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Halfway to Everywhere: What Churches can learn about Community Vibrancy From its Professional & Entrepreneurial Women

Catherine L. Holland¹

Core Question

“What can churches learn about community vibrancy from its professional and entrepreneurial woman?”

Project Abstract

Community vibrancy is multifaceted. It grows and is sustained through a community's assets – economic and social capital, available human skills, and natural resources. The life and work of churches is woven into that vibrancy in many ways. Churches not only provide a spiritual home for people, they are places of acceptance, belonging, and foster a community – the *koinonia*. The 21st century reality is that churches are no longer at the center of family and community life. Rather than work from the comfort of the church sanctuary to devise programs to entice people back to church, this project chose the contemporary missional approach to learn the churches' role directly from the community. Professional and entrepreneurial women were invited to talk about their choice to work in the Oyen area, the role of their faith and beliefs for work and the community, and their perceptions and expectations of the local churches, especially All Saints Anglican. The survey and interviews that were conducted for this project revealed places of pain and hope that would not be recognized from the safety of the sanctuary and they also pointed to new ministry possibilities. A vibrant and healthy community includes a life giving *koinonia*, which necessitates that it grows, and changes with its local context and resources.

Project Focus

The focus of my project was to understand the rural community of Oyen, Alberta – its vibrancy and its contributions—in order to enhance the ministry of All Saints Anglican Church. It would be a process of discovery to learn the reality of All Saints as it is in the community, the ministries it offers, and its place in community life. To borrow from Wendell Berry and his sense of place: “an authentic community is made less in reference to who we are than to where we are. ... if I am to live [in] it authentically ... I can do so only by knowing where I am.”²

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² Wendell Berry, “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community” in *The Art of the Commonplace*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 180.

To discover this reality of place for All Saints, I engaged in a process of learning about the town in which the church is located – Oyen, Alberta. This learning process went deeper than geographical location, population, and major economic base, along with accompanying health, education and safety services. Beyond the basics of how a town might be described on Google maps, an understanding of a town's vibrancy is essential. Economic development boards promote a town's vibrancy and employment, availability of necessities such as housing, groceries, schools and health care, along with entertainment, recreation and faith-based organizations are important elements of that vibrancy. Things like this attract people to the town and its surrounding catchment area. Faith-based organizations are also a component of this vibrancy and they play an important part in the community's social network. A healthy vibrant community is a place to call 'home.'

In the beginning

The Saskatoon Theological Union's Doctor of Ministry program had its beginnings in a newly developed program in Rural Ministry and Community Development. Its inception introduced the first cohort (of which I was a member) to the world and language of community development and that which creates and sustains healthy, vibrant communities. Sustainability, social and economic capacity, social cohesion and the influence of the global economy were concepts to be grasped. We learned about the key interactions between the members of a community – the bonding of people through a common organization such as the church, and the bridging that happens between organizations when one group aids another, such as the Lions Club assisting the Ministerial Association with setting up a community event.

The expectation of the original program was that projects would have a strong community component. As reading and course materials started mapping out various ways in which faith-based organizations and the 'civil commons' intersected, I wanted my project to investigate the place and role of the church in my local area – the responsibilities it has towards the community and what the community expects of faith-based organizations – specifically All Saints Anglican Church. My goal for a project that would link church and community was to discover a revitalized future for All Saints. Those of us who frequent the pews can only surmise what might meet the spiritual and social needs of those outside or on the fringes of the Church. Based on our unsubstantiated guesses we assume that those who are not actively engaged with a faith community have little or no spiritual health and are unaware of the role and place churches may have in their community. The project was an opportunity to ask: What role does faith have in one's work life, approach to work, community life and what could be expected of a faith organization such as All Saints?

While the concept for such a project was exciting, defining a clear focus proved to be illusive until I returned to a casual comment made to me in the early stages of the program. The first essay I wrote about my ministry context required input from people in the community. During an annual dental appointment, I asked the dentist for her perceptions of working in Oyen. She expressed amazement at the number of professional women in Oyen. I recounted that incident to my program advisor who suggested that I invite professional and entrepreneurial women to participate in my research. My ministry team was very excited about this idea and I received a positive response from a quick poll sent out to a few of the professional women working in Oyen.

Theological Foundations

The Theology of Work

Questions about the intersection of work and faith were at the theological heart of my project, and The Theology of Work Project³ offered me some important theological insights. Essays on the creation stories in Genesis invited me on a journey of re-reading and re-interpreting these stories from the perspective of work and community development. With work placed at the centre of God's creation, a broader understanding of the relationship between work, humankind, and God is revealed. The human creature was created to work in partnership with God as well as with each other. As the Theology of Work Project notes: "Laboring in God's image, we work in creation, on creation, with creation and – if we work as God intends – for creation."⁴ As those first chapters of Genesis are interpreted through the lens of work, we learn that the beginning of work was not at the time of expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:23-24). The liturgical poetry in Genesis 1 recounts God's delight with all of creation and commands humankind to be "fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). Genesis 2 recounts the story of a hands-on God, who created *adamah*⁵ immediately after the heavens and earth, before the Garden of Eden was planted so that Adam could till the earth (Gen 2:7, 15).

When we can see how work is woven into our creation, we can take delight in our vocational calls knowing that they are gifts from God to be embraced and celebrated. The women who participated in the project were asked to consider the moments of thankfulness they have for the vocation they chose. Their responses could be the source of a Thanksgiving Litany. They especially expressed gratitude for the support from family, the beauty of the prairie night sky, thank-you cards, a flexible lifestyle, the honour of walking alongside people during times of need and appreciation for customers, clients, colleagues, employees and bosses.

The creation accounts are not complete without considering the events of Genesis 3 where God's human partners put a damper on their relationship with God. Both creation stories recount that God gave permission to humankind to eat from any seed-bearing plant and tree. However, in the Genesis 2 story God places a prohibition on eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, a prohibition that is violated in Genesis 3. Eating fruit from the forbidden tree violated the one prohibition God place on their vocation to tend the garden and their freedom to choose to eat from any plant. God's expectation of mutuality and equity were relinquished for a desire for knowledge and self-control resulting in distrust and disparity. It is unfortunate that the more common interpretations of this incident, namely that humankind's fall from grace, and work was declared to be a non-reversible punishment, overshadows the gift of boundaries and prohibitions in our work.

The professional and entrepreneurial women interviewed for my project noted that their work is bound by a code of ethics and/or government regulations. Violation of prohibitions set out in those regulating boundaries can, and usually do, result in expulsion

³ www.theologyofwork.org.

⁴ "God Works Relationally," Theology of Work Project, www.theologyofwork.org.

⁵ The Hebrew word *adamah* means "Land," "ground," or soil." ... *adam* is also used as the proper name of the first man, Adam. www.gotquestions.org/meaning-of-adamah.html.

from their 'garden'. "Recognition and honoring of boundaries leads to well-being"⁶ because workers have a reference point from which to assess decisions and actions in the workplace; trust between the service provider and her clients and customers emerges from the foundation set out by the boundaries as well as the competencies performed. Well respected prohibitions point to living and working according to the 'golden rule' and *shema*: loving God and neighbour equally. Both the 'golden rule' and the *shema* were common themes identified by project participants as church teachings that informed their work.

Other Theological Reflections

As my research methodology revealed the place and role of the church in the wider community, several Biblical passages and themes came to mind. During the conception and planning of the project, I kept hearing the psalmist's lines: "The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendour." (Ps 29:4).⁷ This expression of praise was an invitation to hear the voice of the Triune God as expressed through those common routines and rhythms of the workplace not the worship place. One of the more significant biblical themes was:

Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? (Mt 7:7-9)

Jesus' words to ask, search and knock are especially appropriate to this project. Most commentaries and resulting sermons addressing this pericope in Matthew's gospel teach the faithful to reach out to God in prayer, and be confident that there will be an answer, although not necessarily immediately. However, to answer a prayer, Jesus did not hesitate to ask those seeking healing, for example, to name what they are seeking. In Matthew 20:29-34, two blind men shouted out to Jesus as he passed by, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David." In his first response, Jesus asked the blind men to identify what they wanted from him: "What do you want me to do for you?" And in asking, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16:13), Jesus did not presume to know how he was being perceived by the community and his disciples. While the commands to 'ask, search and knock' are an invitation to ask Jesus for whatever we want or need, those very commands could also be the answer Jesus is giving to a congregation's prayer for revitalization. Jesus could expect the congregation of All Saints to follow his example and ask its peers and neighbours, "Who do people say you are? What do people expect and desire of you? How will you provide the ministries asked of you?" Since I was curious about a meaningful faith-based gathering for the participants, I also asked: "Do you have an idea for a worship service or gathering that would be meaningful for you and/or your family?"

The answers to these questions were varied and reflected the broad stroke of how faith is lived and expressed through the group of women who were interviewed. Most responses focussed on some form of worship service. However, one response from an astute businesswoman came from her awareness of lonely people in Oyen. She wondered if the local

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, 1982. *Genesis*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Series, James L. Mays, Patrick D. Miller & Paul J. Achtemeier, eds. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 51.

⁷ *Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985).

churches could provide a gathering place for coffee and companionship because she recognized signs of unhealthy lifestyle choices in some of her customers, choices made, in her eyes, because of loneliness. This response affirms the richness of acting upon Jesus' invitation to 'ask, search, knock' because it points to an opportunity to learn about a gap in local social inclusion that may not seem obvious, nor would it be discovered solely from the comfort of the church sanctuary.

Research and Methodology

My research was conducted using two types of methodology. The first was an online community engagement survey using the Survey Monkey platform.⁸ The second was in-depth interviews with six women who, in the initial survey, agreed to participate in further research. Two factors determined my research methodology. The first was the timeline I had to complete the project. The second, and most important, was the context of my ministry site. While there are many interesting qualitative research methodologies available, the general rhythms and lifestyle of those who work in Oyen did not present a feasible scenario for a town hall meeting or for participants to present a photovoice representation of their community engagement. My demographic for data gathering was the professional and entrepreneurial women who work in Oyen. Many of these women do not live in Oyen. They commute from farms, ranches, and surrounding towns and villages for work, family recreation and shopping. Their travel also takes them to other cities and towns as schedules, appointments and consumer needs dictate. While trying to work out the best day and time to invite women to a town hall meeting, I realized that it could take as many as three meetings to gather a significant amount of information. While the online survey eliminated an opportunity for the women to gather and hear from each other, it did allow the women to consider more questions than could be covered in a town hall meeting, and invitations to complete the survey could be resent at any time to those who did not respond.

The Online Community Engagement Survey

The online community engagement survey investigated community engagement and the role and contribution of faith-based organizations in Oyen. The questions helped to identify why people live and work in the Oyen area, what social, religious and recreational associations they have, their perception of the town of Oyen's longevity, and some of their dreams for the community. Community engagement on all levels, including employment, lifestyle choices, and associations, contributes to the desire for people to stay in the Oyen and District area. While not all the survey questions and responses were included in the final project report, what was left 'on the cutting-room floor' could lead to further ministry opportunities, presentations to local governing authorities, and a data-sharing event at which the contribution of the project participants to the vibrancy of the community could be celebrated.

Choosing the electronic method for data gathering saved time, effort and the expense⁹ of holding town hall meetings. However, it was time consuming to design a suitable questionnaire, which required an appropriate consent form and questions that could be directed to different sections of the survey, based on answers given. For example, women

⁸ The University of Saskatchewan has a subscription to Survey Monkey, made available to qualifying students.

⁹ E.g. childcare expenses to permit women to participate.

who own and operate their own professional practices answered questions appropriate for an employer, while employees answered questions appropriate to them. To ensure that the sample of participants was true to my chosen data selection, public and online advertising of the study was not done. Email addresses were gathered by me or members of my team. Forty-two women consented to receive the survey – a number that did not include teachers, nurses, laboratory technicians, or paramedics. Survey Monkey calculated, based on the complexity of my survey, that 46% (19) of the women contacted would complete the survey. In the end, 62% (26) completed it. I do not believe that those 26 women would have agreed to participate in one or more town hall meetings. The advantage of the online platform was that the data received in electronic form was ready for dissemination and analysis and could be organized and downloaded in several different formats for PowerPoint presentations or incorporated into written reports as charts or tables.

The In-Depth Interviews

The concluding questions in the online survey asked volunteers to participate in further research, namely, the in-depth interviews. I was overwhelmed by the response, since almost all the women consented. However, because of the timelines for completing the project, it was recommended that I conduct only six interviews. I believe my selection of those interviewed was a good mix of women who attended church regularly as well as those who seldom attended regular worship. I was also intentional in selecting women who, for the most part, were not members of All Saints.

In preparation for the interviews, I emailed each woman a copy of my questions and the related consent form. I requested an appointment that suited their schedule. I also left the option open for them to offer written responses and submit them to me. Only one woman chose the written option. Most of the one-on-one interviews were recorded and transcribed into electronic documents. I wish I could have conducted more of these interviews. The stories and the insights that came from those meetings were informative and uplifting.

The first few interview questions focussed on the participant's career and current vocation. It included questions such as: "Do you have a sense of call to your current vocation?", "Is your vocational choice something that interests you?", "Is your choice of vocation a practical choice that fits your family and life-style?", and "Are you bound by a code of ethics and/or government regulations?" Participants were invited to share what made them thankful to be working in their chosen field and the advantages of living and working in the Oyen area. In addition to the survey questions that asked about the place, role, and programs of a local church, the women who consented to be interviewed were asked about their impressions of All Saints or any local congregation. These questions included: "What responsibility does the church have to the community?", "What could the church do to meet its responsibility to the community?", and "How might the church or its teachings support them in their work?" In a final question, the women were asked to share an idea for a meaningful worship service or faith-based gathering, and to name a place where they might encounter God in the community.

Those who responded to the in-depth interviews represented different ages and careers. While some were deeply committed to their faith and others claimed no faith community, their answers had a fair amount in common.

Summary of Learning

The responses gathered from the online survey were organized into three categories. The first two categories - Why we are here and Why we stay - gave insight into the contribution of professional and entrepreneurial women to community vibrancy. The third category gave insight into the church and its contribution to community vibrancy.

The Women's Contribution to Community Vibrancy: Why we are here

Given Oyen's geographical location it is reasonable to ask: Why are we here? Oyen is located in the midst of the semi-arid prairie and is "halfway to everywhere". It is the business, education, healthcare and spiritual center for a good portion of its surrounding area. The agricultural industry that gave Oyen its birth, oil and gas well production, and the recent establishment of a rail logistics yard are essential contributors to the local economy. However, a strong economic base does not necessarily create a vibrant community. An Australian study found that availability of natural and human resources along with infrastructure, public service and quality of life are important factors for would-be investors to judge the vitality and viability of a community.¹⁰ Public services and quality of life are tied to a desire to live and to be part of a community. In other words, there has to be a place to call home. The survey asked if living in a rural setting was an intentional lifestyle choice. Those who answered in the affirmative or stated that they left their options open were in the majority. The reasons for choosing to live in the Oyen area are: employment, business opportunities, family ties, marriage/relationship and an intentional lifestyle choice.

The Women's Contribution to Community Vibrancy: Why we stay

A vibrant community depends on tangible assets such as available land, a skilled workforce, infrastructure and technology, and on intangible assets such as quality of life and public services. No single asset, such as a major employer, can sustain a town. People may be employed, but employees need homes, food, schools and medical care. The institutions and the retail sector and services that a community provides are important assets and contribute to what many communities desire: the transformation from being a workplace into a place of belonging.

The professional and entrepreneurial women of Oyen contribute significantly to the capacity that enables those who live in our part of the prairies to call it home. Apart from the obvious contribution of their specific services to their clients and customers, many are aware of their impact on the town and the health of its residents. Appointments and shopping often result in people eating in restaurants, visiting friends, or participating in other recreational and social activities. When asked about the consequences if their business or place of work ceased to exist, almost all of the responses indicated that the nearest comparable service would be available in other communities one to two hours away. In addition, many responses indicated that if their business or place of work ceased to exist they would seek work elsewhere, a decision that would reduce their contribution to the businesses and organizations in Oyen.

Employment is a significant factor for the professional and entrepreneurial women to remain in the Oyen area. The recreational facilities, social networks, organizations, and

¹⁰ *Population Attraction and Retention: Considerations and Strategies* (Balranald Shire: Balranald Shire Council, 2014).

faith communities many of the women associate with, create a place of belonging allowing them to stay and raise their families.

The Church and its Contribution to Community Vibrancy

One of the more challenging components of this project was marrying the world of community development and the work of the church especially since modern society encourages a clear separation between church and state. However, there are various reports for and by civic authorities¹¹ that give recognition to the need and place for faith-based organizations. These reports show that the people attached to faith-based communities are more likely to volunteer at various social assistance agencies such as food banks, and that church buildings are often places where the community gathers for social events, in times of crisis, and for important meetings like AA. These are just some of the places ways faith-based organizations are recognized and relied upon for their contributions to the health of the wider community.

Who do people say we are?

Is there a need for the church or faith-based communities? This was one of the most frightening questions asked in the project, because the answer would determine a starting point for new and continued ministry at All Saints and other faith-based organizations. I was relieved that the answer given by the professional and entrepreneurial women to that question was positive.

Another difficult question asked in the in-depth interviews was: “What is your impression of All Saints Anglican Church, Oyen?” The answers to this question had two distinct themes. One theme centered on the role of the church as a valid and valuable place, that is, an outlet for support for people in distress. The church was valued because of its ability to respond in times of crisis, and for the quiet, physical space it offered the community. The second theme centered on the people of the church, in the form of the availability of the priest and the welcoming and inclusive congregation. The professional and entrepreneurial women appreciated the integrity they experience from customers they know who are members of All Saints. Respondents from congregations other than All Saints said they appreciated the congregation’s engagement with the community through its various fundraiser events, community connections and emergency response assistance. The ministry of All Saints builds relationships amongst its members and with the wider community.

What became apparent from the survey and the interviews is that the church (its building and its people) is a neighbour to the community. The church serves the local community by being open to the rhythms associated with the local life and lifestyles. Ministry is about relationships; about being a neighbour. Apart from times of inviting the general public to share a meal, volunteering with various organizations beyond the church, or helping with evacuation centers, it is also important to acknowledge that church buildings and the congregations who worship and support them are part of a neighbourhood. All Saints Anglican Church in Oyen is a neighbour. A neighbour needs, on occasion, to ask the teachers

¹¹ Corporate & Community Development Dept., *Population Attraction & Retention: Considerations & Strategies* (Balranald Shire: Balranald Shire Council, 2014); Richard Farnell et al, *Faith in Rural Communities: Contribution of Social Capital to Community Vibrancy*, (Warwickshire: ACORA, 2006); Friesen & Cleiff, *Strengthening Vital Signs through Urban Religious Communities* (Calgary: Cardus, 2013).

and students of the high school across the shared parking lot to park elsewhere on a day when a funeral is held in the church. A neighbour needs to know when the school needs the parking lot for one of its events. A neighbour has to take responsibility for the occasions when agile youth discover that the tree closest to the building gives easy access to the bell tower at two o'clock in the morning. A neighbour contributes to the tidiness and aesthetic of the neighbourhood. Some its neighbours offer neighbourly help even though they are not members of the congregation by lending grass cutting equipment to the church or clearing snow from the church. How the building is cared for and used impacts those who live and work nearby. All Saints is a neighbour with many gifts to share whether through acts called forth from the Christ-like faith of its members or a physical space for other organizations to meet. All Saints is a neighbour with needs and, ultimately, it is a neighbour who is called to love its neighbours as itself.

The Necessary Place for the Church in the Community

The interviews I conducted with women revealed reasons why the church is necessary for the life and health of the community. The themes that dominated the answers to questions about the church's responsibility to the community and how the church can fulfill those responsibilities are:

- Place. The church should be a place where spiritual presence, care, and teaching are offered; a place where people can 'refuel' and de-stress; a place to feed the hunger of those desiring religious and spiritual teaching and guidance in ways that meet current lifestyles;
- Inclusivity. The church should be a place where Christ's example of inclusivity is lived and people are taught to live with differences and to respect other traditions;
- Communication. The church should communicate and inform the community about its role and its ministries;
- Justice. The church should clearly address social inequality, especially bullying; and
- Presence. The church should be present and available to the community.

In many ways, the summary of these themes asks the church to continue doing what it is already doing. However, it is one thing as a faith-based organization to expect to be called on to be a pastoral presence in moments of crisis, it is another thing to be able to sit and listen to crisis responders and learn specifically what they respond to in a congregation's community.

A particularly interesting revelation that arose from the interviews was the plea for some form of church, including children's church, on social media. This request came from a very enthusiastic young mother who shared that she and some of her peers want to engage in church online. Her explanation is that the busy life of work and family responsibilities do not leave time or energy to participate in worship according to the traditional patterns currently offered by the local churches. For her, an occasional pot-luck meal, accessible online sermons, and children's programs, even by subscription, would be ideal.

In the online survey I asked a question about church services, wondering if the people who do not attend Sunday worship might want to learn more about the church and its worship. I was pleasantly surprised to see that from the 19 responses nine people named this as something that would be of interest to them. This response supports the comment from the young mother that she and some of her peers are interested in learning what the church has to offer. Her comments regarding the use of social media are also an indication of

how some people might like to receive information about the church and its service, at least initially.

Conclusions

Social capacity is an ongoing process of how community assets – economic and social capital, human skills, and natural resources – are utilized to create valued outcomes such as economic prosperity, and social inclusion and cohesion. While taking note of the health and sustainability of its host community is prudent for a congregation, it is also prudent for a congregation to assess whether its presence and work continues to be an asset contributing to community vibrancy. The command to ask, search, and knock is asking us, the faith leaders, to be present in our host community. It is also an invitation to look inward at our congregations' infrastructure, organizational structures, polity, and sustainability. Looking inward is difficult for many congregations as we would rather think "that the church isn't doing so badly at all,"¹² especially when the latest pancake supper is profitable.

Becoming a "missional congregation" is the current trend for those parishes who desire to keep the work of the gospel alive in their communities. Congregations who wish to adopt a more missional life are called first to be secure in their own context. That context goes beyond the doors of the church to knowing the lifestyle and rhythms of its town or neighbourhood. Some soul searching is required to determine how congregations hope to move forward in the years ahead. As Jesus would say, before you can take the speck out of another person's eye, it is necessary to take the log out of your own (Lk 6:41-42). At present, younger families are not actively participating in the life of the congregation on a regular basis. However, through the research for this project, some suggestions have emerged as to how to better engage the families that sit on the fringes.

What is ... Now

During a lecture on Appreciative Inquiry, Dr. Keith Walker stated, "You can't get to 'ought' from 'is.'" He was referring to what often happens when an organization wants to implement change but doesn't take the time to discover existing values, norms and dreams. This project was about discovering the 'is' and not the 'ought.' What 'ought' to change is another process altogether, a process that could include working with the information from the survey and interviews and discerning what is feasible for the congregation's gifts and resources, and perhaps, getting out and asking more questions.

The process of looking inward at All Saints' infrastructure, organizational structures, polity, and sustainability has just begun.¹³ It is hoped that in the next few months we will begin to seek out the 'oughts' for our congregation. Some will be implemented in the short term. Others will take time to discern as we plan for future ministries. The All Saints congregation has always taken some responsibility for ministries in the wider community. They expect their priest to be available to the wider community, they offer hospitality to neighbours through fund-raising meals and they seek ways to support needs in the community, be it food for an evacuation centre or funds to help offset someone's unexpected expenses.

¹² Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody: Grand Rapids: Hendrickson, 2003), 147.

¹³ September 2019.

Throughout the learning process related to community and congregational development, there have been changes in my pastoral ministry to the wider community beyond the congregations I serve. I have learned to hear differently especially when it comes to new economic development initiatives in the area. When new initiatives focus strictly on the economic gain for a community, the social implications are sometimes lost. Whenever possible I attend public forums so I can hear the concerns of the community and pass on concerns that have been voiced to me. My ability to formulate appropriate questions is often rooted in the research and learning associated with the Community Development and Rural Ministry Program.

This project was a blessing. At the very least, it pulled me out of my introverted self and opened my eyes to the acceptance of faith-based organizations and what they may be invited to offer to community vibrancy. Again, I hear expressions of hopes and dreams for the community differently. Some of the dreams people described for Oyen were an expression of desire to build community. A number of survey respondents desire a movie theatre in Oyen, an interesting dream given the availability of movies through satellite TV and online streaming services. However, online movie availability does little to build community.

In addition, the project allowed the voice of the Lord to speak to the *koinonia* of All Saints Anglican through the local professional and entrepreneurial women. A floodgate of possibilities has been opened – new ways of engaging in parish and community ministry – both secular and faith-based. Perhaps the greatest blessing however, was the affirmation from beyond the safety of the sanctuary that God is in ‘this place.’ The women who participated in the in-depth interviews, regardless of their faith associations, were confident that God is everywhere in their community – every person, every street corner, every building, every place on the fringe halfway to everywhere.

The voice of the Triune God is very powerful and speaks from ‘fringy’ places. It is an encouraging and hope-filled voice, insisting that the congregation and its judicatory takes seriously its kinship with the community, and that we be willing to ‘do our job’ – to publicize available ministries, defend the marginalized and bullied, uplift the lonely, and be inclusive. The voices in the community are inviting the church to “have the courage to go with them to a place that neither [the church] nor they have ever been before.”¹⁴

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¹⁴ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of the Things to Come*, 11.

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