



*Rural Routes through the Holy: Recognize, Replenish, Rejoice*

“Small is also bountiful.”

Marvin Anderson

From June 26<sup>th</sup> – 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, hopes were realized for a gathering of those touched by or touching rural ministry within Regions 14 (Fundy St. Lawrence Dawning Waters) and 15. This was thanks to an Embracing the Spirit Grant through EDGE, the hard work of those in the Bayfield-Little Shemogue Pastoral Charge with which I am in ministry, and the wise, respectful, and lively leadership of Dr. Marvin Anderson. We learned a lot and laughed a lot. We took risks, among them wringing out the heaviness of our hearts in a ritual of lament. Some spoke who said they’d never be able to speak, and some became still in those profound moments when it might have felt easier to keep talking.

Individually, in the early morning or in pauses between meals and conversations, we visited the still space upstairs in the sanctuary where various prayer stations waited for us. We worshiped and told stories; we were filled with good food; we listened to Maritime music, and

some of us danced- which seemed the natural expression of the energy released by our coming together. This is an energy present in so many rural places, an energy and a wisdom which for so long has been de-valued that it is often *unrecognized* even by those who themselves live in rural places and worship in rural churches.

In these two days together, we began to excavate and affirm and celebrate, to *recognize, replenish, and rejoice* in the way those on rural routes move through the Holy and the way the holy moves through us. Of course, one gathering does not undo the years of Christendom indoctrination through which the church judges itself, often unconsciously, as effective or worthwhile by how closely it mirrors the Western cultural model of success or greatness. Unbinding from that takes long slow work, time which many rural congregations in their present ways of being don’t have. But this was a window opened. The Spirit blew through. Something is coming of it. Something for those in places of rural ministry and perhaps something for the denomination.



“My biggest learning”, one person wrote, “is that if you want to know what rural ministry is about, ask those who live in it.” How striking. It hadn’t occurred to some in these places that they were the experts on the context in which they lived. And yes, that staying the same is not the aim; that when deeply listened to, they could drop some of their defenses. That they could, participate in the World Café process; that they had things to share; that they are not alone. They are a variety of communities and denominations coming together, growing the circle where old hurts are shared and healing possibilities emerge.

It was not the intention of this gathering to end with a five-point plan for rural ministry. It was the intent to begin to open up together to ways in which “they might remain grounded in and able to share the Gospel”. It was to reduce the sense of isolation, to hear from one another what is working well and what is lamented or longed for. It was to build confidence, hope, and to open imagination. Finally, it was to create a cohort to shape what was generated in the gathering in ways respectful of and responsive to rural realities.

The cohort has been formed. As initiator of the original gathering my hope is that we will:

- Organize a second gathering next year.
- Create a network of communication that includes ministry personnel and lay leadership in rural congregations in regions 14 & 15 for the sharing of resources.

- Consider alternative ways in which the needs of rural congregations, for worship, spiritual/faith formation, pastoral care and the work of justice and compassion might be met. (This is a large subject which I address in my original application to EDGE and which I continue to reflect on and write about.) We often think in terms of re-aligning or clustering pastoral charges but we might change lenses and think in terms of how we understand ministry. We can envision ministry positions in ways “that would allow a group of people to call on resources to nourish the roots of the Gospel in their community even if there is no longer a ‘church’ in the conventional sense”.

Other ideas will emerge within the cohort, but I name the above three as central, consistent with the original grant application. Together we experienced worship, education, community-building, spiritual formation, laughter, trust, and a sense of ‘look who we are’ and ‘look what we can do’. I am so glad to have been part of this and I look forward to what continued travels through the holy on rural routes may bring.

