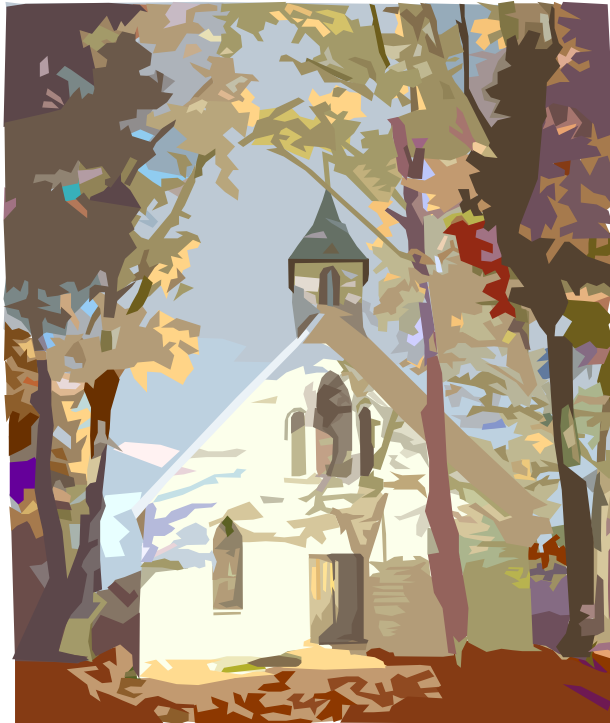


Undercurrents of Change in Rural Church Culture
An Assessment of Pastoral Experience and Needs



Rural Communities in Transition Initiative
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OVERVIEW / PURPOSE

Clergy of rural congregations face challenges unique to the setting in which they minister. Rapid and significant changes in rural America (economic, demographic, etc.) affect individual, family, community, and thus church life. Life in rural America has changed dramatically, particularly in the past two or three decades. It has become more difficult to sustain a family with a farming income alone. Industry, such as textile manufacturing, once based in rural communities has been moved offshore and jobs have been lost. As cities grow and suburbs expand, many rural communities have found themselves at the edge of, or even overtaken by, new commercial and housing developments.

As rural pastors minister to and with individuals, the complex confluence of the impact of the changes which those individuals encounter necessarily impacts and shapes ministry in rural congregations. Understanding not only the changes which are taking place, but how (and on what levels) those changes affect rural parishioners seems critical to not only lively and rich rural ministry, but to the welfare of both congregations and their pastors.



The Rural Communities in Transition Initiative (RCITI) aims to help rural pastors care for themselves while discerning and responding to the needs of rural communities in transition, connecting them with the resources they need to honor the past, face the present realities, and move forward with hope by embracing the best of both the old and the new.

This document will summarize and present the findings of the first 24 months of RCITI work, particularly findings generated from two data sources: focus groups and a needs assessment / planning session. In addition, this document will describe RCITI efforts to-date and offer insight into possible next-steps in the work of the Rural Communities in Transition Initiative (RCITI) team.

The details of this document are aimed at a number of different audiences – all with the hope of increasing the understanding and support of rural clergy as they minister to God’s people. For rural pastors, this document may help articulate and confirm the situations in which they find themselves. For those in central church leadership, these findings will give a deeper and broader understanding of the issues with which rural clergy struggle and the environment in which they work. For an academic audience, this audience may provide information with which to aid in preparing future ministers for work in rural parishes.



A PICTURE OF LIFE IN A RURAL CONGREGATION

In order to give a glimpse into the life of rural clergy, the RCITI team has created the following account of life in a rural congregation. While this account is fictional, it is based on the types of experiences which the RCITI has encountered and heard from rural clergy members. In this account we will hear the perspectives of both Matt (a young, rural pastor) and Anne (one of his parishioners.)

From Matt's perspective, Part I... Just out of Divinity School, Matt was appointed to a small rural church about 25 miles outside of Chapel Hill. For the first several months, he preached to the same 25 people (largely from the same 4 extended families) all of whom had been in the community for generations. Matt had an idea from school about what the first few months of ministry were "supposed" to be like, but so far things were not following that presumed plan. He kept in touch with a number of friends from divinity school; and for the most part, they were having fabulous times in their suburban and city placements.



Matt felt differently. Frustrated by feelings of stagnation, and feeling the pressure from the district and the conference to get the numbers of people and donations coming into the church up, Matt started looking for ways to grow his small congregation.

While driving back from town one day, Matt realized that the development that has been built just 4 miles down the road from the church property is nearly completed. It is now full of new families, many of whom have moved out from Chapel Hill or Greensboro, looking for a quiet place to raise their kids. For the first time in months, Matt feels hopeful and excited. There is a whole new set of people, all of whom have significant disposable income and are certainly looking for a new church, and he has the perfect location. Matt suspects that this is also a set of people with new ideas, new energy, and the desire for success to make something happen. Matt decides that his congregation needs these people. If he can turn this church around, he will be a rising star in the district, maybe even the whole conference, and is sure to get a real posting in Cary or Raleigh.

Within a few weeks of his epiphany, Matt has called together a membership committee, designed an outreach plan complete with flyers and church members going door-to-door to invite people to a grand welcoming service, and the initiative is launched.

Much to his disappointment, it falls flat. Half of the committee members rarely make it to the committee meetings. And, after a good start, the house-to-house visits taper off one-third done. The people who come to the welcoming service don't come back, and the current congregation members complain about people in "their" parking space or sitting in "their" pew. Matt winds up even more frustrated, angry and demoralized than he was before his epiphany and feels like he has been banished to Siberia.

He gets the feeling that the congregation is feeling the same way, only about him. "These people," he complains to his wife, "have no idea about spreading the gospel, and are so set in their ways that change is impossible. What am I even doing here?"

From Anne's perspective... Anne has lived in this county – within the same few miles – her whole life, other than the 4 years at NC State in Raleigh. Her brother now runs the farm that she grew up on, and she lives on her husband's family land, which her brother rents and farms. Her husband tried farming but didn't make it. After farming for a while, he worked in a knitting mill for a few years, but it closed, and so now he drives to Greensboro every day to work at Lowe's.

Anne has gone to the same church her whole life. It used to be a wonderful community to be a part of, but that's not really the case anymore. The problem started to get really bad a few years ago...

As the oldest daughter, and the only girl who has stayed near home, care for her mother fell to Anne. Her mother has Alzheimer's, and while she was doing fine there for awhile, it had been getting much worse. Between caring for her kids, keeping house, work in the school and caring for her mother, it got to be too much for Anne to handle. Her mother needed full time attention, and she couldn't give it to her. To her deep shame, she realized that she could not handle caring for her mother any more.



Insurance would cover a part of a nursing home, but there wasn't one in the area - the only local option was in-home care, which the insurance wouldn't cover. Anne really wanted to keep her mother close so she could still get out into the garden and see her grandchildren and go to church. To keep their mom close by, Anne had to come up with a big chunk of money, more than they had ever hoped to make, and she had to do it quickly. After a series of long, tearful nights, Anne and her husband sold the 100 acres that her dad had left her. There was no other choice, and it broke Anne's heart.

Anne's brother hit the roof when he learned about the property sale. He farmed that land and needed the income. She sold it right out from under him, and this could put him under. But she knew that he couldn't afford the price that they needed, and to give him the option that was out of his reach would have been worse. As it was, he stopped talking to her. His family and his wife's family did too. If her brother went out of business, it would drag their farm down too.

The comments to Anne had started as soon as the plan became clear – from friends, relatives, and even strangers. “How could you do that to your father?” “I know you did what you had to, no matter WHAT anyone says.” “With all that money is your husband going to retire?” At Church, she had to sit and look at all of the people who she knew were disappointed in her. It hurt deeply, even if she knew she hadn't had a choice.



But the man who bought the land went to the church as well, and it was worse for him. He was thought of as no less than a traitor - even though it was his money more often than not that paid the power bill and the water bill for the church.

Even with all of the changes, everyone still sat in their same spots in the sanctuary. Anne always sat down front on the side that faced the organ not the pulpit. Her brother used to sit with her, but now has moved across the aisle, and the man who bought the land still sat half way back. But they didn't linger after church any more. It wasn't only her brother, but now people just didn't know what to say to each other.

The church pretty much split over it. Interestingly it was the newer people in the church, the ones who had moved into the area in this generation, who seemed to resent the sale the most. They seemed to want to be able to close the door to the county after them. They had moved to the country intentionally to get away from crowds and housing developments.

There were a few people who sympathized with Anne, but that was mostly people who liked the idea of development because it meant that when they sold their land it would be worth even more. Mostly she just focused on keeping the care for her mother going, which was turning out much more expensive than they had planned, and it was much more difficult to keep good people.

Anne drives by the development at least twice a day, but she can't bear to look in, much less drive on the roads named after dairy cows. The people in those houses looked like their lives were so easy. She couldn't decide how she felt about the people who laid their heads where her father and grandfather and great grandfather had grown corn and raised cows. Their clothes were nicer, houses were nicer, and lives were nicer. She couldn't decide whether she was angry, jealous, or ashamed. But one thing she did know – the church was hers. It was one of the few things she had left. And she would be damned if she would open the door for one of them.

From Matt's perspective, Part II... After worship one Sunday, Matt was exhausted. It has been a long 10 months in this church for him. He was ready to go home and take a nap, just as soon as he closed up the church. On his way out he heard from a parishioner that Anne's mother had been rushed to the hospital late last night. Even though Matt hadn't seen Anne in church for months – and he didn't know why – he decided that he should probably stop by the hospital before going home that morning.

Matt spent time in the hospital room sitting with Anne and her mother. Doctors suspected a stroke, and Anne's mother remained in a coma. Even though Matt was exhausted, he found the energy to ask Anne how she was doing. Much to Matt's amazement, Anne really opened up – she finally told her whole story – that life was hard at home – that she wanted to worship, but church didn't really feel like such a great place to be anymore – that she was mad, mad at herself, mad at her brother, mad at all of the comments, mad at all of those new people, and worst of all, even mad at her mother sometime.

Matt listened and found himself offering silent prayers for Anne. He knew that there was a lot going on in her life, but he had no idea of all of the levels and layers of stress. Eventually Anne was silent with tears running down her face. Matt asked if he could offer a prayer, and if she would like to talk again sometime. She said “Yes” to both offers...



As he drove home, Matt thought about Anne, about her family, about the church, about all of those new families, about his frustration in his attempt to minister here... Eventually it was like a light bulb went on for him... Somehow things had changed in his thinking after hearing Anne talk. He didn't know what to do next, but finally began to understand the real reality of pastoring a rural congregation – there were people to preach to and serve with, but it was more complicated than that... Relationships and families and jobs and healthcare and farms and development somehow all swirled around in the lives of these parishioners.

Somehow the church needed – he needed – to acknowledge all of those interconnections and figure out what role the church did and could play amidst all of the swirling and all of the changes... No wonder the past 10 months had been so hard. But somehow now he felt a new energy... Matt felt deep sympathy for Anne and the other members of his congregation and couldn't wait to get home and tell his wife about his “discovery” and begin to pray about what to do next...

BACKGROUND

RCITI efforts grew out of a series of conversations between church leaders, pastors, community organizers, and academics. It seemed clear to each of these individuals that life and leadership in rural congregations could be uniquely challenging – sometimes even difficult and unpleasant – especially as societal, economic and cultural changes impacted ways of life for rural residents. Among this group, there was a shared hope that a closer look at these changes and their impacts might help both ministry and congregational life in rural settings.

The following reflections help illustrate these observations and hopes:

As a few leaders (laity and clergy) across our district began to reflect with me about the changing demographics of our district – especially in Alamance and Orange Counties, along the Interstate 40 and 85 corridors. We determined that we best give intentional pause to some pro-active imagining of both the present and the future of these areas, particularly as they impact local United Methodist congregations.



The rural communities were already ceasing to be dependent upon the family farm. Instead, farms were sitting idle. There clearly was an element of despair, hopelessness, even depression and grieving over that farming livelihood and family history that was being lost. In some cases, the land was being sold to developers who were carving up pastureland to build streets and expensive homes for new homeowners, who were relocating from nearby urban areas and sought the "peace and quiet" of the country while commuting back to the city for employment.

We began to ask questions like:

- *What can be done to help congregations and communities deal with these changes that are taking place all around them?;*
- *What can be done to provide healthy systems for grieving the loss of the family farm and way of life?;*
- *What can we do to honor the past, acknowledge the present, and embrace the future?;*
- *What is feasible for helping these new neighbors from a more urban culture and way of life integrate and connect with the pioneers who have been on this land for generations---How do we meet our new neighbors, and do we really care to?;*
- *What effects do these new neighbors have upon rural congregations which have been defined in identity and practice for generations by several key families (and patriarchs/matriarchs) in the community?;*
- *What can be done to resource local pastors in leading their congregation in responding to these neighborhood and cultural changes?;*
- *What is it that we are learning in these transitions that can help seminaries in the training and formation of clergy as they face these pastoral assignments upon their graduation?*

These were the questions and explorations that led us to pursue this initiative not only in hopes of learning but also transforming lives and communities for God's preferred future.

Bill Gattis, District Superintendent

DATA COLLECTION AND ASSESSMENT

In September of 2005, eight pastors first met with the RCITI team to share their thoughts about ministry in rural congregations. While currently at work in rural areas around Burlington, North Carolina, this group of pastors hailed from both urban/suburban and rural areas throughout the southeast and central U.S. For all of these pastors, it seemed clear that there are challenges which are unique to serving rural congregations. The following observations and assessment stem from that initial September 2005 meeting and periodic meetings throughout the next two years, including a more formal planning and goal setting session in January 2006.

Ministering to, and with, any congregation involves gaining an understanding of nature and way of life of parishioners, and in general, these rural pastors were struck by the diversity and magnitude of changes experienced by their rural parishioners. Some of these changes (e.g., aging congregations, the appearance of new technologies, new worship styles and preferences) were similar to changes experienced in urban and suburban congregations, but others were unique.

These pastors unanimously observed that rural communities are changing rapidly. In general, residents are not wealthy, and financial distress is common. New people are moving to town, including new “types” of people (suburbanites, those of different ethnic backgrounds.) Employment patterns were changing dramatically as farming and rural manufacturing jobs decline. These changes not only necessitate parishioners driving many miles from home to find gainful employment, but also forging new identities.

“In the rural county, there are no businesses coming in. It is farmers and government working, and the farmers are struggling to get into something else... Not everyone has manufacturing in their community, but where it is, it is huge. When manufacturers close down, there is a loss of identity as well as a loss of retirement funds.”¹



Economic struggles, particularly healthcare, define life for many rural residents.

“Families are coping with medical cost issues and a shift... There is a tension between values that honor life and the way it was versus longevity for the sake of longevity. Families are struggling. Especially farm families who can't afford nursing care because they will lose the farm... Young families are barely making it.”

Particularly challenging for many congregations was adapting to new members, or even the prospect of new members. It seems difficult to get to know new residents, especially those who seem “different” (economically, racially, and ethnically) and this had been an issue for years.

¹ Text in *italics* comes directly from group conversation. Additional focus group detail can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B.

Rural churches have a tendency to be like one big family. Members can feel so strongly connected with this family that they resist, consciously or unconsciously, efforts by outsiders to become a part of the fellowship of the church. This becomes a barrier for the growth of the church. Some churches may be surrounded by a community which has excellent growth potential, but will remain small simply because they are not receptive to new people.

For the rural pastors, the challenge of thinking about newcomers raised questions about how “our neighbor” is defined. Who are my neighbors? Should we invite them in? How should we invite them in? Questions about newcomers are made more challenging in rural congregations which have experienced membership coming from the same local families for generation after generation.

“If people have moved into the community since 1970, then we don’t know them.... There is a stand-offishness between the old families and the new families moving in from Chapel Hill who are racially accepting.”



“We don’t know them, much less like and trust them.”

Even when congregations want to be welcoming of newcomers, they sometimes feel they lack the tools to do so.

“We get caught up in programming rather than ‘Christ-like-ness.’... We need to find ways to bridge, bridging care and commitment and increase who is ours. Sometimes it is as simple as naming, giving the tools to see what it is we are doing well.”

It is difficult for individuals to know how to react to all of these changes, and these pastors observed that within their congregations, there was often a resistance to, or even fearfulness, of change.

“Folks live in the country, but have computers and TV’s and work in town. Some are trying to hold on to old values... Some are stuck on what was, and don’t understand why people have given it up.”

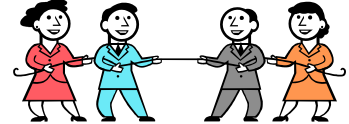
Responding to change often brought (or brought to the surface) tensions between generations, particularly as congregations consider their role in the community and in the lives of parishioners. There is a lack of consensus about what church “is,” and there are often a variety of beliefs and views, even within the same congregation. A heritage of dashed hopes is a part of the baggage carried by the elders of the church. Consequently, they have a tendency to be dismissive of the dreams of the youth. They recall trying something like that in the past, and that it did not work.

“One generation wants to hold onto what was, or rosy memories of what never was. People 55 and under understand that, but these are their parents, and they won’t go against them... [The children of older members] are frustrated because they aren’t in power, can’t make change, and won’t come to meetings.”



Pastors recognize that dealing with change is difficult and that dealing “well” with change requires time, awareness, intentionality, and grieving (among the congregations and community). It can be challenging to engage parishioners in facing and adapting to changes. In addition, while it might seem that smaller rural congregations might make changes easier to address, this does not seem to be the case.

“Congregations as a living entity have to grieve and we need to recognize when they are in the process... People in my community have been living in a way for 30 or 40 years. We come in and say maybe they need to do something else, and they don’t recognize the need for change. There has to be a core group that is committed to change...”



“We need to name the elephant in the room – the conflicts, grief, etc. within the congregation. It needs to be named even if we don’t have the answer. How do we in a community have everyone have ownership without someone feeling displaced?”

Part of the challenge of approaching and understanding the impact of change – and then dealing productively with it – is a perceived lack of agreement (pastorally, congregationally and within the larger church structure) about the role of the church in the life of believers and the community. These challenges are both practical/tactical and theological.

“The church has become a ‘hit and run’ on Sunday, and people do not want to be asked to do more. It is a shift from where the church was the spiritual/social/educational center – whole life. Now the church is one on a buffet line of things calling for their time, energy and money... On the other hand, we are trying to make everyone happy.”

“Most of us in this vocation [serving rural churches] struggle with ‘if I do well in this small appointment, then I’ll get a bigger appointment with more money and eventually the district/church will recognize me and I’ll be a somebody.’ Where we are needs to be named as successful...”

Disagreement in the rural congregations exists between members, but also between pastor and congregation. Both are sources of stress for clergy. Consensus is also lacking about the role of the pastor in these communities, exacerbating the challenge of approaching change. In small rural churches, the solo pastor carries the weight of everyone’s expectation for pastoral performance.

“There are ideals and images of what a pastor should be verses what I am capable of versus what is appropriate... I once sat down with the board and walked through my week and how their demands are and there was a greater understanding.”

The demands of ministry are manifold; they vie for a pastor’s commitment of time, energy, mental preoccupation, and even devotion. As a result spouses and children often feel neglected, misunderstood, and treated unfairly. Amidst these changes and challenges, life as a rural pastor can be lonely, and pastors experience a sense of isolation. Unlike their urban/suburban counterparts, rural clergy are less likely to have other clergy members in close proximity to offer support.



Rural clergy are more often the sole staff members of congregations and there are fewer other churches, and thus pastors, around from which to receive support and fellowship. It often feels as though spiritual leaders have to choose between their spouse and the bride of Christ, between their children and their "flock of sheep".

Given the small size of congregations, it is also more difficult (less likely) to receive support from within the congregation itself. These pastors find that, when possible, it is beneficial and helpful to meet with other clergy. The focus group itself provided one such opportunity to meet as a "Covenant Group."

"Sitting with brothers and sisters recalls things I knew and believed in seminary. Our [parishioners] are in transition, worried for their jobs and if not [then for] the jobs of their kids then their nieces and nephews, wars and rumors of war... We need a place to talk things through. There is something important to knowing that someone else is going through the same thing.

But, geographic distance can make even these beneficial meetings difficult to accomplish.

"If you are far out either geographically or socially, you can't make a Covenant Group close by. It takes an hour to get there (as well as for everything else.) It is tough to make the time, and what is lost is self care."

These pastors recognize that taking care of themselves and their families – emotionally, spiritually and physically – is important to sustaining their ministries, but they also note that it is a challenge.

"The only exercise I get is walking into the hospital."

"You can't fight a battle if you don't have a safe place to retreat to... [You need to] do whatever it takes to find our place for sustenance. I have an office in my home in addition to my office in the church as my own sanctuary and safe place. But my parishioners don't like it...but it is what I have to do."



"I get so lonely out there. Even with my husband as a pastor. We don't get home until 10:00 at night. I don't see my son in Chapel Hill. We need to take care of our families. If we can't do that, how can we care for our parishioner?"

It can be difficult for clergy to receive care from their own congregations, but they wonder if there might be ways for the congregation to participate in those efforts. It is possible that perceptions of what it means to care for the pastor need to change/adapt.

"The pastor/parish [relations] committee should be support for the pastor, not a personnel committee... At Charge Conference, we need to do something that helps hold the congregation accountable for the care of their clergy. They probably think they do, but that is not what we hear."

Clergy recognize that changes in pastoral leadership are another change/transition with which a congregation must deal, and that because of changing appointments that it can be challenging to engender and earn the trust of congregations. Dealing with leadership changes can even supplant facing other challenges and changes. Short stays can also make ministry challenging for pastors.

“They had the same pastor for 15 years... It will take time for them to act like themselves. The first guy after a long-term pastor is the sacrificial lamb.”

“With short-term pastors, people don’t have to learn to forgive each other. They can blame the problems on the pastor, who leaves, and not have to face their own core conflicts.”

Clergy often do find assistance for their ministries from outside resources, even if those resources take time and effort to identify. These resources can support both the pastor and the congregation. The idea of personal responsibility is deeply embedded in the rural culture, which can cause great damage when it comes to health care, mental health or social service needs. For example, public education about, and familiarity with, mental illness play a key role in whether those with mental illness will be accepted in a community. However, rural areas often come up short due to lack of exposure to the subject and lack of services that could increase their familiarity with it.

“People have been dealing with schizophrenia and not telling people – so how open are we? People have “nerves” and “the blues” but there is very little openness to talking and getting help, much less suggesting counseling. The referral is a huge deal. There is low awareness, and there are so many not being treated.”

“My practice is that as soon as I get [to a new appointment] I create relationships with professions in mental health, doctor, police, fire, etc. to know that I can call on them. In a way, this gives permission by calling on someone [parishioners] know.”



Rural clergy also think that there are ways in which seminary and divinity school could better prepare future rural pastors.

“Need at least a semester class on personal / family life – ‘How do you live in a fishbowl?’”

“They should have a class on ‘You don’t believe it now, but you will need to know this.’ It is the little jobs, 5,000 little things: dealing with difficult people, what kinds of difficult people, what works and what doesn’t.”

“We need counseling classes.”

Clergy sense from the larger church organization that the efforts of urban and suburban congregations are more important than efforts in rural areas. With denomination-wide emphasis on growth and finances, they wonder if and how their efforts fit into overall Church plans. Rural clergy view their ministry as valuable, but suspect this opinion is not shared by everyone.

RESPONDING TO TARGETED NEEDS

The work of the RCITI team identified the following key dynamics and needs for clergy ministering in rural congregations:

- Living with (adjusting to) the dynamics of rural churches
 - o e.g., isolation, driving time
- Rural Belief Systems
 - o Family, neighbor, generational, role of church, theological beliefs, blue collar work ethic
- Changes within the community
 - o e.g., employment, other economics, demographic changes
- Church composition & dynamics
 - o e.g., old/new members, family dynamics, resistance to change
- Clergy Needs
 - o Training
 - o Support – from other clergy, from church structure, from congregation, from social support agencies
 - o Understanding needs within the congregation – illness, elderly
 - o Understanding role – are rural churches important to that system? What does it mean if I serve in an unimportant place?

Based on these needs and dynamics, the efforts of the RCITI group focused its initial efforts on:

1. Highlighting and raising awareness of available services (social services, medical, etc.)
2. Creating an environment for personal support through routine gatherings and meetings
3. Beginning with initial study of the “Who is my neighbor?” issue including brainstorming about the nature of the problem, and possible solutions.

A list of RCITI activities (both activities sponsored and participated in) is included in Appendix C.

LOOKING FORWARD

As a direct result of RCITI’s findings regarding the need for conflict resolution and strategic planning in rural churches, the Burlington District of The United Methodist Church has contracted with Plowpoint (www.plowpoint.org) for the training and certification of a team of ten Congregational Health Specialists. The ministry of the Congregational Health Team is to equip and empower local congregations (including clergy and laity) to become more effective in ministry by providing relational healing, strategic visioning, and leadership development grounded in Biblical teaching.

The District team has been trained to lead congregations through seasons of transition in the life of the congregation and community. Congregational Health Specialists receive instruction in dual modules of relational healing (for dealing with conflict) and strategic visioning (to discern and move forward into God’s mission and vision for the church to respond to the needs of their neighbors). Additionally, Congregational Health Specialists are trained to provide one-on-one coaching to the pastors serving the local churches to equip and empower the spiritual leaders to lead the church faithfully during their time of transition. The team members completed their

classroom training in mid-January 2008 and are now in the process of being mentored through church interventions. The mentoring process is expected to be completed in Spring of 2008, and the team will begin serving churches in the Burlington District.

At the November 13, 2007, planning meeting, it was decided to have two types of RCITI meetings during 2008:

1. There will be meetings every six weeks that will focus on helping each pastor meet a specific goal for his/her churches.
2. There will be skills or resource workshops that will be open to everyone in the district. We determined that we will continue to work on the following goals in 2008 and the workshops will be focused on these goals:
 1. Bridging cultural / racial / generational / socioeconomic gaps
 2. Facilitating communication across divides
 3. Dealing with change
 4. Support for new pastors
 5. Mentoring

APPENDIX A – DETAILED FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

In September of 2005, eight pastors met with the RCITI team to share their thoughts about ministry in rural congregations. What follows is a summary of that conversation.²

Where are you (the pastors) from?

- *I'm from a rural area*
- *I'm from the city – from Chapel Hill churches – massive culture shock*
- *From West Virginia (this is my first appointment out of school), so not a big culture shock*
- *Extension ministry back into church, glad to be back in rural area*
- *My previous appointment was in a small town, but most of my appointments have been rural or suburban congregations*
- *I grew up in farm area. Currently I have a mixed appointment - both rural and suburban due to proximity to Chapel Hill*
- *I've spent 7 years on a 3-point charge in a very rural area*
- *I grew up in rural area, but spent 10 years at Methodist College*

THEMES: While currently ministering in rural areas, this group of pastors hails from both urban/suburban and rural areas.

In general, what is it like serving in a rural congregation?

- *Folks live in the country, but have computers and TV's and work in town. Some are trying to hold on to old values.*
- *The congregation is interconnected, and they don't like new people coming in / don't like changes. The kids are bringing change.*
- *Families are feeling threatened by new people – passive aggressive behavior with little innuendos, keeping their hands on everything, not letting new people on committees. They are holding back the possibilities and not letting the Spirit in.*
- *Some are stuck on what was and don't understand why people have given it up. The challenge is to look outside the old farm community. Southern gospel music can be a draw.*
- *Don't know how to pull in the younger people – the 2 generations don't like to mix.*
- *People are mobile. They relate well within the Church except for music – Gospel vs. Rock*
- *Seeing beyond the bounds of the physical to where people are spiritually is foreign*
- *The challenge is to remember, but embrace modernity. The reticence is the newness – They have never had to reach out before and they don't know how. In the past, the whole county was related.*

THEMES: There are many changes afoot in lives of rural parishioners (population demographics, age of congregation, technology, worship). Change is difficult and causes tension between/among people. There is tension between generations.

What do your congregants do for a living, and is it changing?

² Note: Text in *italics* is a near-verbatim representation of the focus group conversation. Non-italicized text indicates summary statements and after-the-fact assessment/analysis and sorting.

- *Three or four families are farmers or self-employed like contractors. Also work at BCBS, hospitals. 25-40 year olds are not there. They are going off to college and not coming back. There are no jobs for them. The mid-range of ages is gone.*
- *In the rural county, there are no businesses coming in. It is farmers and government workers, and the farmers are struggling to get into something else.*
- *In church, we had a 60-year-old man announce that after Thursday, he will no longer be in the tobacco business after so many years, and he doesn't know what he will do next.*
- *Not everyone has manufacturing in their community, but where it is, it is huge. When manufacturers close down, there is a loss of identity as well as a loss of retirement funds.*

THEMES: Employment patterns are also changing. Lost local jobs not always replaced. There is a particular decline in farming and manufacturing jobs. Some drive to – or leave area in search of – employment.

What is it important to know about life, and ministry, in rural areas?

Intra-congregational relationships

- **Generational**
 - o *There is schizophrenia between the generations. One generation wants to hold onto what was or rosy memories of what never was. People 55 and under understand that, but these are their parents and they won't go against them.*
 - o *It is different now. The older generation lives Church as it should be – taking care of each other. "He's a drunk, but he's our drunk." They give 20% of their salary. Their children are frustrated because they aren't in power, can't make change, and won't come to meetings.*
 - o *The 60-70 year olds are doing it. For those under 55, there are 60-year-old family feuds. No one remembers what the feud was about, but they are still feuding. The younger folks are waiting for the older to die to get rid of the feuds.*

THEMES: Generational differences exist in how people approach/participate in church.

- **Newcomers**
 - o *If people have moved in to the community since 1970, then we don't know them.*
 - o *There is a stand-offishness between the old families and the new families moving in from Chapel Hill who are racially accepting.*
 - o *That change is in the community, but increasingly they are not connecting to the church. There is a "blame the victim" mentality – "They're obviously lazy." Many of the people who are living in trailer parks are Hispanic or very poor Anglo who work as mechanics or repair lawnmowers and such.*
 - o *Most churches struggle with "Who is my neighbor?" Both rural and urban struggle with the same issues. Similar to the trust issue, it has to do with transience and the economy. We don't know them much less like and trust them. What used to be local connections are now conglomerated. It is true in rural and urban churches that the bond is harder because there is more isolation all the way around – people live closer together but are spiritually further apart.*
 - o **Racial Tensions / The Hispanic Influx.**
 - *We "don't have them," but there are soccer matches every Sunday morning.*
 - *It is harder to get someone to come to your Church the second time than the first time. Why program if the congregation is not welcoming? It is about recognizing your neighbor. Many see Hispanics as migrants that go back to Mexico.*
 - *One congregation became bi-racial when a family adopted an African American child, and it changed the dynamic in the church. That spirit of hospitality has not bled over to applying to Hispanics yet.*
 - o *Do we confuse the method with the purpose of the method? We get caught up in programming rather than the "Christ-like-ness." There can be a sweet spirit in the church, with a tremendous*

depth of connection and a sense of “we will take care of our own.” But not all of our own. It is all about how you define your “own.” But they are passionately committed to each other.

- *We need to find ways to bridge, bridging care and commitment and increase who is ours. Sometimes it is as simple as naming, giving the tools to see what it is we are doing well.*

THEMES: As new people move to the community (regardless of race, color, economic status), it can be difficult for churches to welcome them. This is not a new phenomenon.

Support/care for pastor / Life in Ministry

- *As the pastor, you wind up feeling alone because much of the church will support you privately, but not publicly when it counts. You wonder if it will turn a corner. Sometimes it feels close, and sometimes it feels like “What corner?” Don’t feel much support from anywhere in the connection. People have concrete ways to measure ministry, but these things are more like the changing of the seasons, happening gradually, then quickly. You may start, but then get a frost. It is such a painful, lonely, crisis-engendering task to change these things, and it takes such a toll on a pastor and family. You know that it is the right thing, but wind up asking “Why am I doing this?”*
- *“They don’t teach this stuff at Duke”*
- *I learned it at Mercy Disaster training, taking hit after hit.*

THEMES: Pastors feel isolated, unsupported, unprepared for challenges. It can be hard to define/measure “progress” for clergy.

Relationship with pastors

- *We have no negative dynamic. They had the same pastor or 15 years, who died last March. It will take time for them to act like themselves. The first guy after a long-term pastor is the sacrificial lamb. Someone served 6 months before I came in, and so I haven’t felt the same pressure or shadow.*
- *I followed someone who was there 24 years. 2 churches had joined. A year later, the underlying dynamics came to the surface.*
- *With short-term pastors, people don’t have to learn to forgive each other. They can blame the problems on the pastor, who leaves, and not have to face their own core conflicts.*
- *There is pastor turnover every 2,3,4 years. There is no continuity except for the retired pastor, and there is great loyalty to him. Sometimes that retired pastor will work behind the scenes to control the church.*
- *The turnover means that there is little trust. No trust because the pastor is not there because he/she wants to be there, he/she is looking for bigger and better.*
- *I worry that I do not want some activity / ministry / etc. to just happen when I am there. I want it to be a good thing long after I am gone.*

THEMES: Changes in pastoral leadership are another change/transition for a congregation to deal with. It can be challenging for clergy to engender/earn trust of congregation.

Congregations Dealing with change

- *Congregations as a living entity have to grieve, and we need to recognize when they are in that process.*
- *Change: People have multiple worship experiences, which allows some of the same, but allows change. We can do both, taking care of what is old as well as new. Dealing with pressure by having people in the church take over some of the roles that the pastor would have had.*
- *What changes this [resistance to change]? When enough of the people who aren’t going to change move on.*
- *There has to be a core group that is committed to change and committed to spiritual growth, and who will nip the old dynamic in the bud. 4,5, or 6 people can turn it around with a mixed group of men and women.*
- *Small groups make big differences between concept and reality. It takes time and people learning spiritual maturity for people to stand up. Meanwhile, a battle is raging. Can we stay alive?*

- *According to the Flywheel program detailed in the book Good to Great, it takes 10 years of consistent push for change to happen. Do you have the support from the district and the church to push past the inertia?*
- *Bringing about change is challenging the core families to live in the grace of God. It is about God and asking that question.*
- *People in my community have been living in a way for 30 or 40 years. We come in and say maybe they need to do something else, and they don't recognize the need for change.*
- *There have been 11 funerals since I have been there. There is also a HUGE building project. Everyone was "gung ho" on the building project until the funerals. They need to grieve, and we need the support to help us transition them. Grieving, but loaves and fishes – feed them. It is hard coming in new and getting ready to move forward.*

THEMES: Dealing with change is difficult. Dealing "well" with change requires time, grieving, awareness, intentionality.

Economic impacts

- *Families are coping with medical costs issues and a shift. It used to be that people lived with their children and family, and they were right there until they died. Now medical care is keeping them alive, and they don't know why God isn't letting them go. There is a tension between values that honor life and the way it was versus longevity for the sake of longevity. Families are struggling. Especially farm families who can't afford nursing care because they will lose the farm; they can't afford nursing care, so they wind up with sub-standard in-home health care.*
- *Food distribution is different with new people coming in.*
- *There are more and more young people who can't afford insurance – children on Medicare to be able to go to UNC hospital. We had a person last week who is in their early 20's and just can't make it. Young families are barely making it.*

THEMES: Economic struggles, particularly healthcare related struggles, define life for many rural parishioners.

Perception of role of church

- *The church has become a "hit and run" on Sundays, and people do not want to be asked to do more. It is a shift from where the church was the spiritual / social / educational center – whole life. Now the church is one on a buffet line of things calling for their time, energy and money. There is a sense of the church as a club. If this is a club, then it doesn't deserve priority. But if it is the Body of Christ, then it is a higher priority.*
- *On the other hand, we are trying to make everyone happy.*
- *It is not about being a cafeteria. What they need is not necessarily what they want.*
- *Buy in to the priesthood of the believer, including the visionary. The congregation needs to own where they feel they are going. Then they "get it." "The reason we need to build this building is..." Then when we aren't there anymore, it doesn't matter and things continue.*
- *There is a tension between healthy conservatism and dysfunctional conservatism.*

THEMES: There is often a lack of agreement (pastorally & congregationally) about the role of the church in the life of believers and in life of community.

What do you wish had been taught at Divinity School?

Interpersonal Dynamics

- *They should have a class on "You don't believe it now, but you will need to know this." It is the little jobs, 5,000 little things; dealing with difficult people, what kinds of difficult people, what works and what doesn't.*
- *Faith versus efficiency deal – what comes out first. Plant the seed, and God takes care of the rest. All of the little deals that become big deals. "My church won't do that."*

- *Need Counseling classes*

Personal impact

- *How much this will cost you, in all ways, and how much you will be alone.*
- *How much do we bend to where they are, and how much do we accept.*
- *Need at least a semester class on parsonage / family life – “How do you live in a fishbowl?”*
- *You can’t fight a battle if you don’t have a safe place to retreat to.*
- *We have to know who we are, and what our limitations are. This creates problems. If you have a heart attack, you go to the hospital. But the same is true of depression, and you can’t make that referral. It is too difficult, “not my call”, too unmannerly.*
- *When you are in a rural place, especially female, and going house to house, where do you go to the bathroom? It is tough to introduce yourself with “where is your bathroom?”*

THEMES: Pastors desire additional practical/skill training at seminary (counseling, establishing boundaries, managing personal impact / sustaining self)

Church Dynamics

- *A large church is really a whole bunch of small churches in the same place. How do we deal with that? We have to admit to ourselves that we are serving more than one church, even with a single charge. We see it in the new building. The older folks want simple, families want a playground, etc. There has to be a shared vision, and grow past knowing everyone.*
- *The common denominator is growth in grace and spiritual maturity, promoting healthy growth. As people grow in grace, things become more clear. But it is a long, gut-busting process that most of us don’t have the stomach for.*
- *Problem of the “variations on a theme” within the church. The “Baptimethodists.” Words mean something different to different folks like saying “Jesus” rather than “the Christ”*
- *How do we get people to broaden their perspective on who their neighbor is? And I am tired of folks who wrap the cross in the flag.*

THEMES: There is a lack of consensus about what church is. A variety of beliefs and views exist, even within same congregation.

Role of the Pastor

- *There are ideals and images of what a pastor should be vs. what I am capable of vs. what is appropriate. There is picky stuff about when can I work in my garden? Family as a priority vs. congregation expectations. What is a legitimate boundary? Am I too busy to protect myself?*
- *I once sat down with the board and walked through my week and how their demands are and there was a greater understanding. “I had a heart attack, and that Sunday I was in the hospital and they couldn’t find the collection plates because I always put them out on Sunday morning.”*
- *The pastor/parish committee should be support for the pastor, not a personnel committee.*

THEMES: Pastoral role definition is challenging (for self and congregation.)

Need for Support Resources

- *Mental health is not recognized as illness. People have been dealing with schizophrenia and not telling people – so how open are we? People have “nerves” and “the blues” but there is very little openness to talking and getting help, much less suggesting counseling. The referral is a huge deal. There is low awareness, and there are so many not being treated.*
- *I tried to get Meals on Wheels out there, but people and families were too embarrassed. They are very self-sufficient.*

- *There are also too many Alzheimer's patients home alone.*
- *My practice is that as soon as I get there I create relationships with professionals in Mental health, doctor, police, fire, etc. to know that I can call on them. In a way this gives permission by calling on someone they know. I had vets with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder episodes, and had a psychiatrist that I could bring him to. Also, had a reformed alcoholic.*

THEMES: Knowledge of and access to outside expertise/referral information/locations (medical, social services) is helpful/needed.

Other

- *Most of the faculty have never been there, and never will.*
- *God has a tremendous but warped sense of humor.*

What are the top 2 or 3 things coming out today's conversation?

Understanding and dealing with change

- *We need to name the elephant in the room – the conflicts, grief, etc within the congregation. It needs to be named even if we don't have the answer. Lack of conflict is unhealthy.*
- *We need help on the transitional dynamics from "We have always done it this way" to new ways – Could you introduce me to everyone in your row? We are imagining many things about ourselves that are not true*
- *Displacement of both us and people. How do we claim ownership? How do we in a community have everyone have ownership without someone feeling displaced? It is the priesthood of all leaders. Security – If we allow folks to feel secure where they come together in worship, will that help them not feel displaced elsewhere?*
- *Awareness of the mourning, from the economics, the medical, loss of life style, deaths. We need to look at the disaster recovery and at what point are people no longer able to get back up.*

THEMES: Change can have large and lasting impacts in congregations. Not always clear how to deal with change and/or impacts of change.

Additional support needed for pastors

From district / conference

- *More district / conference support – maybe different rather than more. Most of us in this vocation struggle with "if I do well in this small appointment, then I'll get a bigger appointment with more money and eventually the district / church will recognize me and I'll be somebody." Where we are needs to be named as successful – this is where we are, and this is where we are likely to stay. We don't talk about the pressure you feel when every other 35 year old is getting a promotion, and you are not.*
- *I would echo the different kind of support. I often have the sense that everyone is trying to exact something from us, but no one is giving / supporting us. Make more bricks, but we will not give you more straw for those bricks.*

THEMES: Rural clergy wonder about the value placed on small/rural churches by overall church system. There is a felt need for more clergy support.

From / within congregation

- *At Charge Conference, we need to do something that helps hold the congregation accountable for the care of their clergy. They most probably think they do, but that is not what we hear.*
- *I had a student pastor. That was caring for me, but that is not the same as taking care of me.*

THEMES: There is a desire for congregation to be part of clergy support/care.

From / with other clergy

- *Isolation. We need more of this type of discussion in more venues, more disciplined, more frequently, with accountability to come back to.*
- *Sitting with brothers and sisters recalls things I knew and believed in seminary. Our people are in transition, worried for their jobs and if not their kids then their nieces and nephews, wars and rumors of wars. The church should be a safe place, but not just safe for them, safe for all. Remind myself of how much people, especially elderly, are in chaos. Also patience – mindful to be patient with people who need security.*
- *We need more Covenant groups. We need a place to talk things through. There is something important to knowing that someone else is going through the same thing. There are models but I am not sure how. If you are far out either geographically or socially, you can't make a Covenant Group close by. It takes an hour to get there (as well as for everything else). It is tough to make the time, and what is lost is self care.*

THEMES: The life of rural clergy can be lonely/isolated. It is helpful to meet with and be in conversation with other rural clergy.

Clergy Self-Care

- *I get so lonely out there. Even with my husband as a pastor. We don't get home until 10:00 at night. I don't see my son in Chapel Hill. We need to take care of our families. If we can't do that, how can we care for our parishioners? The only exercise I get is walking into the hospital.*
- *Do whatever it takes to find your place for sustenance. I have an office in my home in addition to my office in the church as my own sanctuary and safe place. But my parishioners don't like it and no one at the church has applauded that, but it is what I have to do.*

THEMES: There is a need for physical and emotional care for pastors.

Theological Challenges

- *It is not specifically rural, but I have always had trouble with making peace with my people and culture where God and culture come together. How do you do that? How do you preach the radical good news that Jesus preached and either bring peace, or be okay with bringing the sword, and paying the price for that.*
- *I believe that the Gospel that I am called to preach is alien to most of my people and even my family. Hates have become more sophisticated, and it hurts me. I don't know that there is a course that they can teach that in.*

THEMES: It is challenging to determine how Gospel applies in/impacts rural setting, and how to relay that to congregation.

Other

- *"With what the Lord had to put up with, he must have been a yard wide and a foot thick." Jesus didn't make everyone happy, he just preached the truth. I am here to do the best I can with what I've got. Somewhere we have to claim our identity.*
- *"I will serve you and be the best I can and love you, but I will not be able to please you."*

APPENDIX B – PLANNING SESSION RESULTS

On January 9, 2007 a group gathered to review and assess RCITI work to-date and think about future needs and plans. In attendance at this planning session were: John Varden, Scott Marlow, Kristy Bradley, Laura Stern, David Girod, Renée Burnette, Bill Gattis, Joe Wilburn, Elaine Swett, Jack Page, Susan Dunlap, Duane Partin, Brenda Davis, and Sonya Tilley.

What follows is an account and summary of that conversation, including the following elements:

1. ASSESSMENT OF RCITI ACTIVITY TO-DATE
 2. LOOKING FORWARD: IMPORTANT ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS / CHARACTERISTICS
 3. LOOKING FORWARD: MATERIAL
 4. LOOKING FORWARD: SKILLS / TRAINING
 5. LOOKING FORWARD: PASTORAL SUPPORT
-

1. ASSESSMENT OF RCITI ACTIVITY TO-DATE

The group was first asked to brainstorm information for the following 3 categories: 1) issues successfully addressed to-date, 2) issues not fully addressed, and 3) issues yet to be addressed.³

1) What have RCITI efforts successfully address to-date?

Peer Group Support

- *that we are talking/addressing these issues-addressing issues as a group*
- *simply bringing rural pastors together has been effective*
 - o *knowing that you are not alone*
 - o *getting ideas of what works/doesn't work*
 - o *sense of significance in ministry when everything else is about mega churches*
 - o *source of resources-who, what, where*
 - o *rural church as an Asset rather than a Liability*
 - o *we're here and being intentional around this conversation*

Resources for Pastors

- *social services meetings*
- *meeting with county social services was good- more discussion/work in this area*
- *outside perspective crucial- outside knowledge- outside of ministry*
- *presentations at outside events are important*
- *Mental Health Conference in Raleigh was an excellent presentation on the state of mental health in NC*

Other Activities

- *Rural Church Celebration at Cedar Grove was wonderful! Can we do it again?*
- *upcoming January workshop- cradle to grave "Generational Differences"*
- *David Girod's workshop on aging, mental health, end of life issues- good exposure to resource people*
- *beginning to address systemic conflict (workshop in February) -6 churches in intervention*
- *Attempt at broadening the idea of neighbor*
- *District clergy day apart at Camp Chestnut Ridge- caring for the caregiver through fun*

³ Note: Text in *italics* is a near-verbatim representation of the focus group conversation. Non-italicized text indicates summary statements and after-the-fact assessment/analysis and sorting.

- Carol Buxton Hammond with Breuggemann's idea of orientation/disorientation/reorientation-Psalms addressing our situations in the rural church
- at August Myrtle Beach conference, possibilities for farmers were presented in an exciting way

Suggestions / insight from group meetings

- Support
 - o suggestion that person from outside the church come and listen to congregation as to what are greatest needs to them
 - o identified the possibility that small churches could combine efforts to do big jobs- hire staff, "major ministries", money- follow through on this
 - o good at brainstorming broad issues facing rural churches
- Education / Training / Awareness
 - o having a speaker/ specific topic around which to meet
 - o Scott and Susan on rural mindset, especially conservative stances
 - o Susan's naming the need to honor the past in order to make a way to face current realities and seeing future with hope
 - o Scott's explanation of what's going on in the rural communities- farms, land sales, way of life- helped clarify and name the problem
 - o giving better awareness of available community services
 - o understanding that rural churches deal better with concise, short-term projects than with long-range plans (need to follow through on this)
 - o Making the Small Church Effective- good resource book- maybe have a group discussion about it
 - o keep asking how this is a Rural issue
- Organizational
 - o hiring Kristy-needs a coordinator
 - o Kristy's commitment to attend area-wide training events sponsored by other groups

2) What initiatives has RCITI attempted which did not fully meet hopes/expectations/objectives?

Activity related

- poor workshop content - Who is my neighbor?
- promotion/more effective communication
- promotion of Cedar Grove event

Turning theory into practice

- bridge the nostalgic/academic interest in rural life with the real needs that need addressing
- making use of gifts of each pastor throughout the district- Joe's visitation class, Julia's conflict management, Grace's community garden
- pastors/leaders who seek to address these problems can come under tremendous pressure and are isolated by congregations and colleagues and left to die...

Integration of efforts into congregation

- integration with congregation- how can RCITI connect to congregation in a way that helps the pastor not have to bear all the message-outside voice
- 2 families in church were willing to meet and discuss issues, but meeting never held

Connecting churches

- efforts to connect resources at one church with needs of other rural churches

Organizational

- follow through
- have not used our own resources well

3) What are we aware of that hasn't yet been addressed (or fully addressed) by RCITI?

Help with tactics/practices for talking about and dealing with change

- leading change w/o being brutal- how hard to push

- *how do you reach out to new populations in the community- bridging the cultural gap between rural and suburban*
- *dealing with church congregation's denial- symptom of powerlessness-leverage*
- *resources for pastors with no counseling background whatsoever*
- *congregations and communities are in denial that there is a problem*
- *embracing change*

Organization / Planning

- *narrow to specific outcomes*
- *follow through*
- *networking into other trainings-sifting through to know which are worth looking at*
- *specific goals of what we hope to produce (tangible) at end of RCITI grant*

Caring for the caregiver

- *intentional ways of caring for the caregiver*
- *support-care for the caregiver*

Farming / agriculture

- *nothing on agriculture yet*
- *farmers can be assisted was stated, but no concrete suggestions were ever stated*
- *education for pastors on farming*
- *direct outreach to farmers in our churches*

Understanding the role of the church

- *churches and church folk in denial of their real future*
- *how to reach out beyond the walls when there is no felt need or desire*
- *broadening the idea of neighbor*
- *help small churches understand that they are important because they are the majority*

Tapping into outside resources

- *Duke Div School holds topical seminars for graduating seniors in practical areas such as church budgets, administration, etc. Maybe look into offering similar/ complementary workshops with follow up*
- *could we explore low-key discussion events throughout the district on rural church issues, family systems, etc?*
- *resources list of social/mental health resources*

Other

- *covenant*
- *loss of connection to Holy Spirit- church elders die and there is no one to replace them*
- *2/15-16/07- certification training for critical incident stress management counseling with Rev. Dr. Linda Jordan at Salem UMC*

2) LOOKING FORWARD: IMPORTANT ORGANIZATION NEEDS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Using the above lists, the group identified: 1) Resources, 2) Skills, 3) Support Services, and 4) Characteristics / Visions that could be important to RCITI. The group then voted which items were most important. Where applicable, the lists are sorted by number of votes, indicating which items were deemed most important by the group. (Level 1 – most votes, most important.)

1) Resources

Level 1

- *web site with links to churches, pastors with specific skills-6*

Level 2

- *notebook for people coming out of Div school into Rural Church- don't assume that everyone goes to Duke Div-5*

Level 3

- *How do we grow a church- the primary model is for large, megachurches?-4*
- *Who is available in our district to lead/facilitate various workshops and what they have to offer- availability of resources within the district-4*
- *trained mentors- for both new pastors and those coming from non-rural areas-4*

Level 4

- *need a good Bible Study-3*
- *intentional covenant and mentoring among rural clergy-3*

Level 5

- *expert staff that are shared and funded by several smaller rural congregations, including professional Christian educator and youth/children's minister-2*
- *success stories of small rural churches-2*

Level 6

- *plan for inviting/reaching out to the neighborhood-1*
- *mentor training/coaching/facilitation-1*
- *assistance with writing a grant-1*
- *how to use land that is positive monetarily and will glorify God-1*
- *addressing racism/racial issues in the Rural Church-1*
- *stewardship in the rural church-short-term projects rather than long-term(Clay Smith)-1*
- *tapping into non-church resources-1*

Other

- *Better assessment of the health of the congregation*
- *have Bishop come and speak to these issues*
- *district team of clergy for purposes of strategic planning and conflict management*
- *starting a food bank*
- *connections with UNC- School of Social Work, Public Health, and NC Council of Churches*
- *district work team of clergy for purposes of strategic planning and conflict management*
- *models for outreach that do not require that we become like the prevailing culture. How do we reach out yet maintain our integrity and identity*
- *How do we reach out but maintain our identity?*

2) Skills

Level 1

- *bridging cultural gaps- rural/urban/other cultures-2*
- *strategic planning-2*

Level 2

- *modeling how to grieve/grieving process-1*
- *leading change without being brutal-1*
- *Critical Incident/Stress Management certification-1*

Other

- *how to encourage openness and change*
- *conflict management*
- *getting beyond blame the victim/outsider mentality*
- *dealing with alcoholism/drug addiction*
- *understanding and leading in the midst of conflict*
- *greater self-awareness on the part of clergy/lay leaders*
- *writing/verbal communication that moves people forward*
- *how to communicate the urgency and need for change without aggravating sense of overwhelming fear; challenge without demoralizing*

- *as a person from the outside- which differences are just cultural and which are just sinful*
- *giving purpose to elderly and homebound in rural community*
- *knowledge of writing, preparing written and verbal communication to reach others so that they are encouraged to move forward (practical skills and tools)*
- *how to encourage openness to change- if can't handle internal changes, won't be able or open to changes brought by outsider neighbors*

- *The group then boiled this list of skills down to:*
 - Level 1*
 - o *facilitating communication across divides-7*

 - Level 2*
 - o *dealing with change-4*

 - Level 3*
 - o *pastoral care issues-2*
 - o *isolation-2*

 - Level 4*
 - o *time management/prioritization/developing structure-1*

 - Other*
 - o *specific writing/administrative skills-writing grants*
 - o *establishing healthy boundaries*
 - o *What church is*
 - o *planning*

3) Support Services

- Level 1*
 - *trained conflict/source teams- voice from outside to move discussion-intervention teams on conflict-6*

- Level 2*
 - *support existing pastors-3*

- Level 3*
 - *mentoring new pastors-groups get together-1*

4) Characteristics/Vision

- *openness, honesty, sincerity, freedom, genuine warmth*
- *meetings occur on regular day/time and perhaps same central location*
- *value through some form of recognition- CEUs, certifications, etc*
- *pinpoint certain RCITI members (3-4) to share, prepare and help secure strong attendance*
- *rural congregations learning that with other area congregations we can be healthier- in witness and faith*
- *rural congregations and pastors see themselves as a treasure*
- *way that individual families in congregations are able to keep their land and it will glorify God*
- *ways to expand the churches' capacity to know, love, and care for more and more people*
- *ability to address individual parish concerns and not give pat answers or solutions*

3) LOOKING FORWARD: MATERIALS

Materials that it would be helpful for RCITI to have:

- *Website*
- *Availability of resources*
- *Notebook for pastors*

- *Success stories*
- *Good Bible Study*

Updates from group:

1. website up and running by March 1, 2007
2. check into adding a Blog where people can post ideas and thoughts on the rural church
3. send out an email to all district pastors requesting their success stories- reply deadline of March 15, 2007 to be compiled and produced in time for Easter
4. update RCITI brochure to be included in license to preach school (usually in May)
5. create a detailed information sheet to supplement RCITI brochure in district setup packets in July 2007
6. pastor notebooks will be a print version of the website with a concise and thorough forward, table of contents, and tabs for each topic for easy reference- will be a continuous work in process

4) LOOKING FORWARD: SKILLS / TRAINING

Desired Skills/Training for pastors:

- *Facilitating communication* (across culture/age/urban/rural/suburban boundaries)*
- *Dealing with change*
- *Going beyond the walls*
- *Dealing with isolation*
- *Bridging cultural gaps**
- *Strategic Planning*

Notes back from group:

1. Make sure that people know what skills training is out there:
 - ◆ Bishop Ken Carter - Thriving Rural Congregations
 - ◆ Keith Meador - Pastoral Care
 - ◆ Clay Smith - Visioning/Rural Church
 - ◆ Diversity training- group in Carrboro, Abby McConnell, Craig Kocher (Bridging in Durham), Sam Wells (Duke Chapel Dean), Superintendent of Schools in Durham, Bernice Johnson (NCCU)

5) LOOKING FORWARD: PASTORAL SUPPORT

Desired Elements of Pastor Support

- *Intervention teams*
- *Trained mentors*
- *Supporting existing pastors*
- *Dealing with isolation*
- *Shared staff*

Notes back from group:

1. train conflict intervention teams (including laypeople) for churches- check out resources (Plowpoint, Alban Institute, Lombard Peace Center, etc)- goal date for training set for April 16, 2007
2. document process for team building
3. maybe sponsor an event here for conflict intervention
4. build pastor support teams- for a pastor in the midst of conflict
5. supporting existing pastors-phone coaching
6. mediation training for small scale conflict
7. resource- Halverstadt's Managing Church Conflict

APPENDIX C – RCITI ACTIVITIES

Activities sponsored by, attended by, or associated with RCITI:

ACTIVITY	DATE	PRESENTER(S)	SPONSORING GROUP	INTENTION OF ACTIVITY	ASSESSMENT/COMMENTS
Clergy Focus Group	9/13/05	n/a	RCITI	Kick-off meeting to talk about the experiences of clergy in rural congregations	
Dealing with Aging	2/06	Dr. Harold Koenig, Duke Medicine	Salem UMC	Dealing with Medicare / Medicaid, adult day care, legal aid, estate planning	
Spiritual Care and Creative Strategies in Times of Loss & Change	5/22/06	Carol Buxton Hamon, MDiv	RCITI	She spoke on Walter Brueggemann's <u>The Message of the Psalms</u> . The book illustrates a cycle of change based on the Bible.	It is good to have a Bible-based foundation for change.
Social Services Information Session	6/22/06	Bettye Parker, Director of Caswell Co DSS and Susan York of Alamance Co DSS	RCITI	Provide information about and resources for Social Services in local counties.	Very informative! They provided a lot of really useful information. This may be something good for all District pastors.
"Who is My Neighbor?"	8/24/06	Mollie Stewart, Hinton Rural Life Center	RCITI	Assist pastors in helping their congregations be more accepting of outsiders.	Mollie was a good speaker, but this topic will need to be addressed again.
Celebration of Rural Church and Community	9/22-23/06	Norman Wirzba,	Duke Endowment		Wonderful! Very uplifting.
Workshop on Organizing Change	4/30/07	Scott Marlow	RCITI	Discuss specific skills for facilitating change that works, including "rules of the road" for creating and maintaining group ownership.	Good tips to institute change.
Launch of RCITI Website	3/1/07	n/a	RCITI	Provide a centralized source of information and resources for rural pastors.	
History Nights	6/26/06 1/29/07	Susan Dunlap Kristy Bradley	RCITI	Meet with congregations to celebrate the church's past and look forward to its future.	Members really enjoyed reminiscing and visioning.

ACTIVITY	DATE	PRESENTER(S)	SPONSORING GROUP	INTENTION OF ACTIVITY	ASSESSMENT/COMMENTS
Come to the Table: A Conference on Food Faith and Farms	4/11/07		Rural Life Committee	Come to the Table is an on-going project that explores the connections between food security, faith and farms.	
Workshop on Hispanic Community/Outreach	5//07	Denise Long, NCCC Lucho Reinoso, UMC pastor	RCITI	Give pastors resources and information to help their congregations be more welcoming to Hispanic population.	Good background, overview information. Additional conversation re: tactical approaches and resources desired.
Information Session with Orange Co DSS	8/07	Orange Co. DSS staff	RCITI	Help pastors to meet the staff and learn more about their county's DSS.	Poorly attended, but the staff provided excellent information.
Information Session with Alamance Co DSS	9/07	Alamance Co. DSS staff	RCITI	Help pastors to meet the staff and learn more about their county's DSS.	
Congregational Health Team	10/07	Beth Crissman, Plowpoint	RCITI/ Burlington Dist	To equip and empower local congregations (including clergy and laity) to become more effective in ministry by providing relational healing, strategic visioning, and leadership development grounded in Biblical teaching.	Still in organizational stage- all 10 team members have been selected and they will begin training on 11/16/07.