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KATHLEEN KNOLING

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ANDY STANTON-HENRY

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SECTION 1: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Rural Isolation in the Biblical World

The Bible is a *rural* book. Of course, there are stories about cities and texts oriented to people living in urban centers. But we have significantly underestimated the extent to which the Bible is a rural, agrarian book, even, as Wendell Berry put it, “an outdoor book.”¹ It addresses the material and spiritual challenges of rural contexts and highlights the women and men who provided spiritual and social leadership in those places. Rural life, because it is so often geographically isolated (and isolating in several other ways), is often a lonely life. Leadership, too, is often a lonely task. So rural leadership can be a lonely life. Thankfully, the stories of scripture provide wisdom for those practicing rural leadership and those experiencing loneliness due to its isolation.

The Bible is also a *relational* book. From the beginning, God is portrayed as relational, interactive, and personal. In the first chapters of Genesis, for example, the Creator creates creators and involves other creatures in the creative process. This personal God invites human beings into personal relationships with God, the community of creation, and eventually, fellow human beings. This relational quality is central to the Bible because it is central to the divine nature. Philosopher Thomas Oord puts it this way:

God is not only present to all things, but God enters moment-by-moment into give-and-receive interaction with others. In this interaction, God is omni-relational. God acts in

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002), 504.

relation to others both as the Ideal Recipient and the Ideal Contributor. As the omnipresent Ideal Recipient, God takes in the experiences of all others...God is present to all things, all the time, and God experiences the experiences of others.²

Since God is “omni-relational,” God can assess the social and spiritual realities of rural people and places. God sees the risks of rural leadership and acts on that assessment by providing companionship and community. The following passages point to a pattern of God’s assessment and action based on divine concern for isolated individuals and their communities.

Textual Discussions

Genesis 2:18-25

The creation narratives of Genesis are rural stories. The first humans were “placed creatures,” planted in the Garden of Eden. They are members of that community, to be sure—*adam* means literally “earth creature” (a Hebrew word play between *adam* and *adamah*, which means “ground” or “earth”).³ And yet, humans are a “special species,” created in the divine image, and given charge to exercise “dominion.” This translation has a tragic history of abuse, used as license to conquer and dominate. However, scholars like Ellen Davis note that a better translation would be exercising “skilled mastery among the creatures.”⁴ In other words, the setting is agricultural and horticultural, with human beings partnering with God in overseeing the flourishing of the garden and its inhabitants.

² Thomas Jay Oord, “A Relational God and Unlimited Love,” *Religion Online*. <https://www.religion-online.org/article/a-relational-god-and-unlimited-love/>. Accessed February 21, 2022.

³ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978), 78.

⁴ Ellen F. Davis, “Meaning of Dominion,” *Bible Odyssey*. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/passages/related-articles/meaning-of-dominion>. Accessed Feb. 20, 2022.

Connections to rural life and leadership are not hard to make from these contextual clues. However, the second chapter of Genesis provides a central truth about leadership, especially leadership in a rural setting, that is worth highlighting. At each stage of creation's unfolding, the Creator pauses to evaluate and celebrate. At each pause we are told, "And God saw that it was good." However, in 2:18, the Creator witnesses the human creature and declares it "not good" (*lo tov*). And what is not good? The human being's aloneness.

There are many possible reasons for this state of aloneness being *lo tov*. The reason could be existential—human beings are not able to survive and thrive in isolation. It could be theological—how can the human represent the divine image as an isolated creature when the divine nature is relational (and later, Trinitarian)? It could be more practical—the task of garden stewardship is too much for one person. Or it could be sexual/reproductive—how can the human creature fulfill the calling to "be fruitful and multiply" if they do not have a human partner? It could certainly include all those reasons and more.

Seeing the problem, God is thus committed to finding a solution. As Phyllis Tribble puts it: "God the evaluator is God the rectifier."⁵ So the Creator seeks to rectify the problem, but true to the divine character, does so in an interactive, relational way. In a process that Terrence Fretheim describes as "divine experimentation," God continues to create new creatures and bring them to Adam to name. Both Adam and God "learn from the experience," seeing that though there is a bond between all the creatures formed from the earth, none were adequate to alleviate the "aloneness" of the human being.⁶

⁵ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 89.

⁶ Terrence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 56.

Then, using a more invasive strategy, God created Eve—the right match. Some translations call her a “suitable helper.” Many scholars point out that “helper” (*ezer*) doesn’t necessitate a subservient or submissive role. After all, the word is used to describe God in terms of a strong ally, perhaps a more powerful agent providing assistance (i.e. Psalm 121:2). This word is paired with *kenegdo*, which is sometimes interpreted in terms of gender complementarity.⁷ But “next to” is a better translation than “opposite of.” Adam is celebrating “bone of my bone” using a phrase used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, always referring to kinship bonds (i.e. Genesis 29:14) not necessarily a theory of gender complementarity or sexual union in “traditional marriage.”⁸ Eve was a “corresponding companion,” as Tribble puts it, who could stand next to him as a fellow image-bearer, exercising skillful mastery over their homeplace.⁹ In Eve, God provided what biblical scholar Linda Belleville calls a “strong helper as partner.”¹⁰

God saw that the aloneness of the first human being was “not good.” In response to this problem, God acted in a caring and creative way to provide a helpful and fitting partner. This indicates a principle of divine design. We cannot flourish in isolation and there is something incomplete, if not broken, about the world we do not live in partnered right relationship with others. Thankfully, we also find a pattern in divine provision. God answers our loneliness and weariness with “strong helpers” who lead alongside us. God is a competent and kind

⁷ Steve Gardner, “Does ‘Helper’ in Genesis 2:18 Imply Women are to be Submissive and Subordinate to Men?” *Authentic Theology*. March 8, 2018.

⁸ James Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 106-107.

⁹ Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 90.

¹⁰ Gardner, “‘Helper’ in Genesis 2:18,” *Authentic Theology*.

matchmaker, not only for individuals seeking a marital partner but also those needed companions in leadership situations.

Exodus 18:13-27

Exodus 18 provides the only other time in the Hebrew Bible where we find the phrase “not good” (*lo tov*). Moses was leading the people, and growing frustrated and exhausted by his role. So, Jethro, likely Moses’ father-in-law, decided to pay him a visit and share his wisdom. He travels to meet Moses “in the wilderness”—*midbar*, a remote and wild place, with few human inhabitants. Moses was leading the people in a rural context. But *midbar* shares the same root as the word *dabar*, which means “to speak.” So *midbar*, or wilderness, is literally “a place where something or someone speaks.” It was commonly a place where prophets and the larger community heard the *dabar YHWH*, the “word of the Lord.”

Moses was about to hear the speech or word of his in-law. Probably the word of the Lord, as well. What was the message? “What you are doing is not good?” (v.17). Jethro explains why it’s *lo tov*: “You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone (v.18). Dr. Robert Stallman comments that though Moses may have been *uniquely* gifted, he wasn’t *infinitely* gifted.¹¹ He needed help. Like the divine evaluation from Genesis 2, Jethro’s evaluation sees the way isolation undermines the leader’s well-being. It also points to the needs of the community, which cannot flourish without prompt and attentive leadership. Justice delayed is too often justice denied. The wellness of the leader inevitably impacts the wellness of the community.

¹¹ Bob Stallman, “The Work of Justice among the People of Israel,” *Theology of Work*. December 18, 2012.

Jethro advises Moses to institutionalize justice by delegating responsibility to “capable men from all the people” (v.21). The word translated “capable” is *chayil* which has a range of meanings including “virtuous,” “excellent,” “strong,” “capable,” “valiant,” and “resourceful.” It’s the same word used for the “woman of valor” in Proverbs 31 and David’s “mighty warriors” in 1 Chronicles 7.¹²

Once again, we see the pattern of isolation in life and leadership being a state judged “not good” followed by divine provision of capable companions who ease the burden and create conditions for a better world.

Luke 1:26-52

This passage begins when a divine messenger (*angelos*) visits a young woman in the town of Nazareth. Nazareth was a small village in southern Galilee, not connected to any major roads, with no particular importance, and consisting of about 300-400 people. It’s local life and economy were centered around farming. Villagers farmed grains and cereals on the valley floor and grapes and olives on the hillsides. Some, like Mary’s pledged husband, Joseph, also made their living as artisans (*tehton*).¹³ People in this region were heavily taxed by the Roman Empire, so they typically lived on the border of subsistence and the “downward spiral of indebtedness.”¹⁴ This was not the place anyone expected to be the birthplace of a global movement. It was not the place anyone would expect an angel to be sent. A pejorative question from John’s gospel

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 141.

¹⁴ Quoted, Ibid, 55.

highlights this attitude: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn.1:46). Lucan scholars Greg Forbes and Scott Harrower summarize it well:

Gabriel is commissioned by God and sent to Nazareth, an insignificant place in Palestine let alone the Roman Empire. Hence the focus of Luke’s account moves away from the temple in Jerusalem to Nazareth in Galilee. By means of this geographical shift, the power of God is surprisingly focused on a remote place, and upon a person of very low status—a woman.¹⁵

From the beginning of this story, we learn of God’s attention to often ignored rural places and people and God’s interest in empowering them for important vocations.

Powerful though the angelic encounter may have been, it was a lot for young, rural Mary to take in. And, contrary to popular portrayals, Mary did not immediately accept and submit to all that she was told. The verbs of the narrative indicate that she engaged the message with all her emotional, intellectual, and spiritual faculties. The New Revised Standard Version describes her initial response as “much perplexed” (*diatarassomai*) by Gabriel’s words; she “pondered” (*dialogizomai*) the strange greeting (v.29). Dr. F. Scott Spencer notes her movement from “deliberation” to “interrogation” then finally to “declaration,” in which she states her “informed consent” (often referred to as her *fiat*, Latin meaning “let it be so”) to participate in this incredible move of Spirit.¹⁶

During her “interrogation” stage, Mary asked about how this promise could be fulfilled within the body and being of a young, unmarried Nazarene woman from the middle of nowhere. The angel answered by promising the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and Most High God

¹⁵ Greg W. Forbes and Scott Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity: A Narrative and Theological Study of the Characterization of Women in Luke-Acts* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 44.

¹⁶ F. Scott Spencer, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 40.

(v.35). However, Mary is not left with God alone to face this wonderful and terrifying calling. The angel tells her that she had a relative, Elizabeth, who was also made pregnant in a surprising and seemingly miraculous manner. Mary was not alone. The Visitation was embedded within the Annunciation. Mary was not only given a calling; she was also given a companion. After all, the Jewish faith that shaped Mary taught that it is not good to be alone.

After the Annunciation experience, Mary goes “with haste” (*spoude*) to see Elizabeth. It indicates that she left with eagerness and enthusiasm (1:39). The Greek word is the same one used in Luke to describe the shepherds as they “hurried off” to witness the newborn Christ child (2:16). Scholars debate whether the haste was out of urgency for safety (avoiding scandal and potential punishment for her “illegitimate” pregnancy) or agency for spirituality (desire to share the experience with her friend and relative), or both.

The “hills of Judea” where Elizabeth resided and to which Mary made haste is often identified as Ein Karem. It was a small mountain town outside Jerusalem. And it was over a week’s journey away from Nazareth. We don’t know whether she went entirely alone, as part of a caravan, or with Joseph, but Mary had to have been intensely motivated to make such a journey. It seems, however, that as soon as they came together, all the struggle of the journey was worth it as they were filled with joy and comfort in one another’s presence.

Mary needed a “suitable helper” and “woman of valor.” She had to overcome loneliness and isolation at several levels:

- Geographical isolation (living in an extremely remote village)
- Spiritual isolation (making sense of a singular and unusual spiritual experience)
- Social isolation (separated from people who would understand and support her)

- Sexual isolation (experiencing a reproductive phenomenon that others couldn't understand)
- Religious isolation (at risk of religiously-inspired judgment and possible punishment)
- Political isolation (lack of power due to socio-economic status and gender as well as distance from centers of power)

It seemed that the same divine pattern from Genesis and Exodus was at work, leading Mary from isolation to visitation. God provided a companion as well as a call, and Mary made haste to be in her presence. Elizabeth was a relative but also a spiritual friend and social comrade who awakened a new song in Mary that may have otherwise been silenced by fear and loneliness. Sister Joan Chittister notes: "Elizabeth recognized in Mary the great gain that would eventually come from a situation that looked like such a great loss to everyone else...Elizabeth's power in friendship is a fierce commitment to hold on with hope to the spiritual fecundity of a friend."¹⁷

Jesuit scholar Brendan Byrne notes that Luke often uses this partnering as a literary motif: A favorite devise of Luke...is to bring together two individuals, both of whom have had a religious experience that they only partly understand. When they share their experience, individual experience becomes community experience and in the process finds full meaning...The two women and the two stories have come together, and faith overflows in knowledge, testimony, and celebration.¹⁸

¹⁷ Joan Chittister, *The Friendship of Women: The Hidden Tradition of the Bible* (New York: Blue Bridge, 2006), 54.

¹⁸ Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 35.

In any pregnancy, expectant mothers need guidance, support, and partnership, not least an unexpected and apparently miraculous pregnancy for a salvific purpose. But in their meeting and mutuality, they are enabled to believe in seemingly impossible promises.

Their solidarity was especially meaningful since great events in history typically went forward by “great men.” But curiously, there are no men in this passage. Joseph is probably at work and Zechariah was silenced. So, it was two women in a traditionally female domestic space supporting one another in their roles in a new, movement of God. Elizabeth Johnson notes: “No other men are around. Such quieting of the male voice is highly unusual in scripture. Into this spacious silence, two women’s voices resound, one praising the other and both praising God.”¹⁹ Once again, God provided a “strong helper as partner” to companion and co-lead. These two rural and small-town women were both chosen for a special purpose and led to one another for a world-shaping purpose.

Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments

Rural life is often lonely. Leadership is isolating. The biblical characters of Adam, Moses, and Mary of Nazareth illustrate the perils of loneliness and isolation, especially in rural and small-town contexts. They teach us that trying to live, love, and lead on our own is *lo tov*; it receives a “not good” assessment by God, in-laws, and angels. But the omni-relational God wisely and kindly acts on this assessment to provide a “corresponding companion” who will serve as a “strong helper as partner” that alleviates our loneliness, empowers our leadership, and promotes the flourishing of our communities and world. As C.S. Lewis said about the discovery

¹⁹ Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 259.

of friendships, these companions do not arrive in our lives “by chance” but as the result of a “secret master of ceremonies.”²⁰ In other words, God sees the risks of isolation among rural leaders and acts as a “matchmaker,” even when it seems like there is no one around.

These biblical stories testify that when rural folks and faith leaders will take the risk of relationship, embrace the helpers and partners God provides, and ally ourselves with others, amazing things become possible. We become, like Mary, *theotokos* (“bearers of God”), bringing new life into the world. And we restore the original goodness God intended for creation. We counter the toxic tendencies of isolation and individualism by creating what Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer called “circles of tov.”²¹ This, in turn, reveals the possibilities of partnership for other rural residents, clergy, and other leaders who are challenged by loneliness and isolation.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960), 114.

²¹ Scot McKnight and Laura Barringer, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power* (Carol Stream: Momentum, 2020).

SECTION 2: TOPIC HISTORY, MINISTRY OR VOCATIONAL CONTEXT, AND KEY VOICES

Topic History and Ministry or Vocational Context

It's helpful for contemporary clergy and spiritual leaders to know that they are not alone in their struggles with loneliness and isolation. Hearing from a "longer line" of lonely folks in church history may, in and of itself, alleviate loneliness. While this paper does not allow for a comprehensive study of historical figures, I will highlight eight figures (four men and four women) from the last two centuries of church experience who provide insight about the dynamics of loneliness, isolation, and friendship.

Loneliness

Dorothy Day (1897-1980)

Dorothy Day was familiar with the experience of loneliness and titled her autobiography *The Long Loneliness*. She experienced loneliness as a young woman, when she became pregnant with a man who refused to marry her and did not share her new commitment to the Catholic faith. Holding her newborn baby she felt "deadly lonely," adding that many women "especially are victims of the long loneliness."²² She experienced loneliness as a Catholic woman with a public ministry, caring for the poor and advocating for social justice in the Catholic Worker Movement. Looking at her life as an elder woman, she traced her loneliness all the way back to

²² Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 157.

her childhood experiences of walking through her neighborhood: “the sudden realization came over me that I was alone, that the world was vast and that there were evil forces therein.”²³

Ultimately, however, loneliness energized her journey toward God and service to others. She opened many “houses of hospitality” where other lonely human beings could find food, shelter, friendship, and spiritual nourishment. “We cannot love God unless we love each other,” she wrote, “and to love we must know each other. We know him in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.”²⁴ For Day, loneliness is a lifelong experience but one that can lead us into community, service, and spiritual formation.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

Thomas Merton lived with a profound restlessness and loneliness throughout his life. In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton talks about the loneliness he experienced throughout his childhood, losing his mother and feeling homeless. He tells the story of his spiritual journey in a way that mirrors Western society, reflecting on how his loneliness and restlessness drove him to hedonism and meaninglessness. Only in returning to God can our hearts find peace. This led him to the Catholic Church then to monastic vows at a Trappist abbey in Kentucky. Loneliness remained a prominent topic throughout his writing and in his life. It moved him deeper into solitude, outward in dialogue, and led him to break his vows of celibacy during one period of his monastic life.

²³ Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 19.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 285.

Merton's primary message about loneliness is that it's unavoidable. Trying to avoid it leads to many of society's ills. We must acknowledge and face our loneliness. Once a person accepts the reality of their loneliness, they can begin the journey of transforming their loneliness into solitude. Ironically, when a person ceases to strive after human relationships that will alleviate their loneliness, they open a space within themselves where divine companionship can be cultivated. "The [person] who fears to be alone will never be anything but lonely, no matter how much [they] may surround himself with people," Merton states unequivocally. "But the [one] who learns, in solitude and recollection, to be at peace with [their] own loneliness, and to prefer its reality to the illusion of merely natural companionship, comes to know the invisible companionship of God."²⁵ When one learns to embrace this companionship in solitude, they can also love their human companions, because they are loved "in God" and not in desperation and brokenness.

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996)

Henri Nouwen also wrestled with profound loneliness throughout his life. People that knew him said that this loneliness sometimes made him clingy, needy, and possessive. The complications of being a celibate priest and privately gay man only added to these struggles, and he experienced intense seasons of darkness. During one particularly dark time, triggered by the loss of a close friendship, he wrote: "When you experience the deep pain of loneliness, it is understandable that your thoughts go out to the person who was able to take that loneliness

²⁵ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 241.

away, even if only for a moment...But no human being can heal that pain...Dare to stay with your pain, and trust in God's promise to you."²⁶

Like Merton, Nouwen counseled seekers to stop avoiding loneliness through human relationships and social distractions. Relationships are healthy and important, but they cannot ultimately bring us peace. They can never give us enough reassurance, praise, or love to fill the void within. Drawing from Jesus' teachings and wisdom from the desert dwellers, Nouwen proposes that we can transform our loneliness into solitude: "To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our loneliness and to change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude."²⁷

When we engage this spiritual path with courage and humility, our wounds (including our deep loneliness) are also transformed from something we must hide, to something we can accept, and even share with others. Nouwen writes: "The main question is not, 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."²⁸ Henri testified to this truth by the way he lived, loved, and led. He was a "wounded healer."

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Mother Teresa of Calcutta lived a life of profound service and spiritual commitment. She was known to smile and laugh often and spoke of Jesus in intimate ways. And yet, we learned

²⁶ Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey from Anguish to Freedom* (New York: Image, 1999), 47.

²⁷ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out* (New York: HarperCollins, 1975), 13.

²⁸ Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 1997), 166.

after her death that she also experienced deep desolation and despair. In one correspondence, she wrote: “I want God with all the power of my soul—and yet between us there is terrible separation...Heaven is closed on every side.”²⁹ She seemed to be able to use this loneliness, like Nouwen’s “wounded healer,” to alleviate the loneliness of those she served.

Mother Teresa saw her ministry to those experiencing the poverty of loneliness as a form of identification with Jesus. “When Christ said: I was hungry and you fed me, he didn’t mean only the hunger for bread and for food,” she explained. “He also meant the hunger to be loved. Jesus himself experienced this loneliness. He came amongst his own and his own received him not, and it hurt him then and it has kept on hurting him.”³⁰ Jesus knew the suffering of loneliness in an intimate way; he knew what it was like to hunger for love and community. Mother Teresa calls this “the real hunger,” no less important or real than hunger for food.

Even as she advocated global service and love, she reminded people not to neglect the loneliness in those closest to us. “It is easy to love the people far away. It is not always easy to love those close to us,” she notes. “It is easier to give a cup of rice to relieve hunger than to relieve the loneliness and pain of someone unloved in our own home. Bring love into your home for this is where our love for each other must start.”³¹ Mother Teresa believed the only cure for loneliness is a growing circle of love, starting with those near us and expanding out into the world.

²⁹ Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 170.

³⁰ Mother Teresa, *Love, a Fruit Always in Season: Daily Meditations from the Words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 43-44.

³¹ *Ibid*, 129.

Friendship

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)

Clive Staples Lewis wrote extensively about friendship as one of the four loves of classical philosophy and exemplified deep friendship through his life. In his earlier writings, Lewis presents as an individualist but post-conversion, during his Oxford years, he comes to place high value on friendship. This surely has much to do with his participation in the Inklings, the group of literary criticism and comradeship that met regularly for nearly two decades—including such giants as J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Owen Barfield. Lewis praised the group: “What I owe them all is incalculable.” He exclaimed, “Is any pleasure on earth as great as a circle of Christian friends by a good fire?”³²

Perhaps because of his personal experience with the Inklings, Clive called friendship “the greatest of worldly goods”³³ and lamented its declining importance in the West. A student of the classics, Lewis expounded on the high value placed on friendship by “the Ancients,” who viewed it as the “crown of life and school of virtues.” “The modern world, in comparison, ignores it. It is something quite marginal; not a main course in life's banquet; a diversion; something that fills up the chinks of one's time.”³⁴

Lewis agreed with ancient philosophers about the importance of friendships but also believed that Christians had a unique perspective on it. “For a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work.” He compares the gift of friendship to the call of Christ, “‘Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you,’ can truly say to every group of Christian friends, ‘Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one

³² C.S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1988), 363.

³³ C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves* (New York: MacMillan, 1979), 477.

³⁴ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 74.

another.”³⁵ In Lewis’ view, friendships are formed, not based on our charm and attractiveness but by divine generosity and wisdom.

Simone Weil (1909-1943)

Simone Weil was truly one of a kind. She was a French philosopher who reached outside the walls of academia to work in vineyards and factories, and even joined a resistance movement. She was a mystic, philosopher, and social commentator at the same time. It’s no surprise, then, that Weil counseled caution when it comes to social entanglements. She wrote that a passionate desire for friendship is a “great fault.” Instead of something sought and attained, “Friendship should be a gratuitous joy like those afforded by art or life. We must refuse it so that we may be worthy to receive it; it is of the order of grace.”³⁶ Weil seems to agree with Lewis that friendship is a gift from God to be received not achieved through our own charm. She calls it a “miracle.”³⁷

It wasn’t just temperament or theology that made Weil skeptical of friendship, it was also the times she lived in. She saw whole nations and people groups taken up into dangerous ideologies like Nazism and thus valued the importance of the individual and the practice of solitude. Self-possession and self-definition must precede social relationships. Wholeness requires that friends maintain an “attentive distance” to one another, learning to embrace the rhythm of friendship that includes both the “joy of meeting” and the “sorrow of separation.”³⁸

³⁵ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 114.

³⁶ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (New York: Routledge, 1947), 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

“Keep your solitude,” Weil advises. When we are in full possession of our individual self then friendship can enrich and not erode our wholeness. And it can be received as a gift: “When you are given true affection there will be no opposition between interior solitude and friendship, quite the reverse.”³⁹

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

John Henry Newman was a theologian, poet, and priest in both the Church of England and Roman Catholic Church. He is known for his work on apologetics, the evolution of church doctrine, and the importance of education. But he is also known as the “apostle of friendship” for the many friendships he cultivated throughout his life and ministry. He had wide friendships, ranging from ivory tower scholars to the working-class folks that lived in his parish. Despite his wide range of friendships, however, his most important contribution to the theology of friendship is about the value of particular, close friendships.

In his famous sermon on friendship, Newman addresses those who argue that Christians should not have close or favorite friends. Some people “talk magnificently about loving the whole human race with a comprehensive affection,” insisting that “the love of many is something superior to the love of one or two.” While this sounds virtuous, Newman insists that it doesn’t amount to real friendship. He concludes: “This is not to love [people], it is but to talk about love.”⁴⁰ True friendship, by contrast, consists of personal knowledge is built on practice and habit. Like Mother Teresa, Cardinal Newman reminded people not to neglect those closest to them; these relationships form the grounds of wider charity and provide a school of true

³⁹ Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 117.

⁴⁰ John Henry Newman, *Selected Sermons, Prayers, and Devotions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 75.

friendship. “The best preparation for loving the world at large, and loving it duly and wisely, is to cultivate an intimate friendship and affection towards those who are immediately about us.” He concludes, “I have hitherto considered the cultivation of domestic affections as the source of more extended Christian love.” He points out that Jesus himself had a small group of trusted disciples and friends. We do well to follow “the Savior’s pattern.”⁴¹

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)

Evelyn Underhill was an English writer, mystic, and retreat leader in the first half of the 20th century. She wrote little on friendship as a philosophical or theological concept, but she testified to its value in terms of her own spiritual development. Several friendships were important to her, but one was of central importance. She was a preeminent scholar of mysticism but underwent a dark time in her life when her research and neo-Platonic spirituality was not sufficient to sustain her. So, she visited the most well-known Catholic scholars in England at the time, a man named Baron Friedrich von Hugel. It was a friendship that would change her life. She later stated: “I owe him my whole spiritual life.”⁴²

Though their relationship was mutually enriching, the Baron became her spiritual director. He taught three elements of religion: intellectual, mystical, and institutional. All three are necessary for vital religion but most of us prefer one. Evelyn was comfortable in the intellectual and mystical elements but less comfortable with the institutional element. She was critical of the church’s narrowness, hypocrisy, and dogmatism. Even in her generous description, she described her Anglican Communion this way: “The Church is an ‘essential service’ like the

⁴¹ Newman, *Selected Sermons, Prayers, and Devotions*, 74.

⁴² Quoted in Robyn Wrigley-Carr, *The Spiritual Formation of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2020), 1.

Post Office, but there will always be some narrow, irritating and inadequate officials behind the counter and you will always be tempted to exasperation by them.”⁴³ But Von Hugel helped Underhill find wholeness by rooting her mysticism in a more incarnational and sacramental practice. He directed her to take the Eucharist at least once a week and spend time caring for family and the poor. He encouraged her to develop non-religious interests. These would help “de-intellectualize her” by allowing “blood to flow away from her brain.”⁴⁴

Underhill praised von Hugel for helping her reconnect to the institutional church, reconnecting her spirituality with everyday life, and for introducing her to Christ through meditation on the historical, human Jesus. Through their friendship and a weekend at a retreat center in the countryside, Underhill was drawn to use her knowledge and skills to nurture spiritual growth in others. She became a much-respected spiritual director, and retreat leader, and writer. And her friendship with the Baron enabled her to have healthier friendships with others. She reported that a more balanced and centered disposition allowed her to approach relationships “rather less intensely”—with less possessiveness and defensiveness.⁴⁵

Key Voices

These wise guides provide deep and enduring wisdom to live by, but it is helpful to put them into conversation with contemporary practitioners and researchers who provide concrete insights into how folks can navigate the “terrain” of rural spiritual leadership.

⁴³ Quoted in Annice Callahan, *Evelyn Underhill: Spirituality for Daily Living* (Lanham, MD: University Press, 1997), 96.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Margaret Cropper, *The Life of Evelyn Underhill: An Intimate Portrait of the Groundbreaking Author of Mysticism* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2003), 75.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 92.

Clergy Loneliness and Friendships

Clergy Loneliness

Before exploring the dynamics of loneliness and friendship in the work of the rural pastor or spiritual leader, it is important to understand the loneliness risks that are common to clergy in all contexts. Pastoral theologian Arthur Boers emphasizes the loneliness inherent in the pastoral role in which clergy are expected to be “everyone’s pastor but no one’s friend.” They are expected to be, in the words of singer-songwriter Bruce Cockburn, the strong one “who gathers everyone’s tears.” The role leaves little room for humanity or vulnerability. People don’t feel like they can be themselves around pastors and pastors don’t feel like they can by themselves around other people.

Boers gives other reasons for clergy loneliness:

- *Working alone*— Clergy often work in “solo” environments and tend to be “eclectic introverts” and “loners.”
- *Lack of reciprocity*—Their expertise is called upon without an expectation of mutuality.
- *Playing the role of the pastor*— Not able to share honestly because they are fulfilling their role.
- *Frailties*—Feeling that people don’t want to know the struggles they face.
- *Isolation from extended family*—Clergy often don’t get to choose where they live or move frequently, so they often face geographical separation from their extended family.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Arthur Boers, “Everyone’s Pastor, No One’s Friend,” *Christianity Today*. January 1, 1991.

Author and minister Carol Howard Merritt writes about the experience of making a connection with someone, only for the connection to be cut when they find out she is clergy. Most ministers are familiar with this phenomenon and find themselves feeling lonely in a crowded room. She provides three reasons for this common experience:

1. *The invisible pedestal*—Especially in the Bible Belt, the public often views clergy as “set apart” from everyone else.
2. *Past social behaviors*—Before becoming pastors, many clergy made their congregation the relational center of their lives, which they cannot do as pastors.
3. *Schedules*—Pastors often work when other people are not working.

Merritt also shares disappointment at clergy groups; they too often devolve into ego-trips for congregational comparisons and problem solving.⁴⁷

Clergy Friendship and Boundaries

Professor and Presbyterian pastor M. Craig Barnes mourns the parishioners who became angry with him when he was called to a new church, exclaiming: “Friends don’t treat each other like that.” Even when he tried to practice the boundaries he teaches in pastoral ministry classes, there was inevitably fallout during transitions. He understands the risks associated with clergy friendships with parishioners. But there’s one problem—a math problem: “There isn’t enough time left over after serving the church to have healthy friendships. Or at least that’s what pastors tell themselves.”

For Barnes, it’s tempting to multi-task with ministry and friendship, but this approach is not wise. It doesn’t end well. It is, he says, “the cost of ordination.” He says plainly: “Ordination

⁴⁷ Carol Howard Merritt, “Lonely Pastors,” *The Christian Century*. September 13, 2014.

costs pastors, and one of the greatest costs is maintaining the lonely status of being surrounded by everyone in the church while always being the odd person in the room.” Parishioners may rarely understand this, but it is critical that the clergyperson understands it.⁴⁸

Messages around the “cost of ordination” often begin in seminary. While many seminaries caution against the risks of friendships with parishioners, some Catholic seminarians were trained with the Latin motto: *numquam duo, semper tres*— “never two, always three.” Going anywhere with an individual (male or female) was seen as morally dangerous; even if it didn’t become sexual, it could lead to a “particular friendship” (PF). While this is meant to prevent temptation and scandal, it can leave priests feeling like they have no way to make friends. Gay priests feel especially lonely; they feel the additional fear of being outed and being wrongly associated with the clergy child abuse scandal.⁴⁹

Though different in some ways, an evangelical corollary may be the “Billy Graham Rule,” in which a pastor or other leader makes the decision to never be alone with a person of the opposite sex. Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren recognizes the good intentions behind it but is troubled by unintended consequences: “This rule, in its most pristine form, renders male-female friendships impossible. However unintentionally, it communicates to women that they are fundamentally dangerous. And it bars men from meaningful mentorship or pastoral care of women and vice-versa.” She goes on to share ways she and her husband guard their marriage, many of which developed organically. She concludes: “Between legalism and license, we may find some good friends or help someone or change a life, and we may become better wives or

⁴⁸ M. Craig Barnes, “Pastor, not Friend,” *The Christian Century*. December 27, 2012.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth Dias, “‘It Is Not a Closet, It Is a Cage.’ Gay Catholic Priests Speak Out,” *The New York Times*. February 17, 2019.

husbands and grow in virtue, by God’s grace alone.”⁵⁰ Gay or straight, excessive rules can instill fear and suspicion in clergy, and create a significant barrier to friendship.

Some may fear that “loosening” the rules about opposite-sex (or same-sex for gays and lesbians) relationships may result in an increase of the all-too-common stories of abuse and infidelity. But there is a difference between “intimacy” and “genitality.” While affirming the importance of boundaries, clergy counselors Donald Hands and Wayne Fehr point out that nurturing a leader’s capacity for intimacy often serves to counteract the temptations of compulsive sexual activity:

It has been our experience and observation that when clergy needs for intimacy have been realized and nurtured, then their sexual and genital needs also become more a matter of free choice, less driven and compulsive. These needs are also less likely to be confused with needs for power and achievement, as in the cases of pastoral sexual abuse of parishioners.⁵¹

This psychological dynamic makes friendships even more important for clergy. But Hands and Fehr recognize the common struggle for many clergy—learning to relate as persons and not just pastors. This makes authentic friendship with parishioners unlikely since they inevitably relate to the clergyperson through their role. They write: “The key phrase for understanding the kind of relationships needed for health is *out of role and responsibility*.”⁵²

Rural Clergy Loneliness and Friendship

⁵⁰ Tish Harrison Warren, “It’s Not Billy Graham Rule of Bust,” *Christianity Today*. April 27, 2018.

⁵¹ Donald R. Hands and Wayne Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy: A New Psychology of Intimacy with God, Self, and Others* (Lanham, MD: The Alban Institute, 1993), 70.

⁵² Hands and Fehr, *Spiritual Wholeness for Clergy*, 68.

Rural Social Isolation

A 2020 article from the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) summarizes the scope of social isolation faced by rural residents. They note how nationwide struggles can be intensified by the characteristics of rural life: “The effects of rising stress levels, loneliness, depression, and despair can be exacerbated by rural hardships and a geographical dearth of resources.” The problem was more widespread than expected. For example, they found that 25 percent of older adults were socializing with people less than once a month, which they connected with negative physical as well as mental health outcomes. Researcher Carrie Henning-Smith singled out the common rural problems of “stigma” and “stoicism.” Many rural folks value being resilient and self-reliant, so acknowledging loneliness and asking for help can be hard.⁵³

Researchers with the Rural Pastors Initiative describe the similar struggles faced by rural clergy with the added weight of being a helping professional in an area where other sources of care may not be readily available:

The daily lives of rural pastors involve a sufficiently troubling degree of boundary confusion, role conflict, emotional exertion, and isolation (both geographic and social). As one of the few viable resources in rural communities—especially those suffering from economic depression—rural pastors perform a multitude of tasks with scant organizational or professional support. Conditions such as these may add up to fatigue

⁵³ Jennifer Franklin and Carrie Henning-Smith, “Approaching the issue of rural isolation,” *Rural Health Voices*. January 9, 2020.

and burnout if not addressed remedially at the individual, organizational, and/or structural level.⁵⁴

This convergence of social risk factors makes rural clergy uniquely susceptible to loneliness and burnout.

Noting that much of the empirical research about rural ministry is based on Anglican churches in England, researchers from Duke University used data collected on United Methodist clergy in North Carolina to examine whether rural clergy are “worse off” than urban and suburban clergy. They concluded that: “Although rural clergy face several unique challenges (such as multi-church ministry and lower salaries), they report lower levels of several stressors and more positive experiences. These differences disappear once controls are added, suggesting that rural ministry per se is neither particularly harmful nor beneficial when compared to ministry in other settings.”⁵⁵ The research confirmed the unique challenges of rural clergy, but those challenges are offset by more positive experiences in other areas.

Whether rural ministry is seen as uniquely challenging or as similarly challenging to other ministry contexts, there is abundant evidence that rural clergy need care and support. What is being done? A few examples illustrate attempts to address isolated rural clergy.

Rural Clergy and Online Community

A project sponsored by the Louisville Institute explores the potential for online collegial community for female clergy. The research revealed ways that clergywomen stay connected,

⁵⁴ Greg Scott and Rachel Lovell, “The Rural Pastors Initiative: Addressing Isolation and Burnout in Rural Ministry,” *Pastoral Psychology*. January 10, 2014.

⁵⁵ Andrew Miles and Rae Jean Proeschold-Bell, “Are rural clergy worse off?: An examination of occupational conditions and pastoral experiences in a sample of United Methodist clergy,” *Sociology of Religion*. June 24, 2011.

though technology, conferences, etc. It also revealed the ways they feel isolated, with geography listed as the number one isolating factor, above age, race, ability/disability, relationship status, family status, and sexual orientation.

Nearly everyone surveyed reported relying on digital communication to stay connected with colleagues (primarily through Facebook and texting). This was especially true for those serving in a rural region. The study's author states:

This is not the case for all pastors, however, and my research bears out what I already knew anecdotally: it is particularly problematic for clergywomen who, whether via search and call, an appointment system, or some combination, come to serve churches in places they find isolated geographically or theologically or both, because even in moderate-to-progressive mainline denominations, the default preference for churches is a white, male pastor. Women thus tend to be called or appointed to pulpits in less desirable social, theological, and/or geographic locations, where they are in a social fishbowl and a collegial desert.⁵⁶

The study concluded that digital connections like coaching, clergy groups, blogs, and so on have potential to alleviate isolation for rural clergywomen. The study's author started a website for blogging and networking among clergywoman called RevGalBlogPals.

Black Rural Clergy

A project of Duke Divinity School, known as Peletah Ministries, addresses the unique challenges of Black clergy in North Carolina, especially Black clergy serving in rural areas.

⁵⁶ Martha Spong, "Alleviating Isolation: The Role of Online Community in Sustaining Clergywomen," *Louisville Institute*. <https://marthaspong.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/louisville-institute-pastoral-study-project-report-with-bibliography-1.pdf>. April 14, 2022.

Clergy in the state's coastal regions are given special attention since they are particularly isolated and their congregations face pervasive financial and emotional challenges. The ministry provides a five-week program that helps these clergypersons cultivate well-being. The program uses the image of a shell to convey safety and comfort. SHELL is also an acronym for the curriculum, covering themes of Safety, Hope, Efficacy, Lasting, and Links. It connects Black clergy not only to theologians and ministry professionals but also to dietitians, social workers, and psychologists. The results have been positive, supporting vulnerable clergy through the difficulties of hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁷

Rural Clergy Retreats

The ministry Catholic Rural Life has harnessed the power of retreats to “provide spiritual refreshment, rural ministry insights and support, individual leadership development, and fraternity with other priests serving rural communities.” They recognized the growing challenges of isolation among rural Catholic priests as many report feeling exhausted and isolated, especially those serving multiple parishes over a long distance. The Thriving in Rural Ministry retreats provide space for priest to rest, reflect, pray, learn, and make peer connections. For example, one priest reported that he discovered more ways to connect with dairy farmers and ranchers in his parish as well as ways to connect the rural setting to practices of prayer and creation care. The retreat also helped him see that he was not alone; many other priests were facing the same challenges and can share ideas and support.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Robert Webb, “Meeting the Special Needs of Black Clergy,” <https://www.dukeendowment.org/news/meeting-the-special-needs-of-black-clergy>. December 14, 2021.

⁵⁸ Steffanie Koeneman, “Retreats Help Rural Pastors Reach Out To Their People,” <https://diocesetucson.org/news/retreat-helps-rural-pastors-reach-out-to-their-people>. January 7, 2020.

Rural Clergy Groups

The United Methodist Church has addressed clergy isolation through the creation of clergy covenant groups. These groups are defined by several elements:

- a definite group of three-eight clergy who meet for encouragement, support and accountability
- committed to pray for one another
- may have a written covenant
- meets regularly, though maybe not monthly
- may be a residency, local pastor mentoring group, or Transition into Ministry group
- not a network meeting, lectionary study group, or book club

These groups are sustained using four different models.

- Clergy Community Practice—led by a trained facilitator who help develop a skill or practice that addresses a shared need or desire.
- Monthly Clergy Covenant Group—meet monthly for worship, spiritual growth, accompaniment, and confidential sharing.
- Wesleyan Band Meeting—modeled after Wesley’s small group approach where groups share at the soul-level, confess sin, and grow in holiness.
- Retreat Model—meet four times a year, in-person, sharing a communal retreat of “playing and praying” and catching up.⁵⁹

These groups present possibilities for deepening collegial, communal connections, which

⁵⁹ Great Plains United Methodists, “Clergy Covenant Groups in the Great Plains,” <https://www.greatplainsumc.org/clergy covenant groups>. Accessed April 16, 2022.

many studies show are essential to clergy well-being and longevity.

SECTION 3: SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

The fourteenth century Persian poet Hafiz wrote a poem, translated as “A Great Need,” that describes the landscape of spiritual leadership in rural contexts:

Out
 Of a great need
 We are all holding hands
 And climbing.
 Not loving is a letting go.
 Listen,
 The terrain around here
 Is
 Far too
 Dangerous
 For
 That.⁶⁰

The “terrain” of rural ministry is “dangerous” (in terms of loneliness) in three ways:

- The loneliness of “life in general”
- The loneliness of rural life
- The loneliness of ministry

⁶⁰ Hafiz, “A Great Need” in *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 165.

Clergy and other spiritual leaders who choose to serve in a rural setting face a challenging task. They navigate a risky territory. Thankfully, wise guides from scripture, church history, and contemporary practitioners help show the way.

Harmony

In many ways, their voices are harmonious. They remind us that human beings are not meant to function in isolation and attempting to do so puts us into a “not good” state. We cannot flourish personally or professionally in isolation. The biblical testimony points to the dangers of isolation, the pain of loneliness, and the gift of friendship. It tells us that life-giving, life-changing relationships are gifts of divine providence. Recent Christian guides agree, whether it’s C.S. Lewis naming the “master of ceremony” behind the scenes or Simone Weil calling friendship a “miracle.” Contemporary researchers and ministers are unanimous in stating the importance of friendships, seeking to connect rural clergy with other clergy and competent caregivers so they can “hold on” to others and not get lost or injured in the “terrain around here.”

Contrast

Some contemporary guides, however, provide “creative contrast” to the narrative by pointing out risks that come with clergy friendships. Friendships with parishioners should be entered with caution—if not avoided altogether—because they can create unhealthy expectations and unhelpful influences. Not every new relationship or potential friendship can be embraced as an unquestioned gift from the divine hand. Clergy covenant groups, retreats, digital connections, and professional gatherings can provide alternative avenues for friendship. They remind us that we are not alone in navigating this terrain.

Spiritual teachers like Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen also provide creative contrast by reminding us that loneliness is not only about *interpersonal relationships* but about *intrapersonal dynamics*. They remind us that reaching out and making friends is not the end-all solution to our troubles with loneliness and isolation. In fact, relationships can be “dangerous terrain” if they enable us to avoid facing our loneliness, which prevents us from transforming it into solitude and letting it teach us about divine companionship.

Dorothy Day and Mother Teresa instruct us to befriend loneliness as a source of strength for serving others who are lonely. Mother Teresa proposes that our loneliness and our accompaniment with others who are lonely allow us to identify with the loneliness of Jesus. It helps us empathize with others who have experienced what Day called “the long loneliness” and serve them through hospitality and justice.

The research revealed tension in terms of just how dangerous the terrain of rural ministry is, compared to ministry in other regions. Rural residents clearly face unique risks to their mental and physical health. And the Louisville Institute study showed the central connection between geographical isolation and psychological isolation faced by female clergy. Like Mary of Nazareth, they have to “make haste” across a great expanse (geographic, cultural, political, etc.) to fellowship with like-minded friends (though digital connections help shrink this distance). However, the study from Duke University indicated that though real risks exist for rural clergy, they are not “worse off” because positive trends off-set the risks. Simply put, there are great gifts and tough challenges that come with rural ministry. The debate is whether the interaction between those gifts and challenges makes rural ministry *more difficult* or *just different*.

Gaps

If there was a gap in the scholarship and conversations, it was in the experiences of minority populations and people of color. One of my questions that emerged from my workshop was whether people of color experience a unique sense of loneliness and isolation in rural settings. Of course, people of color are not always the minorities in rural and small-town settings (predominantly Latinx and Native American regions, for example). However, many rural contexts are primarily populated by white majority folks. Considering these demographics and the histories of oppression and marginalization, it seems likely that minorities, people of color, and other oppressed communities experience rural isolation in a particular, if not intensified, way. Most of the literature on loneliness and friendship are written from a white European perspective. How much of these dynamics are universal and how much is culture-specific?

With a growing awareness and emphasis on racial and ethnic histories and historical injustices, I assume that there are studies being done on these subjects, but I found little in the literature. I did include the study on female clergy, which did note the specific impacts of rural isolation. I noted experiences from gay priests, who have to navigate a complex landscape of sexual politics, professional boundaries, and institutional issues. I also found the notable exception of the Duke University outreach to Black pastors in rural North Carolina. Their work represents an important state-wide and denomination-specific awareness and provides an innovative project from which others can learn.

While this paper did not allow room to explore it, a significant factor in how rural clergy experience the “long loneliness” in this terrain is the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was an intentional, practical oversight of mine but not one that exists in research. Studies are already revealing the ways the pandemic and its mental, medical, and interpersonal impacts are

taking their toll on rural clergy and other rural residents. This factor deserves “honorable mention.”

Of course, there were many other corners and ecosystems in this “terrain” that I did not have room to explore. The body of wisdom that already exists is encouraging and I believe the gaps will soon begin to fill. I hope that the existing research and projects can make the territory less dangerous and more easily navigable. It can also enable us to appreciate the unique gifts of rural ministry. I look forward to exploring a way in which I can contribute to this ongoing conversation and the work being birthed from it.

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