

“Picturing” Lay Ministry: Photovoice and Participatory Group Spiritual Gifts Assessment

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*2013 recipient of
‘The Journal of Christian Ministry Award of Excellence’
for outstanding thesis-project*

Abstract: The “Picturing Lay Ministry” project uses the visual methodology of photovoice as a way of generating participatory laity discernment around the topics of calling, rural ministry, and spiritual gifts. The project involves working with curriculum action research embedded within one-day ministry discernment events for laity. Measurement tools include a spiritual gift inventory, repeated measures Likert questionnaires, a short-term photovoice exercise, and semi-structured interviews. The research shows that a photovoice intervention positively impacts participants’ awareness and ownership of calling and spiritual giftedness, and encourages contextualization of both ministry realities and hope-filled opportunities.

During our time together in seminary in the early 2000’s, my wife Rebecca had the opportunity to travel to Houston for a ministry leadership conference. At this conference, one of the headliners asked her where she planned on serving after seminary, to which Rebecca replied “the Dakotas.” This headlining evangelist replied, “Why would you go there? There aren’t any people there!” Not only did this comment highly disappoint my wife, but it also caused us to re-evaluate our call to ministry. As someone who comes from this place (the

Dakotas) where supposedly no one of significance lives, I saw the inherent fallacy of the leader's missional objectives. If indeed the mission of the church is to send the good news to, for, and with all people, throughout the world, then how could we justify cutting ministry and mission to the rural parts of America? A simple reading of John 1:35-51 reminds us that perceived cultural insignificance should never be mistaken for Spiritual insignificance. The simple agricultural village of Nazareth (estimated population of 480 people) raised up Jesus, and the commitment of similarly "small" people throughout the region was responsible for the spread of the Gospel in the first place. Continuing to promote ecclesiastical structures and mission objectives that leave out the "Nazareths" in our midst in favor of more densely populated mission fields not only denies the witness of the Gospel, but also runs counter to Jesus' own mission to and with the "least of these" in his own society.

Granted, the rural communities of America are not utopian and perfect lands just waiting patiently to take part in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. The success or failure of the rural congregation in the current era will depend upon how willing it is to take an honest look at its reality, and a hopeful look at its God-graced potential. The "Picturing Lay Ministry" project aims to capture the Spirit of both. My project builds upon a cultural study of the rural church and aims to forge a new path in lay ministry discernment that has the potential to renew the minds of laity concerning spiritual gifts. My methodology

asks questions that get to the heart of individual and collective giftedness and calling, and seeks to offer reflexivity (both scientific and spiritual) at every level of inquiry. All of these factors contribute to my overall thesis for this project: Participants will develop a more positive and more contextualized understanding of their spiritual gifts through a short-term photovoice experience.

In this article I provide a condensed version of my project research paper, beginning with an introduction into the cultural software of the American rural church. I then present the ministry problematic of an “oppressed” mindset amidst rural laity. Next, I offer the sociological, theological, and qualitative research methods pathways that lead to a re-writing of this cultural software. After laying out the methodological framework of the “Picturing Lay Ministry” project, I then outline and interpret the results of data collection. Finally, I discuss the ramifications of the research project for the rural church, future educational endeavors, and the church at large.

Rural Cultural Software

In order to evaluate and to influence a cultural situation, a person or entity must first be aware of one’s own culture. Jackson Carroll and Wade Roof stress the importance of such cultural “reflexivity,” shown through the act of

“cultivating awareness of ourselves in social and historic religious contexts.”¹ Soong-Chan Rah defines culture as the “software of the mind,” and viewing culture as software opens up the possibility that humans can individually operate in different ways after exposure to alternate cultural opportunities (or re-write the program, so to speak).² Such a definition, however, does not give the complete picture, as it appears to ignore the overwhelming influence of community upon one’s learning and belief structure. In traditional anthropological thought (via Clifford Geertz), culture “influences action when it is deeply felt and deeply embedded – either in an individual’s deepest and earliest habits and feelings or in the taken-for-granted ‘web of meanings’ created through the repeated interaction of small intimate groups.”³ Therefore, the concept of communal cultural rules articulates the desires of the powerful, lays down sets of rules, and creates schemas for acceptable actions. If one is to re-write cultural software, one must first know these communal rules and schemas that the software codes operate within.

When describing rural communal rules, we must begin with a concept of American “rural” culture in general. Martin Giese suggests that American rural “is a set of values arising from a lifestyle based on a shared socio-cultural *memory*

¹ Jackson W. Carroll and Wade C. Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 210.

² Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 24.

³ Penny E. Becker, *Congregations in Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 202.

of an agrarian way of life.”⁴ Therefore, whether or not one actually works or lives a life of agriculture, the landscape of agricultural heritage which has formed the rural communities influences them nonetheless. Giese understands this agrarian mindset as one that “perceives life and livelihood as largely beyond human control,” and he names key rural traits such as: working “alone” and independently, coping with an unpredictable environment, developing pessimism to protect self, carrying an “inflated” view of self (aka “erroneous” reflexivity), and being personally guarded with “emotions.”⁵ These traits are presented as personal characteristics, but we can also see how such rugged individualism cyclically both forms and is reinforced by a like-minded community.

Rural life also finds its challenges through competition for scarce land and resources, deadly habits fueled by isolation, dangers of weather and travel fatalities, crippling costs of farming machinery and the transportation lifestyles necessary to support life in rural places, and a lasting refusal to see one’s own neighbor as oneself over differences such as skin and religion. These challenges influence various realms of local and regional congregational leadership as well, as remnants of competition and schism are overtly visible and often can’t move away from one another, making collaboration and/or consolidation tenuous at best. Congregations know they will outlive their pastors, and for the most part

⁴ Martin Giese, “The Distinctive Context of Rural Ministry,” *Abundant Harvest*, Ed. Victor Klimoski and Lance Barker (St. Paul: Minnesota Consortium of Theological Schools, 2000), 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, “Distinctive,” 48.

are willing to actively “wait out” any attempts to alter their identity, for better or for worse. This often occurs because parishioners realize that any attempts at change in a rural area pose a “socio-cultural risk. A decision could polarize people and jeopardize the social harmony that makes life bearable in small communities.”⁶ Therefore, the reconciliation and spiritual growth necessary in many of our rural congregations and small towns stands directly counter-cultural to the situations and emotions which formed the conflict initially.

Symptoms of this problem evidenced ecclesially include lack of leadership due to having to overstaff a community with a minister from each denomination, and lack of shared mission due to competition of monetary and personal resources. Combining this understanding of an oversaturation of churches, with the innate survival mentality of rural residents, we begin to see how rural congregations fight an untenable battle from the outset. They cannot all survive as separate entities given the factors already mentioned, and yet, a new vision for what the church might look like within a rural setting culturally threatens the survival instincts of what little rural congregations have left. At the same time, attempts by rural congregations to financially sacrifice in order to obtain the culturally desired full-time clergy, combined with the inevitable failure of a human being to fully inhabit such impossible pastoral and cultural expectations, often lead to a general sense of “hopelessness” in rural congregations.

⁶ Giese, “Distinctive,” 53.

Adding to this negative cultural inertia is the fact that the one group in the rural church that has the power to turn the tide of ministry, the laity, often finds itself at a loss for agency. The word “laity” itself goes back to the Greek word *laikos* and “it means originally: belonging to the ‘laos’; that is the chosen people of God, both in the Old and the New Testament.”⁷ All members of the Church are therefore part of the *laos*, and it is only in terms of this inclusive membership that more specific ministry callings can be understood. In today’s usage we have lost most, if not all, of the “all-encompassing” nature of word “laity” and have allowed it to slip into the realm of the pejorative. George Peck argues that the negative connotations of the word “lay” and “laity” in today’s English definitely affect ministries quite adversely, for “frequently we are dealing with people who in their major area of activity are very competent and well trained, but yet we insist on calling them, in the church, ‘lay people.’”⁸

The Biblical witness (especially the New Testament) points to the calling and ministry of the whole people of God, and names several gifts and graces that Jesus himself left for the laity to live into. I also agree wholeheartedly with Brian Bauknight that, regardless of size of faith community, “there are sufficient spiritual gifts in every community of believers to do what God is calling that

⁷ Kraemer, Hendrik, *A Theology of the Laity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 49.

⁸ George Peck, “Reconceiving the Ministry of the Laity: A Personal Testimony,” *The Laity in Ministry*. eds. George Peck and John S. Hoffman (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1984), 16. If “in current usage ‘lay’ means: unqualified to speak or judge in various fields of knowledge and science,” then how can we ignore the negative connotations that this word brings to ministry of the laity? Kraemer, *Theology*, 49.

community to do in this particular moment of time.”⁹ Therefore, the onus is on each individual participant in Christ’s body, and the church as a whole, to discern together where the spiritual gifts have impacted, are currently empowering, and can potentially serve in ministry in the future. Such a task requires that Christians “see” their gifts, and the gifts around them, not as categories on a page, but as possible actions in their midst. I argue that the qualitative methodology of photovoice provides one such pathway to this transformational and revolutionary sight.

Education for and with the Oppressed Mindset

The motivation for my photovoice project originally came from the connections Alice McIntyre made in her work on Participatory Action Research between Paulo Freire’s motivational education schema, the ensuing empowerment of local knowledge through such education, and the powerful role the qualitative research method of photovoice can play in similar settings across cultures.¹⁰ Freire believed that in order for someone in an “oppressed” situation to “wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting

⁹ Brian K. Bauknight, “Team Building Through Spiritual Gifts,” *Equipping the Saints: Mobilizing Laity for Ministry*, eds Michael J. Christensen and Carl E. Savage (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 104.

¹⁰ Alice McIntyre, *Participatory Action Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2008).

situation which they can transform.”¹¹ The educational schema of “conscientization” envisions situations in which an educator can work with the people to help them perceive the society that they find themselves in. This educational process consists of conversations which re-present the stories and descriptions of reality that the local people have shared back to them as a problem to be solved, often through the use of visual images.

Running contrary to Freire’s educational style is the “banking” model of teaching, perhaps the most common educational technique in American society today. For Freire, the banking concept of education considers knowledge to be “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”¹² Such a model leads to imbalances of power and freedom, as it reinforces relationships of need and deference. The danger of the “banking” model for the reality of an oppressed people presents itself in that it simply cannot lead to change. If an outside expert would simply come in and try to tell an oppressed people what their reality is, they do not truly have the capacity and tools to believe him or her. When they are given the tools and words to see what is happening all around them, however, they can own their reality and its inherent problems, and therefore own the solutions as well.

¹¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 31. For “when people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole, they cannot truly know that reality.” *Ibid.*, 85.

¹² Freire, *Pedagogy*, 53.

Clifford Geertz adds anthropological illumination to the differences between the educational approaches of “banking” and “conscientization” in his discussion of cultural life as either “landscape” or “collage.” Geertz argues that the “banking” model of teaching works well in environments that function as still-life landscapes, permanent over time and space in their function and appearance. Rural life has often been painted and/or captured by the rest of America as a landscape portrait of life. However, the reality of rural life speaks more directly to life as a “collage.” A collage life properly understood consists of unfixed edges, blurred boundaries, and ill-defined spaces between those known as “other.” Any rural educator must grasp a firm understanding of both the perceived landscape, the reality of the collage, and the local software of meaning and action that a rural community and individuals have constructed between the two before a re-visioning of futures can take place.

Celebrating local rural knowledge for its own sake is not redemptive either, for no local knowledge contains all truth, and in fact might contain some gratuitous error. Instead, educators within local rural places necessarily must begin a comparison amongst and outside of that community. This comparison of “un-comparables” lights pathways to a future that would previously have been unrecognizable, while darkening paths that should not be taken.¹³ Such comparisons not only help to conscientize and contextualize local realities, but

¹³ “We need, in the end, something rather more than local knowledge. We need a way of turning its varieties into commentaries one upon another, the one lighting what the other darkens.” Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 233.

also positively influence the discussion of local possibilities. I believe these cultural comparisons can be directly applied to rural culture in general, and to rural lay ministry in particular.

While I'm following the sociological lead of Freire and Geertz, I am also methodologically following the qualitative vein of Participatory Action Research, and visual methods in particular. Butler-Kisber notes that there has been increased use of the visual in research due to its ability to elicit emotion and to describe local contexts across gender, generational, racial, and economic barriers. Pink points out that images "permeate our academic work, everyday lives, conversations, and dreams. They are inextricably interwoven with our personal identities, narratives, lifestyles, cultures and societies, as well as with definitions of history, space and truth."¹⁴ It would make sense, therefore, that any approach to ministry research involving the laity who live and work out in the everyday world must necessarily deal with the visual aspects of ministry.

My project utilizes the visual methods of photovoice, and, to a lesser degree, photo elicitation in order to study spiritual gift discernment in the rural church. Wang lists three stages of participatory analysis in the photovoice process: selecting, contextualizing, and codifying.¹⁵ First, through the selecting phase, the participants choose the photographs that most accurately reflect their concerns. Next, the participants contextualize through telling stories about what

¹⁴ Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (London: SAGE, 2001), 17.

¹⁵ Caroline C. Wang et al., "Photovoice as a participatory health promotion strategy," *Health Promotion International* 13. no. 1 (1998): 80.

the photographs mean to them. Finally, through codifying, the participants identify together either the issues, themes, or theories that emerge from the photovoice process. Rather than just garnering data, photovoice often acts as a motivator for new, and often counter-cultural, action. Butler-Kisber advocates for the transformational power of photovoice when she shares that in her research, “the process of taking pictures within one’s local community became an opportunity to develop individual and collective stories that had heretofore been silenced or spoken only privately.”¹⁶ In a rural culture that harbors all of the trademarks of what Freire labeled an “oppressed” mindset, I believe that photovoice has the potential to meet the transformational spiritual needs of the rural church.

Structure of “Picturing Lay Ministry” Project

In the “Picturing Lay Ministry” project, I worked with the leadership of the Dakotas and the Minnesota Annual Conferences of The United Methodist Church, particularly with a Dakotas and Minnesota Certified Lay Ministry oversight team consisting of lay leaders, cabinet members, and directors of leadership and new church development from both conferences. During the conceptual and implementation processes of the CLM trainings, I acted as the contact person and facilitator of one-day discernment events held in five different settings across North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota.

¹⁶ Lynn Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 128.

Throughout the project I exist as a researcher as Elizabeth Conde-Frazier defines one, as “that of facilitator and/or catalyst, trainer, and coach.”¹⁷ My research population consisted of seventy United Methodist laity who expressed interest in attending a one-day Certified Lay Ministry discernment retreat at one of five potential sites: Murdo, SD, Jamestown, ND, Grand Forks, ND, Mankato, MN, and Watertown, SD, in January and February of 2012.¹⁸ These participants registered for the course after a general invitation to participate in the discernment retreat was sent out via email and regular mail to the churches and certified lay speakers of the Dakotas and Minnesota Conferences. The participants in my study were either certified lay speakers or recent/soon-to-be completers of the new Basic Lay Servant Ministries course.

Of the seventy people who registered and were contacted by myself with pre-course materials, sixty-six of them attended one of the retreats. I received consent for my research project through signed consent forms, which were explained and obtained during the morning portion of each Module #1 discernment event. The participants were instructed that they were consenting to grant me access to their results, spoken and written comments, and some basic biographical information for use in my study, and their consent or lack of consent in no way would affect their status in the CLM program. The photograph consent form offered a place to express which photos (if any) could

¹⁷ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “Participatory Action Research: Practical Theology for Social Justice,” *Religious Education* 101. no. 3 (Summer 2006): 325.

¹⁸ Total event attendance: Murdo, 14; Jamestown, 4; Grand Forks, 10; Mankato, 9; Watertown, 29.

be shared publicly, and what form of identification (either by name or anonymously) should be attached to the photographs if published.¹⁹ Two men and two women chose not to consent to the research project, meaning that sixty-two total participants consented to participate in my DMin research project: thirty-three men and twenty-nine women. The participants' ages ranged from outliers in the mid-teens to the mid-eighties, with the majority of the group falling in the "mid-life" and "almost or recently retired" categories.²⁰

Methodology in Action - Instrumentation and Data Collection

The methodology of my research project began with the construction and distribution of the pre-class assignment, which was mailed and/or e-mailed to each registered participant a month to two-weeks prior to the retreat. In the pre-class assignment, the participants were invited to

take seven photographs of places, spaces, and/or settings where ministry takes place in and around your local church, home, and/or community. During the training, you will present these seven photographs to the

¹⁹ The consent forms for the photographs were informed by: Claudia Mitchell, *Doing Visual Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011), 23-26. For a great example of a "letter of explanation of study to participants" which informed my consent forms (not in structure but in substance) see *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁰ This comes from verbal description during the retreats and during follow-up interviews. I failed to find an appropriate place to ask for the exact age of participants, as the place in which it was asked only applied was only completed by those who chose to move forward with Certified Lay Ministry training in the summer. This was an oversight on my part in the data collection, and I regret that I will not draw any significant data from participant ages.

group along with a brief spoken description of why each place is important for God's ministry.²¹

I intentionally designed the description of what photographs the participants should take to be vague, with the hope that the participants would define ministry themselves based upon their experience (i.e. the contextualized use of their spiritual gifts). Those without the ability or technology to take the photographs themselves were advised to cooperate with someone that they knew who could assist them in acquiring the photographs. These photographs were either e-mailed to me before the retreat, or scanned in hard copy form by myself at each retreat when possible.

Once at the retreat site, the participants were presented with three-ring binders which contained the CLM Module #1 materials obtained from The United Methodist Church General Board of Discipleship (eighty-four single-sided pages).²² The back section of these binders was separated by a bright yellow blank sheet of paper, and consisted of general CLM information and Dakotas and Minnesota Conference process steps, checklists, forms, and contacts (eleven total single-sided pages). The event began with prayer and introductions led by myself, followed by small group bible study around the theme of God's calling in various biblical settings

²¹ I can see now that phrasing the question in terms of "places" most likely limited the photos that were taken. However, the results show that participants still took photos of things and people, thereby showing that they focused on the word "ministry" more than the word "places."

²² Richard A. Vance, *Module 1: Call and Covenant for Ministry* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2008).

Following this large group discussion, I presented my intentions as facilitator/researcher along with the aforementioned consent forms. After the participants either signed or declined their consent to the research project, they were left to complete the 125 response, 25 category, spiritual gift inventory found in the Module #1 materials.²³ I also presented an option for having myself read the inventory out loud to the participants, and two people elected to have me do this with them. I collected the participants' spiritual gift inventory score sheets after they were self-scored by the participants (or scored by myself if they chose not to). The participants then shared in a meal together on-site.

Following the noon meal, the participants received their spiritual gift inventory scores and were advised to reference the explanation of the spiritual gifts categories found in the Module #1 resource.²⁴ The participants were also advised to write down their three highest ranked gifts, and also their two or three lowest gifts. This discussion of highest and lowest gifts, along with the categories of gifts, marked the end of the recommended Module #1 instruction on spiritual gift discernment. The participants were then presented with Questionnaire #1, and were asked to fill it out as honestly as possible and to hand it in when completed.

²³ Vance, *Module 1*, 24-32. Answers were scored on a Likert scale spectrum with 0 = Not at all true of me, 1 = Occasionally true of me, 2 = Moderately true of me, 3 = Usually true of me, and 4 = Almost always true of me. The inventory was created by Christine Harmon.

²⁴ Vance, *Module 1*, 35-50. This instruction followed the recommendations of the Module #1 training guidelines. The curriculum listed each spiritual gift category, with three to five Scriptural examples of each spiritual gift category at work, along with definitions for each.

I next led the participants in a large group presentation of the photographs that were brought in response to the pre-class assignment, following Wang's photovoice design where "the purpose of the group discussion is to enable people to reflect on the images they have produced."²⁵ Claudia Mitchell points out that while "the oral presentations of the photo-narratives are also rich texts," being able to see the image during the oral presentation makes "the situation real, not just for one individual, and not only when the event initially happened. It allowed the event to be re-discovered and shared by others who also had found themselves in the same situation."²⁶ I therefore projected the photos whenever possible onto a wall or large television screen so that the group could view them simultaneously, or passed around the actual photos if a digital version wasn't accessible.

One by one, the participants were asked to present each of their photographs with a verbal caption (1-2 minutes in length per photo) that described the ministry that was pictured in the photograph. The participants were also asked to name their highest ranked spiritual gifts from the inventory, and to note any places where these gifts materialized in the photographs. As two hours was the amount of time scheduled for the photograph presentation, seven

²⁵ Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris, "Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment," *Health Education and Behavior* 24. No. 3 (June 1997): 379. Here I also followed the lead of Stephanie D'Adamo, who recognized that how participants chose to interpret the photovoice question was a vital part of understanding what her rural participants valued most. Stephanie D'Adamo, "Farmer photovoice: visual values and the impact on conservation practices," (Masters Thesis: Iowa State University, 2010) , 26.

²⁶ Mitchell, *Doing*, 66 & 61 respectively.

to ten participants proved to be a manageable and lively number for the time allotted. This experience at the earlier retreats influenced my decision to split the fifth training event's participants into three groups consisting of eight, nine, and twelve (my group) participants. After all participants had taken their turn in the photograph presentation, the participants were presented with Questionnaire #2, which was the same exact questionnaire as the first, albeit named differently.

Following the afternoon break, the participants heard a presentation about the Dakotas/Minnesota UMC CLM program led by the conference leaders present at each retreat, and joined in a general question and answer period. The final discussion included giving the follow-up assignment that needed to be completed in order to obtain credit for an advanced lay servant ministries course. In an effort to spread the transformation of the training, the participants were instructed to conduct a photovoice project similar to what they experienced at the Module #1 retreat upon their return to their home church or ministry. Not everyone who consented to my research project completed the follow-up assignment, therefore these results do not factor greatly in my analysis.

The last form that the participants were asked to complete before we closed the retreat was the Dakotas Conference course/event evaluation form. In the spirit of Participatory Action Research, everyone was instructed to complete this in order to further edify the subsequent retreats, and the results did influence how the photo project in particular was conducted. For example, several participants reported moderate to poor visual aids due to the use of a

projector in a room that had too much ambient light at the first two retreats, and this evaluation contributed to the seeking out of large screen televisions that were capable of connecting to my computer for the use of viewing the electronic copies of the photographs in a bigger and clearer format at the remaining three retreats.

Following each retreat, I compiled the questionnaire, spiritual gift inventory, and photo presentation data into excel worksheets. I chose participants for ten to fifteen minute follow-up phone interviews based upon those whose questionnaire results showed change, and male/female distribution ratios. I called participants roughly two weeks after each training, and continued making calls until I had noticed distinct trends and patterns in their replies. This amounted to interviewing nine people from Murdo (four men and five women), four from Jamestown (two men and two women), seven from Grand Forks (three men and four women), six from Mankato (three men and three women), and sixteen from Watertown (eight men and eight women).²⁷ These numbers represented forty-two of the sixty-two consenting participants, or roughly 68% of total consenting participants.

Overall, the “Picturing Lay Ministry” project methodology proved to be both repeatable and dependable in structure. I was able to ask my research questions consistently, and those participants who consented to my project

²⁷ At the Watertown site, three photovoice discussion groups were formed in groups of eight, ten, and twelve due to the large number of participants and the limited time allowed in the schedule.

answered the questions fully through the project's built-in data collection structures. The participatory nature of the research contributed greatly to the improvements made from training to training, both in material covered and in communication of data collection procedures. The methodology of my research project also proved to be practically flexible, which was necessary considering that no two sites had the same amount of participants. The procedures and data collection methods worked for groups ranging from four participants to twenty-nine participants, meeting in both large and small rooms, held in both extremely rural and moderately large towns.

Results of the Project and Interpretations of Data Collected

Butler-Kisber notes that in qualitative research "analysis is going on from the outset – based on what the researcher brings with her to the inquiry, what she pays attention to and selects out of what she is hearing, seeing, and recording, and how the field texts are constructed."²⁸ I concur that from the very first discussion about what the Module #1 discernment events should look like; analysis of how participants would respond had already begun. This process influenced how I responded to actual interactions with participants prior to, during, and following the Module #1 event experiences. One popular methodological tool to help the qualitative researcher navigate through the inevitable bias in route to the truest analysis of the data is triangulation. While

²⁸ Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative*, 30.

evaluating three different research approaches doesn't ensure an unbiased, perfect research project, it definitely helps by giving different views of interpretation to either confirm or to question findings and conclusions, and by revealing areas of the fact that informants/participants do not always act consistently.²⁹ I attempted to triangulate the data through procedural field notes and theme analysis of the photovoice experience, a Likert scale pre- & post-questionnaire, and a semi-structured follow-up phone interview.

Photovoice Intervention

Of the roughly 455 photographs that were presented in the "Picturing Lay Ministry" project, I had permission to work with 402 of them in my data analysis. Wang and Burris note that when working with photos, a researcher may "codify themes and patterns or develop theories that are grounded in data that have been systematically gathered and analyzed in collective discussion."³⁰ In determining what types of themes the participant photographs contain, I turn to the congregational research of Nancy Ammerman. Ammerman names three aspects of practice within congregational culture that make up its identity: activities, artifacts, and accounts.³¹ Activities represent what a congregation does together (i.e. rituals, religious education, fellowship, behind the scenes work).

²⁹ Graham R. Gibbs, *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, ed. Uwe Flick, The SAGE Qualitative Research Kit (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2007), 94.

³⁰ Wang and Burris, "Photovoice: Concept," 381.

³¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, "Culture and Identity in the Congregation," *Studying Congregations*, eds. Nancy T. Ammerman, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 84-96.

Artifacts comprise the things which congregations make to represent themselves, namely its space, sacred objects, and investments. Last, the accounts of a congregation are the stories that a congregation tells through their language, history and myths.

The bulk of the photographs taken (73%) focused upon artifacts of ministry, with non-church buildings (26%) and rooms inside the church building (15%) leading the way. The artifacts themes with lesser frequencies were: sacred spaces outside of either church or home (11%), church buildings (8%), items and spaces converted to sacred artifacts at home (6%), items inside the church building (4%), and non-church items (3%). Of the activities represented, the theme of people/ small groups constituted the highest frequency, representing 21% of all photos taken. The activities themes with lesser frequencies were: mission trips or mission events (4%) and sacramental or sacred ministry activities (2%).

The fact that the participants took photographs that fit in line with Ammerman's categories at all, even though I incorrectly asked only for "places" in the pre-class assignment, verifies for me that using activities, artifacts, and accounts does encompass the schema that people define ministry by. I envisioned that the participants would have taken more photos of church buildings and sanctuary settings, and less photos of people. I believe that the results show how ministry truly functions on a personal level, and the photos

contained those everyday people and places where the laity find themselves encountering ministry. I see now how I based my expectations from a “clergy” perspective, where the bulk of the perceived ministry work occurs at church.

One might notice at this juncture the absence of “accounts” in the photograph data. Each photograph on the surface contained places, people, and things (the realm of activities and artifacts), but once the participants began sharing their verbal captions of the photographs that they had taken, I began to realize that each photo truly also represented an account. In fact, it was the accounts which drove the participant to take each photograph, and formed the substance of the verbal testimony to ministry and giftedness during each photovoice presentation. It was also here that participants began to name the connections between their spiritual gift high scores and the ministries portrayed in their photographs. Indeed, the boundaries between Ammerman’s categories proved to be somewhat permeable in relation to the use of photovoice, with each photo and caption often naming artifacts, activities, and accounts.

Results and Interpretation of Likert Scale Questionnaires

In order to discern whether or not the photovoice intervention acted in accordance with my thesis, I presented the participants with pre- and post-photovoice discussion questionnaires. These two questionnaires were identical, and contained eight likert-style statements which the participants could respond

to in one of five ways: strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree. With no real examples existing for a questionnaire involving contextualized understanding and/or degree of claiming with regards to spiritual gifts, I constructed a list of roughly forty sample questions and sought the assistance of my Doctor of Ministry On-Site Advisory Team and other ministry peers to help whittle the list down to a manageable group of questions that would gather the data that I was seeking. I settled upon a list of eight questions, which were equally weighted with one-half being phrased in the positive, and one-half being phrased in the negative in order to assure answering bias protection.

A word must be said at this point about what constitutes “positive” and “negative” movement for the purposes of this questionnaire analysis. I conceive “positive movement” as that which moves towards my ideal understanding of the statement. For instance, for Question #1, “I can easily describe my spiritual gifts to others in my church,” my ideal scenario assumes that participants would “strongly agree” with this statement. Movement towards “strongly agree” does not represent “positive” movement across all questionnaire statements, however, because I attempted to weight the questionnaire evenly for positive and negative statements. Questions #1, 4, 6, and 8 show my ideal positive movement as they migrate towards “strongly agree,” while Questions #2, 3, 5, and 7 show my ideal positive movement as they migrate towards “strongly disagree.” When trying to

normalize the questionnaire data for gender bias, I determined that men had forty-five “positive” shifts, and twenty-eight “negative” shifts for total of seventy-three shifts. Women had forty “positive” shifts and thirty “negative” shifts for a total of seventy shifts. Remembering that there were thirty-three men and twenty-nine women represented, the questionnaire results were nearly equally dispersed across individual questions and in totality with respect to both positive and negative changes and total changes. These results lead me to conclude that gender played little to no role in determining overall questionnaire result patterns.

As likert scales, they contain an ordinal level of measurement, meaning that while the response categories have a rank order, the numerical intervals between values aren’t necessarily equal. While most statistical tests involve using the mean (average of numbers), Susan Jamieson rightly states that “methodological and statistical texts are clear that for ordinal data one should employ the median or mode as the ‘measure of central tendency’ because the arithmetical manipulations required to calculate the mean (and standard deviation) are inappropriate for ordinal data.”³² Ordinal data may also be best described through the use of frequencies or percentages of responses for each category. In order to show statistical significance I utilized the nonparametric Chi-square test for goodness of fit, as it is based upon mode figures and changes

³² Susan Jamieson, “Likert scales: how to (ab)use them,” *Medical Education* 38 (2004): 1217. For instance, “the average of ‘fair’ and ‘good’ is not ‘fair-and-a-half.’” *Ibid.*, 1218.

to a null hypothesis (which could be measured by comparing any change in response frequency across the two repeated measures questionnaires).³³

When asked to agree/disagree with Question #1: "I can easily describe my spiritual gifts to others in my church," only 27.5% of participants changed their answers between the two questionnaires, and there was a nearly even distribution of positive (16% moving in the direction of "strongly agree" on the scale) and negative movement (11.5% moving in the direction of "strongly disagree) represented. While I believe that the amount of participants responding "strongly agree" (36) or "somewhat agree" (32) is significant in terms of defining the lay participants' level of spiritual gift awareness at the outset of the questionnaires, the results of Question #1 did not show significant statistical change between Questionnaires #1 & #2.³⁴

When asked to agree/disagree with Question #2: "Spiritual gifts only exist in a few people," only 6.5% of participants changed their answers between the two questionnaires, and they all moved positively (6.5% moving in the direction of "strongly disagree"). While I believe that the amount of participants responding "strongly disagree" (56) is significant in terms of defining the lay participants' level of spiritual gift awareness in other people at the outset of the

³³ In determining which statistical tool to utilize and how to incorporate it with my data, I am indebted to the work: Frederick J. Gravetter and Larry B. Wallman, *Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences*, 8th Ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2009).

³⁴ Chi-square results for Question #1: $X^2(4, n=62) = 1.07, p > .05$.

questionnaires, the results of Question #2 did not show significant statistical change between Questionnaires #1 & #2.³⁵

When asked to agree/disagree with Question #3: "There is a difference between a minister and a pastor," only 29% of participants changed their answers between the two questionnaires, and there was an even distribution of positive (14.5% moving in the direction of "strongly disagree" on the scale) and negative movement (14.5% moving in the direction of "strongly agree") represented. While I believe that the participants' scattered dispersion of responses are significant in terms of defining the lay participants' concept of "ministry" at the outset of the questionnaires, the results of Question #3 did not show significant statistical change in one direction between Questionnaires #1 & #2.³⁶

When asked to agree/disagree with Question #4: "A spiritual gifts inventory is easy to understand," 40.5% of participants changed their answers between the two questionnaires, with 18 % moving positively (in the direction of "strongly agree" on the scale) and 22.5 % moving negatively (in the direction of "strongly disagree"). While I believe the scattered dispersion of participants' responses is significant in terms of defining the lay participants' wide range of feelings towards the spiritual gifts inventory, the results of Question #4 did not

³⁵ Chi-square results for Question #2: $X^2(4, n=62) = 1.84, p > .05$.

³⁶ Chi-square results for Question #3: $X^2(4, n=62) = 0.38, p > .05$.

show a significant amount of statistical change between Questionnaires #1 & #2.³⁷

When asked to agree/disagree with Question #5: "God calls people only to be pastors," only 13% of participants changed their answers between the two questionnaires, and there was an nearly even distribution of positive (8% moving in the direction of "strongly disagree" on the scale) and negative movement (5% moving in the direction of "strongly agree") represented. While I believe that the amount of participants responding "strongly disagree" (52) is significant in terms of defining the lay participants' concept of "ministry" at the outset of the questionnaires, the results of Question #5 did not show significant change between Questionnaires #1 & #2.³⁸

When asked to agree/disagree with Question #6: "I can picture where my spiritual gifts can best be used," 42% of participants changed their answers between the two questionnaires, and there was a significant difference in distribution of positive (29.5% moving in the direction of "strongly agree" on the scale) and negative movement (12.5% moving in the direction of "strongly disagree") represented. While I believe that the amount of participants responding "strongly agree" (28) and "somewhat agree" (29) is significant in terms of defining the lay participants' concept of "ministry" at the outset of the questionnaires, the results of Question #6 did not show significant statistical

³⁷ Chi-square results for Question #4: $X^2(4, n=62) = 5.53, p > .05$.

³⁸ Chi-square results for Question #5: $X^2(4, n=62) = 2.35, p > .05$.

changes between Questionnaires #1 & #2.³⁹ The Chi-square results were almost within the critical area of significance, which makes me again question to what extent having either a “positive” or a “negative” movement, due to the instance of raising a question that the participants previously had no reference for, could represent “positive” movement with the Spirit in the visioning of new ministry possibilities.

When asked to agree/disagree with Question #7: “God doesn’t call everyone to ministry,” 42% of participants changed their answers between the two questionnaires, and there was a significant difference in distribution of positive (31% moving in the direction of “strongly disagree” on the scale) and negative movement (11% moving in the direction of “strongly agree”) represented. I believe that the amount of participants responding “strongly disagree” (30) and “somewhat disagree” (17) is significant in terms of defining the lay participants’ concept of “ministry” at the outset of the questionnaires, and the results of Question #7 were the only ones in the project that did show significant positive change between Questionnaires #1 & #2.⁴⁰

When asked to agree/disagree with Question #8: “I understand my spiritual gifts,” 32% of participants changed their answers between the two questionnaires regarding, and there was somewhat of a difference in distribution of positive (20.5% moving in the direction of “strongly agree” on the scale) and

³⁹ Chi-square results for Question #6: $X^2(4, n=62) = 7.99, p > .05$.

⁴⁰ Chi-square results for Question #7: $X^2(4, n=62) = 10.19, p < .05$.

negative movement (11.5% moving in the direction of “strongly disagree”) represented. While I believe that the amount of participants responding “strongly agree” (22) and “somewhat agree” (34) is significant in terms of defining the lay participants’ concept of personal ministry at the outset of the questionnaires, the results of Question #8 did not show significant statistical change between Questionnaires #1 & #2.⁴¹

Given that only one of the eight questionnaire statements showed significant statistical change, it might be assumed that there is very little to interpret from the questionnaire data. On the contrary, I believe that the results of the pre- and post-photovoice discussion questionnaires reveal an important glimpse into the mindset of my participants, as well as the ways the photograph discussion itself moved (or failed to move) the participants. I was encouraged to see the frequency at which the laity responded positively throughout the first questionnaire, with 90% stating that they “strongly” or “somewhat” agree that they can easily describe their spiritual gifts to others in their churches, and 95% stating that they “strongly” or “somewhat” disagree that spiritual gifts only exist in a few people. 84% of participants also “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that they understood their spiritual gifts before the photovoice experience, while 90% of the participants “strongly” or “somewhat” disagreed with the statement that “God calls people only to be pastors.” Even with a statement that experienced some positive change, albeit barely insignificant statistically, 84% of participants

⁴¹ Chi-square results for Question #8: $X^2(4, n=62) = 3.96, p > .05$.

already “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that they could picture where their spiritual gifts could best be used from the outset of the first questionnaire. Here I question what role the taking of the photographs played in framing the mindset of the participants prior to the discernment retreat.

These overwhelmingly positive results from the outset betray the participants’ strong concept of how God’s call encounters the *laos*, and lead me to interpret that the fact that my participant pool consisted mainly of people who already had assumed lay leadership in ministry situations played a significant role in the initial positive results, and the subsequent lack of movement in answers between the two questionnaires. With such a confident group of participants, any attitude changes that occur after a two hour discussion might hold more significance than a statistical test can show. That being said, the only statement to show significant statistical change over the two questionnaires was Question #7, “God doesn’t call everyone to ministry.” The significant positive movement here speaks to the ways in which the photovoice discussion affected the participants’ view of calling, and their understanding of how all people possess the gifts and graces for ministry in some way. This was a very exciting result, as it supports my thesis greatly, especially in terms of positively affecting the participants’ contextual understanding of the spiritual gifts of others.

I believe the three questionnaire results that leave the most up to interpretation involve Questions #3, 4, and 6. Question #3 (“There is a difference

between a minister and a pastor”) showed the most even distribution across all answer types, with the majority answering in what I deemed a “negative” direction, with minimal change also equally distributed in both directions. I believe confusion and multiple definitions surrounding the word “minister” caused some of this variation, and these results are culturally informative as we continue to explore what the work of a “minister” means to the laity, and if/how this conception differs from the traditional “pastor” roles in rural congregations.

Question #4 (“A spiritual gifts inventory is easy to understand”) showed a somewhat varied response frequency, mostly skewed towards the “positive” end of the scale. What was surprising to me was the fact that 40% of participants changed their answers on Question #4 between the two questionnaires, with almost equal distribution between positive and negative change. I believe that the positive movement represents a positive response to my addition of photovoice to the curriculum, and the negative movement represents a similar positive response that made the participants realize how lacking in clarity the original curriculum was. This understanding of parallel movement also factors into the Question #6 (“I can picture where my spiritual gifts can best be used”) results, where once again the participants were presented with a statement that meant one thing at the outset, and another after they engaged in the photovoice presentation. I posit that through the introduction of new ministry possibilities

regarding calling and spiritual giftedness, participants felt led to question their previous understandings in an ultimately “positive” way.

Results and Interpretation of Follow-up Interviews

I constructed my line of follow-up interview questioning in a semi-structured method, to insure that at the very least I would discern whether or not my questionnaire data was valid, and whether or not the photovoice project itself had any impact (that may or may not have been observed in my earlier attempts at data retrieval). In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has certain questions that he/she asks all interviewees, but also lets the interview go where it goes through open-ended questions and flexible structure. In the process of interviewing the participants by phone, I took short-hand notes of their responses. As a researcher, I must also claim my role in the fact that “researchers are already undertaking a reflexive review of the interview while they are engaged in it...(and that) respondents themselves are no mere cultural dopes but collaborative partners, who are also reflexively attending to the research interview.”⁴² Therefore, as I note themes from the interview results, I must also admit that these themes were in the back of my mind before, during, and after the interviews themselves. What I note in the results of these interviews are places where the participants themselves mentioned, and thereby verified, the

⁴² K. Neil Jenkins, Rachel Woodward, and Trish Winter, “The Emergent Production of Analysis in Photo Elicitation: Pictures of Military Identity,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 9. no. 3 (2008): 5, accessed 3/23/2012, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0803309>.

themes that began to form in my own thought throughout the “Picturing Lay Ministry” project.

Follow-up interview Question #1 asked “Since you have finished the training, how has your experience during Module #1 influenced your view of participating in the ministry of the local congregation?” This question often turned into a discussion about whether or not the participant’s follow-up project was proceeding in their local setting. While some local groups seemed to naturally grasp the spirit of the photovoice project and participated in strong and even “tear-filled” conversations in their local context, other participants faced accusations of “silliness” and attitudes of “disinterest.” While this data carries no statistical significance (only seventeen of the forty-three participants interviewed had begun the follow-up assignment, with ten claiming much support, five claiming negative local feedback, and two claiming mixed reviews), I believe it shows how clear communication and expectations, and proper procedural timelines can go a long way in contributing to the “success” of a photovoice experience in any setting, but especially a rural one.⁴³

Interview Question #2 asked, “What aspects of the photograph discussion impacted you the most?” Through the participants’ responses to this question, I

⁴³ These results also back up Wang’s claim that through photovoice interventions, sometimes “participants who are motivated to become actors for change may feel a sense of cynicism, despair, or powerlessness when the results of their efforts fail to match their expectations.” Wang et al., “Photovoice as a participatory,” 84.

noticed the following four themes: seeing, variety, spiritual gifts seen in photographs, and general affirmations of the project.

Seeing – Thirteen of the 43 participants interviewed noted in some way that the photovoice project changed the way they “saw” ministry, whether it be in the rural church, the community, or in the laity’s participation in ministry. One participant stated that the photovoice project “opened up an avenue, where now when I go by places I see new pictures!” Another participant shared that through the photos shared by her site, she saw the same places in their local community “with different eyes now.” Others noted seeing new “opportunities for ministry,” and how seeing things concretely helped to confirm some aspects of ministry that had been until that point, merely intellectual concepts.

Variety – Twelve of the 43 participants interviewed stated in some way that the photovoice project increased their appreciation for the “variety” of ministry present in the rural church and in the lives of laity in general. One person commented that “everyone had a picture of the church in different ways,” while another stated that “we are in ministry all over the place in a wide spectrum of places.” More participants shared how the many different ways and ideas to serve God that were portrayed opened up new ideas for ministry in their own local setting, and the experience confirmed for them that ministry is indeed everywhere. For one participant, it was the variety of gifts represented in the

participants themselves, experienced through the giving of their testimonies during the photovoice discussion that was appreciated most.

Spiritual Gifts in the Photographs – While “spiritual gifts” eventually became a part of my asking of interview Question #2 following the first set of Murdo interviews (thereby framing the answers to some extent), what became clear through the follow-up interview process was how significantly the photographs and the photovoice presentations foreshadowed or reinforced the results of the spiritual gift inventory. Eight of the forty-three participants interviewed specifically referenced the fact that at their Module #1 site, it was uncanny how easily one could guess the presenter’s strongest spiritual gifts by looking at their photos and by listening to their verbal captions. One participant “could not believe how the pictures matched the spiritual gifts,” while another noted that they “could really see the gifts and ministries intertwined.” Also of interest was the fact that more than once, the participants mentioned how the group helped the photovoice presenter to “see” their spiritual gifts as actual “gifts” by pointing them out in the pictures. Here, the photovoice project became a direct link to the claiming of spiritual gifts by the participants through peer intervention and group discernment. For the majority of the others, the process of taking and naming the photos themselves provided the necessary reflection for “seeing” the Holy Spirit in action.

General Affirmations of Project – The overwhelming majority of interviewees responded positively to the intervention, using phrases such as “fun,” “really enjoyed,” “awesome,” “genius,” “a good way to focus the discussion on spiritual gifts,” “positive experience,” and “it got me thinking.” These were very exciting affirmations that the photovoice project did indeed have a positive spiritual and practical impact on the lives of those who participated, regardless of where they personally intersect now and in the future with the CLM process.

Follow-up interview Question #3 asked, “At the Module #1 training, you noted (*whatever the biggest change in attitude factor was*). What influenced you to note that change?” This question concerned whether or not the changes that were noted on their questionnaires were valid/accurate. The participants’ answers varied dependent upon the questionnaire statement involved. For instance, the results of questionnaire Questions #1 (“I can easily describe my spiritual gifts to others in my church”) and #4 (“A spiritual gifts inventory is easy to understand”) had equal splits of confirmation and dismissal. Four participants agreed that the changed results of Question #1 reflected their experience, while four participants disagreed. Five participants agreed that the changed results of Question #4 reflected their experience, while three participants disagreed. This result backs up my theory that the “positive” and “negative” nature of the movements may both represent “positive” movement of a spiritual nature.

The results of questionnaire Questions #2 (“Spiritual gifts only exist in a few people”) and #8 (“I understand my spiritual gifts”) reflected agreement with the change noticed, but the sample size was too small to be significant in any way (four participants for Question #2, and six participants for Question #8). The results of questionnaire Question #5 (“God calls people only to be pastors”) reflected unanimous disagreement with the change noticed, but the sample size was too small to be significant in any way (three participants).

The results of questionnaire statements #3, #6, and #7, however, all involved a larger sample size and showed somewhat significant agreement in the changes noticed. In regards to questionnaire Question #3 (“There is a difference between a minister and a pastor”), eleven participants showed changes in questionnaire results, and nine affirmed the change noticed. In regards to Question #6 (“I can picture where my spiritual gifts can best be used”), twelve participants showed changes in questionnaire results, and nine affirmed the change noticed. In regards to Question #7 (“God doesn’t call everyone to ministry”), fourteen participants showed changes in questionnaire results, and twelve affirmed the change noticed. These results confirm the movements noticed, especially in regards to the “almost” statistically significant Question #6, and the statistically significant change previously discussed with questionnaire Question #7.

Overall, the themes represented in the interview data gave evidence in support of my thesis in several ways. First and foremost, the responses expressed testimonies to the ways in which the photovoice experience positively changed the way they “saw” ministry in their community, and helped them to envision how they personally fit within that ministry setting. The participants also gave witness to the variety of spiritual gifts and ministries that they found in their community, often much to their own surprise. Here one can see the importance of having the participants gather their own photographs of local ministry, as the process of selecting and framing the pictures offers a wonderful exercise in reflexively interpreting their cultural and ministry surroundings.

The responses which named the transformative power of the photovoice presentations illustrated how this process opens eyes to the variety of spiritual gifts dispersed throughout the *laos*. This reflexive exercise between peers gave evidence to the Holy Spirit’s presence throughout the photovoice process, and led to encouragement and affirmation of gifts across the board. The interview data reflects a quick but powerful spiritual change that happened for multiple participants, and supports the theory that even short-term photovoice experiences hold the potential for transformational change.

Summary Analysis

The success of any qualitative research project greatly rests upon validity, which Butler-Kisber refers to as the “so what” factor.⁴⁴ Conde-Frazier believes that qualitative researchers must “evaluate our research by asking what impact it had on the daily lives of persons.”⁴⁵ From the follow-up interviews, and the general experience of the Module #1 events themselves, I conclude that the photovoice ministry intervention impacted the lives of the participants positively. Changes were noted both in questionnaire data and interview responses, and with a group of participants predisposed to seeing ministry in one particular way already, I believe any changes of this nature carry significance. In this respect, the questionnaire statements that I designed left a little to be desired, as the majority of them asked for data that proved unnecessary or redundant given the participant sample. On the positive side, consistency of responses across all intervention sites, even in these “fluffy” questions, lends credibility to the overall validity of the data collection process, and the research project as a whole. At the end of the day, perceptions surrounding spiritual gifts and their contextual role in rural ministry settings were positively changed, and triangulation of the data helped to ensure this finding’s validity.

The nature of the project as a qualitative study requires that I hesitate to generalize my results across a large population. What carries importance is not

⁴⁴ Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative*, 150.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “Participatory Action Research: Practical Theology for Social Justice,” *Religious Education* 101. no. 3 (Summer 2006): 325.

the ability of this project to be generalized broadly, but the evidence that something positive did occur, raising the possibilities that new local knowledge situations might continue to be accessed and transformed through similar methodologies. In terms of project replication, Fals-Borda notes regarding qualitative research that “imitation or replication of techniques is not recommended, not even when they have proved successful. The rules of cultural consistency make it preferable to undertake new actions every time, depending on the specific conditions and circumstances of each experience.”⁴⁶ Therefore, the fact that across all five sites, some sort of positive response to the intervention occurred reflects not only the simple and culturally adaptable nature of photovoice interventions, but also the amazing influence that the participants had in adapting the ministry intervention with me along the way.

Last, but definitely not least considering this was a photovoice intervention, we must reflect upon how the project allowed the participants to find and to share their “voice.” In coming up with her term of “photovoice,” Wang conceived of “VOICE” as an acronym meaning “Voicing Our Individual and Collective Experience.”⁴⁷ What I noticed after I began to show the participants’ photographs as a slide-show during the breaks at each subsequent event, was that the photographs themselves lacked something in terms of the

⁴⁶ Orlando Fals-Borda, “Remaking Knowledge,” *Action and Knowledge*, eds. Orlando Fals-Borda and Mohammad Rahman (New York: Apex Press, 1991), 149.

⁴⁷ Wang and Burris, “Photovoice: Concept,” 381.

accounts of the participants.⁴⁸ Without the photovoice presentation and discussion time, the powers of the photographs were not fully unleashed. Therefore, while the photos offered a visual aspect of the participants' voice which carried some meaning, the verbal explanations of the pictures offered a unique and important aspect of the individual and collective experience of the photovoice intervention. It was through the group presentation that the Body of Christ, the *laos*, shared its individual and collective voice loudly and clearly.

One aspect of the project's results that I was not prepared for came when those who had more concrete notions of their spiritual gifts became somewhat "foggier" in the application of them, while those who came into the day "foggy" gained somewhat in clarity as to where their gifts could be put to use. At first I felt dismayed that my project had confused those who had already found some clarity, but then I realized that most likely the project had simply shown new opportunities for the Spirit's movement. While any exercise in reflexivity can be disorienting at first, it doesn't necessarily represent a "negative" movement in terms of life experience. Here the need to code my questionnaire data in terms of positive and negative movement distracts from the natural and seasonal nature of God's calling.

I also believe that the project resulted in a broadened understanding of "ministry" for the participants across the board. Such a movement, over such a

⁴⁸ Wang argues that using "photographs alone...would contradict the essence of photovoice." Wang et al., "Photovoice as a participatory," 381.

small amount of discussion time, proved to me the extreme and potent counter-cultural influence that photovoice can provide. In practice, photovoice's result ran contrary to popular contemporary ministry theory, and proves that ministry *is* happening despite what the traditional numerical evaluative methods of church ministry effectiveness (such as attendance, church budget, and full-time pastoral status) might state.⁴⁹ In a demographical region of numerical population decline and transition, amongst a rural culture carrying the trademarks of an "oppressed" mindset, the photovoice project helped to name where ministry existed and where future avenues for ministry were possible. Such an evaluative and collaborative process builds strength upon strength, instead of trying to energize a system from a negative cultural stance of desperation and hopelessness.

Conclusions and Visions for Future Research

American history shows that rural life has been maintaining a difficult existence for centuries. Due to technological advances in agriculture and demographic shifts in population and economy, the future of rural life faces even more rapid change that will rend such a maintenance mindset as futile. Structures designed to replicate the nostalgic view that we can somehow return to a "better" time of rural culture will only continue to perpetuate these

⁴⁹ This observation echoes Wang's premise that "as a participatory method, photovoice is well suited to address what Green and Lewis have called 'theory failure.'" Wang and Burris, "Photovoice: Concept," 384.

difficulties. Movements for actual change in the rural landscape will inherently have to confront such nostalgia, especially as it exists within the church itself in terms of congregational leadership expectations and denominational structures. This confrontation needs to be intentionally approached with an end goal in mind if it is to be ultimately successful. For the rural church, raising up disciples of Jesus Christ in Spirit and in action serves as a proper goal. How this process looks must represent faithfully the collage within which rural people truly find themselves. The goal necessitates the presence of strong and faithful leaders in the rural church, and the economic and demographic trends of a time such as this necessitate new models for envisioning the calling, equipping, and dispersal of such vital leadership.

Rural movements for change need also to learn from Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. Ultimately, the *laos* of God must "see" their spiritual gifts as current and potential actions, and must "picture" how the gifts of their neighbors fit together to ensure Spirit-led ministry in rural communities. Through the continued use of visual methods such as photovoice, future rural ministry movements will necessarily involve pushing against boundaries of ministry action held by many (in leadership and in the pews), most notably in our shared understanding of what it means to be "pastor" and who can do "ministry." This movement will also require a re-visioning of the pastoral roles as we now perceive them. The pastor can no longer be charged with being all things

ministry for all people in a rural place, but instead must be intentional about naming, equipping, and unleashing the spiritual gifts already in their midst.

The results of my project alluded to the fact that the members of the *laos* feel callings, but struggle to see where their giftedness fits into the structure of their local ministry settings. A concept of communal calling stands opposed to a model of ministry where clergy and church leaders attempt to “fit” the members of our congregations into pre-designed polity roles (such as committee and staff positions). I propose that true transformational change in this area will only come from focusing first upon what gifts are already present within the congregation, and then organizing church structure and vision from there. I argue that the use of spiritual gift discernment provides a way for avoiding such “avocational” usage of laity in traditional, polity-based, leadership roles, and gives the rural church an opportunity to take a stand as a place where the Holy Spirit continues to guide the agenda of both individual souls and collective ministry.

In our search for ways to improve upon the inherent obstacles that the rural church faces, we must first name areas in our rural settings where laity are perhaps more spiritually gifted and willing to lead in focal ministry practices (both inside and outside of the church walls). I believe that for the rural church, relying upon the local knowledge of the laity to lead from within, while appointing ordained elders to be both transformational mentors and fellow

students in ministry with the laity, will mutually empower the spiritual discernment of both callings. Ministry will then become recognized as something that gets experienced out amongst the everyday work and home situations where the laity find themselves called to serve. As evidenced by the photographs taken by the participants in the “Picturing Lay Ministry” project, this ministry will weave between the arenas of secular and sacred, community and congregation, communal and individual. If the future of the rural church is to be worthy of the calling placed upon it, both clergy and laity will have to weave these various and necessary strands together in a spirit of collegiality and grace, with collaborative educational programs contributing as flexible and vitally reflexive movements of the whole people of God.

In terms of practical usage, the results of my research intervention suggest how lay leadership educational experiences and ministry trainings can be better conceived and presented. My project named several positive areas where the addition of visual methods increased the curriculum’s efficacy, and should serve as a valid reason for including such methods in curriculum in the future, both in the seminary and out amongst the “fields” where laity live and minister. I also believe that my project named the global ability of photovoice to assist in naming spiritual gifts, and in providing a safe space for participants to affirm one another’s gifts. Not only does implementing photovoice into other ministry education arenas provide great personal reflexivity, but it also acts as a “laying

on of hands” to a certain degree, as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ affirm each other in both ministry calling and action. I believe that a photovoice experience also safely offers new opportunities in a positively correcting fashion, as there exists a place within photovoice to notice and to name areas where people are perhaps aiming outside of their areas of giftedness or calling.

Perhaps the most important methodological finding that emerged through the “Picturing Lay Ministry” project came as I showed that even a short-term photovoice exercise can be beneficial in terms of raising awareness of spiritual realities, resources, and opportunities in many different settings. Even if just for a day, photovoice has the potential to give others a glimpse into a way of “seeing” ministry that will forever affect their perceptions. Also, in an age where American rural youth grow up immersed in visual communication methods spanning vast distances and socioeconomic strata, visual methods offer an important link between the testimonies of those who have been called to ministry, and what the next generations of ministry might look like.

Areas of Need for Further Research

One question that emerged for me through this research process concerns vocation in terms of how effective the photovoice was in actually influencing the participants to take the life-steps of change named in their data. To put it another way, how long does the naming and claiming last once the participant

hits the real world again? Further study needs to be done involving more longitudinal looks into the subsequent ministry of the photovoice participants. One could potentially look at how their photos and spiritual gift inventory results changed a year later, two years later, etc. Such research could ask whether or not the participants continued to feel emboldened in the Spirit to take the next step, or whether or not all of the excitement of the Module #1 event was only temporary. One potential version of such a longitudinal study could involve having the same group of participants meet more often, taking more and more photos ala Wang's traditional photovoice approach. Here a researcher could address how the photos and correlations with spiritual gifts inventory results change over the course of repeated exposures and participations in the group. Also, one could see whether the participants' photos of rural ministry continue to bear the same images, or continue to evolve with the spiritual discernment of the photographer.

Another avenue of future research could involve holding discernment events using photovoice with participants from one local church, rather than a sample set across a wide geographical area, thereby facilitating a reflexive "in-house" discussion surrounding the availability and usage of spiritual gifts in that community. I wonder if my conference-wide site would prove to be a "safer" space to share for those who have already somewhat claimed their gifts, given that within local settings they would be with neighbors who already often claim

to “know” their neighbors. Also, a local setting of participants selected at random would introduce people who would begin the discernment day with very little agreement that spiritual gifts and calling are present in all people. As diverse as my groups of participants were, they definitely all had already claimed some level of lay leadership responsibility. The varying degrees of success found by the participants’ efforts at completing the follow-up assignment back home raise my interest as to how this exercise could be better translated for use by participants from one local church alone.

Conclusions

Overall, the photovoice project positively influenced both the participants and facilitators, and helped all parties involved to picture spiritual gifts in a more contextualized way both individually and collectively. This process in essence gave a “voice” to the testimonies of where the Holy Spirit was working in the lives of participants, fellow congregants, and community members in the holy spaces that often go unnoticed or unspoken in a rural culture. I believe that my project flowed freely from God’s Word, and remembered well the historical experience of ministry growth in times of strong lay leadership development and spiritual gift awareness. I also believe that my project built upon the line of theology which understands that people who are living out their spiritual gifts can be a powerful and persuasive witness for Christ. These Wesleyan lenses will

continue to inform my research and ministry as I work with work the CLM program, always striving to “picture” God’s call to ministry for the *laos*.

Through the “Picturing Lay Ministry” project, I showed how inserting a photovoice experience into a spiritual gifts discernment curriculum created a transformational vehicle of cultural reflexivity and change for rural participants. Through having participants photograph various aspects of local church identities; my belief was that the participants would be equipped with a better understanding of where the rubber of their spiritual gifts hit the proverbial road of local ministry. I also hoped that through this photovoice project in lay spiritual gift discernment, some of the walls that have blocked ministry from growing exponentially in our rural communities could be broken down. The results of the project were highly positive not only in terms of contextual understanding of ministry and spiritual gifts, but also in terms of general positive movement towards claiming ministry roles within local settings. This research marks the tip of the iceberg in terms of lay ministry discernment, and I believe the laity will continue to drive the future of the participatory work in ministry education. I have no doubt, having witnessed the Holy Spirit’s movement throughout my project, that the Spirit will not disappoint those who actively seek the will of God, and the ministry of Jesus Christ in such educational endeavors.

In conclusion, I argue that local churches still exist as one of the last hopes to offer formal support structures to rural people as they seek to answer God's call in an often lonely and desperate place. Ultimately, the course of the rural church will be determined by its actions: by the ways it remembers the past, acts educationally and revolutionary in the here and now, and lives forward with hope amidst life's changes, always discerning Christ's vision for the future. I believe that the recent rural demographic shifts actually present potential for returning to Methodist models designed for equipping lay leadership in a late-19th Century rural socio-economic and geographical setting. A lay leadership and ministry movement captures this historical potential by offering a transformational vehicle of local culture and knowledge, but only if its educators heed and translate the historical, cultural, and pedagogical lessons of the rural collage.