ	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	8%	62%	31%	--
Current student pastors (n=13)	31%	54%	15%	--
Alumni (n=21)	25%	45%	30%	--
ALL (N=47)	22%	52%	26%	--

3.6 Ability to make disciples for Jesus Christ	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	31%	62%	8%	--
Current student pastors (n=13)	54%	31%	15%	--
Alumni (n=21)	62%	24%	14%	--
ALL (N=47)	51%	36%	13%	--

3.7 Ability to invite, welcome and engage youth and children in the life of the church	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	23%	15%	46%	15%
Current student pastors (n=13)	46%	31%	23%	--
Alumni (n=21)	33%	48%	14%	5%
ALL (N=47)	34%	34%	26%	6%

3.8 Better understand how to engage with communities for mission	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	38%	38%	8%	15%
Current student pastors (n=13)	46%	46%	--	8%
Alumni (n=21)	67%	33%	--	--
ALL (N=47)	53%	38%	2%	6%

3.9 Better understand how to administer a rural church	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	15%	31%	31%	23%
Current student pastors (n=13)	23%	38%	31%	8%
Alumni (n=21)	38%	33%	19%	10%
ALL (N=47)	28%	34%	26%	13%

3.10 Better understand resources and supports available through the Duke Endowment	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	62%	31%	--	8%
Current student pastors (n=13)	62%	23%	--	15%
Alumni (n=21)	90%	10%	--	--
ALL (N=47)	75%	19%	--	6%

3.11 Better understand how to access Conference resources and support	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	15%	31%	46%	8%
Current student pastors (n=13)	23%	46%	15%	15%
Alumni (n=21)	24%	48%	24%	5%
ALL (N=47)	21%	43%	28%	9%

3.12 Better understand how to exercise leadership within the Rural Church	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	15%	54%	15%	15%
Current student pastors (n=13)	38%	38%	15%	8%
Alumni (n=21)	62%	29%	10%	--
ALL (N=47)	43%	38%	13%	6%

3.13 Better understand how to exercise leadership within the surrounding community	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet contribute)
Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	--	54%	23%	23%
Current student pastors (n=13)	23%	54%	15%	8%
Alumni (n=21)	57%	24%	19%	--
ALL (N=47)	32%	40%	19%	9%

TABLE 4: Perceived Benefits of Being a Rural Fellow

BENEFIT		PERCENT REPORTING THEY HAVE EXPERIENCED THE LISTED BENEFIT			
		Current students (other than student pastors) (n=13)	Current student pastors (n=13)	Alumni (n=21)	ALL (N=47)
4.1	Able to call on other Fellows for advice or support	85%	100%	95%	94%
4.2	Forming (becoming part of) Clergy groups for support in rural ministry	62%	77%	67%	68%
4.3	Exposure to different ways rural churches thrive	77%	85%	95%	87%
4.4	Able to call on the TRC Director for mentoring and advice	92%	83%	100%	94%
4.5	Mentoring by my Field Education pastor	77%	23%	71%	60%
4.6	Able to call on resources of the Hispanic House of Studies	8%	69%	55%	47%
4.7	Guidance in my ordination process	75%	62%	86%	76%
4.8	Deeper sense of calling to the rural church	85%	100%	90%	92%
4.9	Having a frame of reference to apply to my school work	100%	92%	95%	96%
4.10	Practical experience doing worship	92%	92%	90%	92%
4.11	Practical mission experience	62%	77%	76%	72%

2013 Thriving Rural Communities Initiative survey

This survey is being sent to you as part of the evaluation of the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative (TRCI). Information will be used to help tell the story of TRCI over its first six years and to inform the program as it moves forward. All answers will be reported as themes, via anonymous excerpts (quotes) or in the aggregate, except where specifically noted. The exceptions are reflections on local churches being served by appointed Rural Fellows or student pastors. We are piloting those questions for possible baseline information going forward.

Please get in touch with Sally Leiderman at sleiderman@capd.org with any questions or if you need help with the survey. Please get in touch with Rev. Brad Thie, TRCI Director, at bthie@div.duke.edu to verify the legitimacy and purposes for this survey. Thank you for taking time to answer each question as thoughtfully and candidly as you can. We very much look forward to your opinions and insights.

Sally Leiderman

2013 Thriving Rural Communities Initiative survey

1. At this point in your formation, how prepared would you say you are to serve a rural United Methodist church in North Carolina? What are the things you have encountered or will encounter in living and serving in Rural Communities for which you feel most prepared? What are the things for which you feel least prepared? The text box below will expand -- please provide as full an answer as you wish.

2. The next questions concern the experience of being a Rural Fellow. We know from discussions with many of you how comprehensive those experiences can be. We also know every Fellow starts at different places and grows in different ways.

For each item below, please describe your sense of the extent to which being a Rural Fellow has or has not contributed to your own growth in that particular area. Please be as candid as you can, thinking about just what you would consider the added value of being a Rural Fellow in that area, to the extent it is possible to think about that separately from all of your other experiences.

	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet) contribute
Ability to articulate rural church gifts and values	◯	◯	◯	◯
Ability to create effective sermons for rural congregations	◯	◯	◯	◯
Ability to help rural congregations develop meaningful worship	◯	◯	◯	◯
Ability to engage across cultures and race/ethnicity for worship or mission	◯	◯	◯	◯
Ability to invite others to profess faith in Jesus Christ	◯	◯	◯	◯
Ability to make disciples for Jesus Christ	◯	◯	◯	◯
Ability to invite, welcome, and engage youth and children in the life of the church	◯	◯	◯	◯

2013 Thriving Rural Communities Initiative survey

3. For each item below, please describe your sense of the extent to which being a Rural Fellow has or has not contributed to your own growth in that particular area. Please be as candid as you can, thinking about just what you would consider the added value of being a Rural Fellow in that area, to the extent it is possible to think about that separately from all of your other experiences.

	Contributed enormously	Contributed somewhat	Contributed a little	Did not (yet) contribute
Better understand how to engage with rural communities for mission	◯	◯	◯	◯
Better understand how to administer a rural church	◯	◯	◯	◯
Better understand resources and supports available through the Duke Endowment	◯	◯	◯	◯
Better understand how to access Conference resources and support	◯	◯	◯	◯
Better understand how to exercise leadership within the Rural Church	◯	◯	◯	◯
Better understand how to exercise leadership within the surrounding community	◯	◯	◯	◯

4. Please tell us anything here that will help us better understand your answers to the questions above.

5. Was there anything about being a Rural Fellow that is changing/has changed your imagination or vision about rural churches? If yes, in what ways? If no, why or why not?

2013 Thriving Rural Communities Initiative survey

6. Rural Fellows have suggested a number of possible benefits of being a Rural Fellow while at the Divinity School and in their early appointments. Please indicate whether you personally have or have not experienced any of these benefits to date -- and, no is a perfectly acceptable answer (smile).

	Yes	No	Not sure
Able to call on other Fellows for advice or support	◯	◯	◯
Forming (becoming part of) Clergy groups for support in rural ministry	◯	◯	◯
Exposure to different ways rural churches thrive	◯	◯	◯
Able to call on the TRCI Director for mentoring and advice	◯	◯	◯
Mentoring by my Field Education pastor	◯	◯	◯
Able to call on resources of the Hispanic House of Studies	◯	◯	◯
Guidance in my ordination process	◯	◯	◯
Deeper sense of calling to the rural church	◯	◯	◯
Having a frame of reference to apply to my school work	◯	◯	◯
Practical experience doing worship	◯	◯	◯
Practical mission experience	◯	◯	◯

7. What do you see as key challenges for ministry of rural churches going forward?

8. Thinking about your last answer, are there ways TRCI can help address any of the challenges you mentioned? Why or why not? How?

9. The next questions will be used to help describe Fellows and to look for ways of grouping responses to this survey.

Are you:

- ◯ Male
- ◯ Female
- ◯ Prefer not to answer

10. What year did you graduate, or if you are still a student, do you expect to be graduated from the Duke Divinity School?

- ◯ 2008
- ◯ 2009
- ◯ 2010
- ◯ 2011
- ◯ 2012
- ◯ 2013
- ◯ 2014
- ◯ 2015
- ◯ 2016
- ◯ 2017
- ◯ 2018
- ◯ 2019

2013 Thriving Rural Communities Initiative survey

11. Please check all of the TRCI experiences below that you have participated in at least once (so far).

- [ ] Field Education at one of the TRC churches
- [ ] Encuentro
- [ ] Caminantes
- [ ] "Boot Camp"
- [ ] TRCI Colloquia
- [ ] TRCI Rural Fellow Retreats
- [ ] TRCI Rural Fellow Alum Retreats
- [ ] Visited with Migrant Farm Workers
- [ ] Convocation and Pastors School (October)
- [ ] Convocation on the Rural Church (August)

12. Are you currently:

- ◯ A Student Pastor
- ◯ A DDS student, but not a student pastor
- ◯ A graduated Rural Fellow

Other (please specify)

13. Are you currently serving

- ◯ A single church charge
- ◯ Multiple church charge
- ◯ I am not currently serving as a local church pastor

14. Are you currently serving a Duke Endowment Eligible Rural church?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Not sure

2013 Thriving Rural Communities Initiative survey

Reflections on current charge

The next set of questions are designed to help you reflect on various aspects of your current charge. There are four questions in the set. Please answer the full set (all four questions)once for each church you serve. If you indicated you serve a single church, the set will not be repeated. If you indicated you serve a multiple charge, it will be repeated up to two times.

15. Please indicate the name of the name, location and Conference ID number for the local church you serve. If you serve more than one local church, please indicate the name, location and Conference ID number for any of the ones you serve. Please answer the next four questions thinking just about that church.

16. It is hard for a church to be good at everything. Every church is better at some things than others. Each church also has its own particular set of gifts and challenges. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-Very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-Very much a gift
.We know our history and identity as a church and draw strength from stories about them	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We attend deeply to people's individual spiritual growth	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our life as a church is grounded in scripture	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our worship is inspiring and helps people feel God's presence	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We engage in regular hands-on, face-to-face service and mission work	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

17. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church" and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-Very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-Very much a gift
Youth education and youth involvement are considered assets – we value young people, whether we have a few or many	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We believe and take steps to ensure that each “member is a minister” – we help people discern and live in their gifts	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know that the church is not the building – or a particular community of people – but something greater, different, more spiritual and harder to see or articulate	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
There is something for everyone here	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

18. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-very much a gift
We focus a great deal of attention on welcoming people into our church	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Regardless of our material well-being, we believe ourselves to be a church rich in resources of talent, spirit and energy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We see the strength and opportunities in itinerancy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our congregation accepts a responsibility to build relationships with each new pastor	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

2013 Thriving Rural Communities Initiative survey

19. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-very much a gift
We are resilient. We have weathered change or conflict & can help others do so	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We embrace change - we like our traditions but we are also genuinely willing to do things differently if change is called for	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know how to be multi-racial and multi-ethnic in our worship and connections	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know how to be multi-cultural in our worship and connections -- for example, across age, income, whether someone has been here a long time or is new to the community	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

20. Please tell us anything here that will help us understand your answers to the last set of questions.

21. Do you currently serve any other local church?

◯ Yes

◯ No

22. Please indicate the name of the name, location and Conference ID number for the second local church you serve. Please answer the next four questions thinking just about that church.

23. It is hard for a church to be good at everything. Every church is better at some things than others. Each church also has its own particular set of gifts and challenges. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-Very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-Very much a gift
We know our history and identity as a church and draw strength from stories about them	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We attend deeply to people's individual spiritual growth	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our life as a church is grounded in scripture	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our worship is inspiring and helps people feel God's presence	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We engage in regular hands-on, face-to-face service and mission work	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

24. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church" and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-Very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-Very much a gift
Youth education and youth involvement are considered assets – we value young people, whether we have a few or many	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We believe and take steps to ensure that each “member is a minister” – we help people discern and live in their gifts	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know that the church is not the building – or a particular community of people – but something greater, different, more spiritual and harder to see or articulate	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
There is something for everyone here	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

25. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-very much a gift
We focus a great deal of attention on welcoming people into our church	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Regardless of our material well-being, we believe ourselves to be a church rich in resources of talent, spirit and energy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We see the strength and opportunities in itinerancy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our congregation accepts a responsibility to build relationships with each new pastor	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

2013 Thriving Rural Communities Initiative survey

26. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-very much a gift
We are resilient. We have weathered change or conflict & can help others do so	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We embrace change - we like our traditions but we are also genuinely willing to do things differently if change is called for	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know how to be multi-racial and multi-ethnic in our worship and connections	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know how to be multi-cultural in our worship and connections -- for example, across age, income, whether someone has been here a long time or is new to the community	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

27. Please tell us anything here that will help us understand your answers to the last set of questions.

28. Do you currently serve any other local church?

◯ Yes

◯ No

29. Please indicate the name of the name, location and Conference ID number for the third local church you serve. Please answer the next four questions thinking just about that church.

30. It is hard for a church to be good at everything. Every church is better at some things than others. Each church also has its own particular set of gifts and challenges. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-Very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-Very much a gift
We know our history and identity as a church and draw strength from stories about them	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We attend deeply to people's individual spiritual growth	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our life as a church is grounded in scripture	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our worship is inspiring and helps people feel God's presence	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We engage in regular hands-on, face-to-face service and mission work	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

31. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church" and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-Very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-Very much a gift
Youth education and youth involvement are considered assets – we value young people, whether we have a few or many	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We believe and take steps to ensure that each “member is a minister” – we help people discern and live in their gifts	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know that the church is not the building – or a particular community of people – but something greater, different, more spiritual and harder to see or articulate	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
There is something for everyone here	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

32. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-very much a gift
We focus a great deal of attention on welcoming people into our church	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Regardless of our material well-being, we believe ourselves to be a church rich in resources of talent, spirit and energy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We see the strength and opportunities in itinerancy	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Our congregation accepts a responsibility to build relationships with each new pastor	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

33. Please indicate your perception of each item below for the church you serve, using a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "very much of a challenge for this church and 7 being "very much a gift for this church."

	1-very much a challenge	2	3	4	5	6	7-very much a gift
We are resilient. We have weathered change or conflict & can help others do so	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We embrace change - we like our traditions but we are also genuinely willing to do things differently if change is called for	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know how to be multi-racial and multi-ethnic in our worship and connections	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
We know how to be multi-cultural in our worship and connections -- for example, across age, income, whether someone has been here a long time or is new to the community	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

34. Please tell us anything here that will help us understand your answers to the last set of questions.

35. The survey was designed to help us gather information, and possibly as a reflection tool for you or other pastors. Please offer any feedback about the survey that can help us improve it. This is the last question in the survey -- please hit DONE below to make sure all of your responses are saved in our data base. Thank you very much.