

When the Going Gets Tough, The People Get Going:  
How the lack of Twenty to Forty Year-old People  
is Experienced in Rural Communities of Faith

By  
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### **Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans**

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0072016
Title of Research Project:	How is the lack of 20-40 year-old people experienced in rural communities of faith?
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Susan Willhauck
Student Investigator	Tami Jill Spires

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 16 September 2016 to 16 April 2017
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Dated this 16th day of September, 2016 at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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**When The Going gets Tough, The People get Going: How The Lack of Twenty to  
Forty year- old people is experienced in Rural Communities of Faith**

By Tami Jill Spires

**Abstract:**

“When The Going gets Tough, The People get Going: How The Lack of Twenty to Forty year- old people is experienced in Rural Communities of Faith” is a research project by Tami Jill Spires, submitted December 9, 2016, in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Divinity degree at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This qualitative, phenomenological study seeks to explore rural church attendees' experiences of living with this lack. 9 people were interviewed and of the 9 people, 6 interviews have been chosen to provide insight into these experiences. Through a review of literature, theological exploration, and data provided by the participants, this research paper will explore relevant themes of rural church attendees' experiences. Implications and limitations of these findings will be explored as to how they might impact rural church attendees and their community life.

**Introduction**

In my current context, I journey in ministry with a two point rural United Church pastoral charge in the eastern townships of Quebec. Even in previous contexts, notably the United Church community I grew up in, and the church where I taught Sunday school, it was clear that a part of our church body is missing and has been missing for decades. Growing up in a rural context, I was often the only young person in church on Sunday morning. During the time I was growing up in the church in the late 1980's and 1990's, I noticed that many of my peers were no longer interested in being involved with the church. While all age groups are crucial to the life and work of the church, the challenge

is those who were considered young 40-60 years ago are now in the 60 + age range and these members of our communities of faith are still working hard for the church, but will not live to care for the church forever.

Sociologist Reginald Bibby, who has published many books and articles on the state of religion in Canada, summarized the statistics of membership in the United Church of Canada. In responding to an interview in the Chatham Daily News, he comments, “Members are disproportionately old,” Bibby writes. “Among adults who are involved in the United Church, some 75 per cent are over the age of 55 ... and just 10 per cent are under 35.”<sup>1</sup>

As a minister in a rural pastoral charge I think the lack of young adults in our community is a concern for the health and well being of the rural church community. This is a living reality for ministry personnel who serve rural communities of faith and for the attendees of these churches. Our rural churches have been in a state of decline due to the lack of the 20-40 Year-old age demographic.

Rural ministries and the communities they serve have had their fair share of challenges in the past. The Canadian government's action of centralization, beginning in the 1960's, has contributed to loss in the rural communities through closing of provincial structures (schools, local branches of provincial offices) and federal structures (post offices), meaning people had to travel to a suburban or urban centre to access these

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1 Louis Pin, “Declining attendance backdrops church's 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary”, Chatham Daily Press, Sunday June 7, 2015, accessed July 20, 2016 <http://www.chathamdailynews.ca/2015/06/07/declining-attendance-backdrops-churchs-90th-anniversary>.

services. Due to centralization combined with significant loss of employment in areas as the fisheries, agriculture, and logging, people have moved from rural communities to larger centres to have ease of access to goods and services and to find employment. This has impacted the vitality of the wider community and the church community.

It is important for us to explore the experiences of rural church attendees who are living through this loss. This research paper will offer a forum for the voice people of the rural churches. It will offer up a picture of how the people view their role as the church in the midst of a changing period in the wider church which is also in a period of change. It is a topic which opens the doors to dialogue about how rural church communities journey in our ever changing society. It is also important to discover how they feel living in a wider community with people who do not attend church regularly, offer support sporadically, but still want the church for special times, such as marriages, baptisms, and funerals.

This research paper will explore these feelings and experiences of rural church attendees. I will do this by addressing the purpose of this study and reviewing the current literature and theological rationale. I will describe the methodology used to obtain the data and the data collection process. I will address the emerging themes and explore the pastoral and theological insights. My evaluation will offer implications and limitations for rural church communities struggling through this lack and the impact that is having.

## **Purpose and Research Question**

### ***Research Question***

How is the lack of twenty to forty year-old people experienced in rural communities of faith?

### ***Purpose and Goals of Research***

The goals of this research were to better understand the feelings and experiences of rural church attendees and how they are living through this lack of young adults in the church. It will explore how their experiences are impacting their community life and work, their ministry and mission, and offer the wider church some guidance on how to help rural communities of faith through this time in their communal life.

Fourteen open-ended questions were developed to explore how rural church attendees are experiencing this lack, their feelings about the lack of twenty to forty year-old people in their communities, how they continue to maintain their spirit for their ministry and mission, and in what ways can they be the body of Christ living with this current reality.

### ***Review of Literature***

Literature available on rural church communities and their experiences of lacking young people is small. From the literature available, the following themes emerged:

1. Rural Churches are thriving and not dying
2. Impact of decline hurting communities
3. Many of the words used to describe what the youth and young adult feel is also representative of what those in the church feel

#### 4. The work of ministry and mission needs older adults

Freelance writer and regular contributor to the *United Church Observer*, Frank Dabbs, contributed an article to the February 2010 *United Church Observer* entitled “Hope for the Heartland”. In his article he develops an argument that rural communities of faith have begun to see where they fit in with the wider community, whereas in the past it was the people of the community trying to fit in with the church. One of Dabbs' respondents shared that, “We want them to worship in our building; let’s go ‘worship’ in theirs,” she told [her church community]. Now, her ministry and personnel committee has added attending the public skating events twice a week to Murray’s job description.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Marvin Anderson affirms that the rural churches are not in period of decline and death but are thriving and this new awakening “testifies to the resurgence of the Spirit in United Church congregational and community ministries across Canada. This resurgence flies in the face of fatalism upon hearing news of declining membership and additional church closures among both rural and urban churches.”<sup>3</sup> Both Dabbs and Anderson offer encouraging outlooks for the rural church, which concur that rural communities of faith are not worried about declining numbers and closing doors.

Sociologist Reginald Bibby also affirms that people are not really concerned with decline in the church. Bibby is a Canadian sociological researcher and some of his work

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2 Frank Dabbs, “Hope for the Heartland,” *United Church Observer*, February 2010, accessed July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016, [http://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2010/02/rural\\_churches/](http://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2010/02/rural_churches/).

3Marvin L. Anderson, "Alive and Kicking: Revitalizing Rural Ministries," *Canadian Rural Church Network*, April 2008, accessed July 15, 2016, <https://ruralchurchnetwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/alive-and-kicking1.pdf>.



focuses on church attendance. Bibby's research delineates the polarization at play in the lives of Canadians and the effect it is having on church attendance. His findings indicate that there is a gap of twenty to forty year-old people in the church. As to how his findings relate to older congregations in rural communities, their experiences or feelings on the lack of young people in their communities, he makes no mention of this in his work. Bibby's research does not offer any specific demographics about this "ambivalent middle"<sup>4</sup> group, he had found in his analysis of church attendees versus secularist.

For Bibby, this middle group will be the people to either turn back to the church or begin coming for the first time, or they will be the group who will walk away. It would be interesting to know if this group is the 20-40 year-old age range rural communities of faith are lacking or if he is taking into account in his research the general population who find themselves in this group. Bibby approaches his research from a national perspective, not taking into account differences between the urban and rural communities of faith. Bibby's work in 2006 found, "The extent of participation in organized religion has been grossly underestimated and patterns of involvement badly misunderstood."<sup>5</sup>

Author Tanya Rasmussen wrote of this current reality and speaks about the worries and questions of communities of faith struggling to survive and of the pains of not being able to take steps forward.<sup>6</sup> Rasmussen acknowledges the limited information that is written concerning communities of faith facing decline and death. Rasmussen's

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4 Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back*, 52.

5 Reginald Bibby, *The Boom Factor: What Canada's Most Famous Generation Is Leaving Behind*, (Lethbridge: Project Canada Books, 2006), 214.

6 Tanya Rasmussen, "The Members' Experience," in *Ending with Hope: A Resource For Closing Congregations*, ed. Beth Ann Gaede (Bethesda, Maryland: Alban Institute Publication, 2002), 47.

chapter does take into consideration the voices of those in the churches who are living through this experience. Her study was completed in 2002 and referred to rural communities in the US.

Walt Mueller, founder and president of the Center for Parents Youth Understand, as well as authoring a number of books on engaging and understanding youth culture takes the view of arguing for evangelizing young people and for the church to “think seriously about our responsibility to go to the unique “nation” of young people living in our current postmodern culture, as well as subsequent cultures sure to emerge.”<sup>7</sup> Mueller's challenge to the church is that this is the churches responsibility which the church has failed to follow through on.

David Kinnaman's work, like Mueller's, also argues that when it comes to youth and young adults, the community of faith has failed young people. Kinnaman views his work as “bridging the gap”<sup>8</sup> between the older generation of the church and the youth and young adults who have fallen away.

The other voices who also need to be heard are the voices of those experiencing this reality, the older congregants in rural congregations. Most of the literature that speaks to the lack of 20 to 40 year-old people in the church comes from writers who find themselves in the 60 plus age group or have insight into the needs of this age

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<sup>7</sup> Walt Mueller, *Engaging The Soul of The Youth Culture: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Truths*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>8</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkin, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving The Church ... And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 11.

demographic based on the research they have previously done. This is the aim of my own research.

Of interest though, is the similar language that some of the literature uses. Many of the same words that Rasmussen and Kinnaman use throughout their work speak of abandonment, frustration, identity, listening, alienation, anger as themes that both generational groups share. Gil Rendle bridges the generational gap with his work. His work is directed more towards church leaders than specific generations of the church but reveals some insight for everyone in the church about how generations of faithfuls can co-exist and work together.

Rendle's work takes all the dividing lines that exist in communities of faith and helps leadership teams, not just the ministry personnel, but anyone in a leadership capacity to find new ways of leading and living together through the generational struggle. Rendle's work is full of hope for those communities who can be “a healthy congregation, though not necessarily always a comfortable congregation.”<sup>9</sup> The focus of his work though is primarily for large to midsize communities of faith and leaves out small town and rural communities, and this way of co-existing living does not work if one of the generations is not involved.

Keith Albans and Malcolm Johnson have contributed their voices to others, writing about the positive aspects of ministry and spirituality with our ageing society. Within the pages of their edited work, Lawrence Moore offers a chapter which explores a

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<sup>9</sup> Gil Rendle, *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting The Leadership Challenges*, (Bethesda, Maryland: Alban Institute Press, 2002), 5.

new model for seniors ministry within an ageing church. His thesis and title of his contributed work is that “An Ageing Church is not a Failing Church”.<sup>10</sup> While Moore's work is directed towards the United Reformed Church in England, his findings have merit with any older congregation that is struggling with declining numbers and ageing congregants. The aim of his work is looking at what Johnson defines as the “Third and Fourth Age”.<sup>11</sup> The use of the terms third and fourth age are not correlated to specific age demographics but are fluid:

The third age is defined by the exit of the individual from the employed workforce into a period freed for personal fulfilment, so will never reach the Third Age because necessity requires them to continue in economic labour. Others, through ill health, early retirement, redundancy or simply by choice (for those with enough resources will enter it in their fifties or even earlier. Some may, because of serious illness, move straight into the Fourth Age.<sup>12</sup>

The focus of this work by Albans and Johnson is to bring to light the challenges those in the fourth age and the need to ensure their spiritual and pastoral needs are not overlooked, and to bring attention to how the body of Christ and society can be better equipped to meeting the needs of our ageing communities. What Albans' and Johnson's work has overlooked is offering insight into how the wider community surrounding ageing congregations can be part of this journey.

Similarly Rev. Dr. Richard Gentzler, ordained elder with the United Methodist

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<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Moore, “An Ageing Church is not a Failing Church: Finding New Paradigms for Accompanying Older Pilgrims,” in *God, Me and Being Very Old: Stories and Spirituality in Later Life*, eds Keith Albans and Malcolm Johnson (London, UK: SCM Press, 2013), 188.

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm Johnson, “The Changing Face of Ageing and Old Age in Twenty-First-Century Britain,” in *God, Me and Being Very Old: Stories and Spirituality in Later Life*, eds Keith Albans and Malcolm Johnson (London, UK:SCM Press, 2013), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Albans and Johnson, *God, Me, and Being Very Old*, 9.

Church in the US and director of the Centre on Ageing and Older Adult Ministries in the United Methodist Church shares his insight and wisdom on looking at seniors ministry and acknowledging the need for this ministry to be purposeful and purpose-filled. His book *Ageing and Ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An Inquiry Approach*, is a user friendly reference book that is filled with practical questions and tips for ministry with seniors.

His research shows the numerous ways that our senior population still has something to offer the church and society. Gentzler's research into this topic and his book cover all the bases, providing tools for supporting the senior population not just in our churches, but in our wider community. Gentzler's writing does not address the impact that decline is having on seniors who make up the largest proportion of church attendees.

Most of the literature compiled for this review offers an analysis of the gaps in what is being researched and the lived experience of people that are attending rural communities of faith. There are writers who are exploring the vitality of rural community life and the hopes and challenges of the people living in these communities and in their ministry. However, most of the research and findings within this topic are broad-based findings in the Canadian, US, and UK context and do not have any significant concentration on or in the rural communities of faith in the literature concerning a distinct omission of the voice of the older generation.

More research is needed to understand the experiences of those in rural communities of faith who are experiencing the lack of younger people in the wider church and community. Their voices and their feelings need to be brought into consideration; not just the voices of the youth and young adults. My research on how the lack of 20-40

year-old people is experienced by rural communities of faith will seek to fill the gaps in this area.

### *Theological Rationale*

The United Church of Canada website provides a mission statement about what the church believes about children, youth, and young adult ministry. The statement says,

Children and youth have much to contribute to the body of Christ, the people of God, the Christian church. Young people are recipients of the church's ministry, but they are also participants and contributors to its life, mission, and witness.

Taking young people seriously is essential to the journey towards wholeness in the church. Each person, at whatever age, will have gifts and needs within the community. The integration of children and youth into the church is an important part in the journey toward the wholeness God intends for the church.<sup>13</sup>

As the church commits to valuing youth, the Hebrew Bible has examples of valued youth who were called by God to become leaders and share their leadership skills with the people. In 2 Chronicles, chapters 34 and 35, eight-year-old Josiah is pronounced king of Judah. Seeing the damage caused to the people and the kingdom by his father and grandfather, he knew from a young age his leadership would be all encompassing. “Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and he walked in the ways of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.”<sup>14</sup>

At the time that Josiah was ruling in Jerusalem, Jeremiah was being called by God. While Josiah knew from a young age he was ready to serve God, Jeremiah

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<sup>13</sup> “What We Believe: Engage with Children, Youth, and Young Adults,” United Church of Canada, Copyright 2016, accessed November 4, 2016. <http://www.united-church.ca/being-community>.  
<sup>14</sup> 2 Chron. 34: 1-2. (ESV)

“somewhere between twelve and fifteen...acknowledge[d] that God had planned from his conception that he would be a prophet.”<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah says in the opening verses 'Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.”’ But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.”<sup>16</sup>

In our church communities we have young people like Josiah, natural born leaders who from a young age know their leadership potential. They are the youth who are still actively involved in the church and congregants see that leadership being nurtured by various activities within the structure of worship and liturgy. The church also has its Jeremiah's, the ones who need more nurturing in leadership, more encouragement to participate in the life and work of the church. If the church is committed to ministries involving children, youth, and young adults, why are so many of our rural church communities experiencing a lack of young people?

American intergenerational theorists Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross focus their work on looking at factors that break age groups apart in communities of faith and contribute to how the body of Christ works and lives. Allen and Ross note current cultural and educational trends are aiding in this breakdown and that “as American culture has become more and more generationally fragmented over the last hundred years, churches have followed the same trend”<sup>17</sup> and that “... churches have

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<sup>15</sup> Losch, *All the People in the Bible*, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Jer.1: 6-7. (ESV)

<sup>17</sup> Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship*. (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 38.

embraced other pieces of the cultural outlook that have ultimately contributed to the pervasive age segregation that characterizes American Christianity.”<sup>18</sup>

We live in a changing world, and with more people discerning what they believe and how they seek to engage their faith within society today, the theological question at the heart of this research topic is what does it mean to all be members of the body of Christ in our post modern world when we are missing a group of people?

The apostle Paul addresses this concern in his writing to the church at Corinth. In his discourse in 1 Corinthians 12: 12-20, Paul's use of the phrase, “all the members of the body”<sup>19</sup>, and how we contextualize the phrase has two different understandings. In our modern day context, our understanding of his image is the importance of all the people in our midst. For Paul, the term 'members' in Greek is 'μέλος' and in Hebrew is 'חבר י' and translated to English both words mean 'an organ or limb'. When we look at the human body, we see that it is made up of numerous parts. Though each part is unique to its individual function within the body, no one part works independently of the other parts of the body. The interdependence of the parts of the human body speaks of relationship. Similarly, the body of Christ works together in interdependence, relying on the diversity of the membership and the relationship they share to mirror aspects and characteristics of God, which are also found in God's people.

Theologian and Pauline Scholar N.T. Wright, also affirms the definition in his commentary on 1 Corinthians that “...the word 'member', which we often use without

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<sup>18</sup> Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor 12:12



thinking where it comes from, owes its place in Christian thinking and speaking not least to this present passage, where the word means 'limb' or 'organ'.<sup>20</sup>

For Wright, the definition of the word 'member' has changed from its original meaning of “ 'limb' or 'organ' ”<sup>21</sup> to a basic understanding of what it means to be a 'member' of the body of Christ. Because of the shift in meaning, Wright notes that “the word started out as part of a metaphor – a single body, many 'members' – and has become flattened out into a more general word, 'people who belong.’<sup>22</sup>

In our modern context our use of the word is not too far off from how Paul was thinking when referring to followers of Christ as “members of the body of Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

For Paul, membership in the body is more than people who belong. This image of

membership is illustrated in Wendell Berry's fictional work, *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port Williams Membership*. Berry is a recognized author in theological

circles and his example of membership in his writing connects with St. Paul's understanding of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. In his article

“Membership and its privileges: The vision of family and community in the fiction of

Wendell Berry”, Thomas W. Stanford III states “...community in Berry's novels may more

rightly be understood as a communion of persons bound together by kinship and

friendship, by shared memories and history, by working together on the land, and, most

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20 N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*. (Kentucky: Westminster-John Knox Press, 2004), 158.

21 N.T Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*, 158.

22 N.T Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*, 158.

23 1 Cor 12:12 (ESV)

crucially, by self-sacrificing love.”<sup>24</sup>

Membership in the body of Christ means more than being in community and working together, it is God seeking people to live their lives modelling selflessness, seeking a greater good for humanity, and becoming the body of Christ when he gives up his life to death. In Christ's resurrection we are re-membered and humanity becomes the living, breathing image and body of the risen Christ, which is also the image of God. How can we re-member when we are lacking the young people in our churches to be in community with?

Historically, the church is no stranger to disconnect and schism. Since the time of the Protestant reformation, the church has been divided over how we should be the church, what role members have in the church body, and how we should be living out the mission of the Kingdom of God.

McLaren notes in his book *Church On The Other Side: Exploring The Radical Future of the Local Congregation* that the current ecclesiology of communities of faith are working their way to become obsolete material if they are not prepared for the changing times and that in order for communities to thrive in their mission“ we need to think longer term, to look farther ahead in the road, to be anticipators, not just reactors.”<sup>25</sup>

Kinnaman would agree with McLaren. Churches have neglected to respond when

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas W. Stanford III, “Membership and its privileges: The vision of family and community in the fiction of Wendell Berry,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought & Culture*, Vol. 14 Issue 2 (Spring 2011): 119.

<sup>25</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *Church On The Other Side: Exploring The Radical Future of the Local Congregation*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2006), 153.

youth and young adults in the church voiced their views. No longer are this group of young adults waiting for the church to respond. In the Barna Groups research compiled into his book *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving The Church ... And Rethinking Faith*, Kinnaman discusses in depth why youth and young adults are absent from or leaving the church. For Kinnaman, youth and young adults are moving from anticipating what the next moves of the older generation in the church are going to be.

Their research was looking for a few main themes on their reactory nature, but instead “discovered a wide range of perspectives, frustrations, and disillusionments that compel twenty-somethings to disconnect.”<sup>26</sup> The challenge here is the current generation of people age 60 plus in the church would acknowledge that they have been anticipators too, anticipating this time in the life of the community of faith and have been dreading it. Beyond that they have been anticipating a time when their outstretched hand will be grasped and their ministry of hospitality will be accepted.

## **Method**

To determine how I was going to attain the data that helped with this research, the phenomenological approach was used. John Cresswell describes the phenomenological approach and use of it in qualitative data gathering as “the interpretation of the people's lived experiences”<sup>27</sup> The phenomenon was identified through the experience and feelings of my participants. I looked at the experiences of individuals in rural congregations who

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<sup>26</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 91.

<sup>27</sup> John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2nd Edition, (California: Sage Publications, 2007), 60-61.

are concerned about this lack and were interested in sharing their insights into the impact this lack is having on the life and work of the church community.

Within the phenomenological approach, there is a hermeneutic phenomenology theory which helps the researcher to find data by hearing the stories of people. In seeking peoples experiences, the research topic suited the criteria of the phenomenological methodology. In this theory the researcher extrapolates their data through people's narratives, lived, and shared experiences. Out of peoples experiences, themes begin to emerge and the phenomenon that occurs are collective experiences.

Through email, I sent my invitation to participate to rural united churches in the Quebec region asking people to be part of this research. I sought to interview 6 people who were willing to share their stories, feelings and experiences about the lack of twenty to forty year-old people in their communities. All of my participants were asked to sign an informed consent form and all participants were informed they could stop the interview process at any time.

### **Data Collection**

Six people ranging in ages from 22 – 86 were interviewed about their experiences of the lack of twenty to forty year-old people in their respective church communities. Five of my participants are from rural church communities in Quebec and one participant attends a rural church community in Ontario. To collect their experience, all primary interviews were conducted in person. Follow up interviews were conducted in person,

over the phone where distance was a concern, and audio only was recorded in all interviews. All interviews were conducted in a quiet, private space.

Each person I interviewed is currently living and worshipping in an area where there is a rural church. Each of my participants is involved in their current church setting in areas of governance (board member and /or elder), outreach, and Christian education. To ensure their identity is protected, each participant has been given a pseudonym and the locale of their church community has been removed. My 5 women I have called: Sarah, Ruth, Naomi, Mary, and Rachel. My one male participant I have called Abraham.

Each participant was asked to share their feelings and experiences during a forty-five minute to one hour interview. Originally 10 questions were asked and there was space left at the end of each interview for anything my participants may have wanted to share that they did not share during the interview time. My participants were contacted after the initial interview for follow up questions. Data was then analyzed using the phenomenological approach.

### **Data Analysis**

After each interview was conducted and transcribed, I read each transcription, looking deeply within my participants' responses to find out their feelings about the lack of twenty to forty year-old people in their respective communities, their concerns for the future of their local community of faith, the realities they are facing with the lack of young people, their thoughts of how they see themselves in the body of Christ with mostly ageing church populations, and what initiatives they have tried in their respective communities to change what they have been experiencing. As I sat with the data

collected, it was clear from each of my participants that this lack is impacting them in similar ways. Each of my respondents was able to recall a time in their communities lives when the church was full. Abraham shared with me his memories of times when there was no lack:

“Certainly when our children were growing up. Our boys are getting on to 38 and 40. When they were going through the youth group it was much larger. I remember Sunday services when the youth group would be the praise band and there wouldn't be enough room for all of them at the front of the sanctuary. We've certain seem a drop off in the sunday school through the years – certainly seen a decline in those numbers from the days when our boys participated.”

All my respondents voiced their concerns that there are so few twenty to forty year-old people that want to be a part of the church. Beyond their concern are deeper emotions about why this age group have left and want nothing to do with the church. Sarah told me,

“I have 5 kids of my own and they went to sunday school, every single sunday, and I can't even talk to them to ask them why they do not want to talk about religion, church and faith. They must have picked up something in sunday school all those years, but whatever it was didn't last and I find that very discouraging. I don't know what turned them off.”

Words such as sadness, frustration, sorrow, disheartened, pathetic, and discouraging were used by my participants to express some feelings that the rural communities of faith are living with. These words mark feelings they have towards the lack of young people and also how they feel about the current situation of their local church community. I was interested in hearing from all my respondents what their church mission statements are. I was surprised by the responses I received. Of my 6 participants Abraham knew his churches mission statement, Sarah, Ruth, Rachel, and Mary could not tell me, and Naomi

told me she would ask someone and send me the answer when she received her reply.

My next step was to find out how they are maintaining their spirit for being and doing the work of the church. All of my participants noted that outreach locally, regionally and globally helps them stay connected to the body of Christ through various ways of giving. Ruth shared with me that,

“At the moment we seem to be able to maintain our mission/ministry although I know at times we sometimes feel a little tired and overwhelmed. We still have a core group of 50 to 70 year-old people willing to do this work. However we would be naive if we didn't have some concern about our future ability to continue all that we are doing at this time.”

It was also shared with me that through active outreach locally, regionally and globally is where my participants see and feel God in their midst. Rachel told me that though they have a very small numbers in their community of faith,

“Despite what I would refer to as “active parishioner fatigue”, we have tried to maintain a presence, both in the community and at large, and to be a support for those in need. God is certainly at work through the people who go about their business and you don't always know the work they are doing behind the scenes. For example, we have held services in assisted living facilities to worship in community with the residents there, organized an after-church bowling match, to encourage the social and lighthearted side of coming together as a church family, and the Sunday School children chose two causes to support through Gifts with Vision.”

With this lack of twenty to forty year-old people in their communities all my participants commented on the numerous challenges they are facing.

### **Emerging Themes:**

**Time**

**Shifting Society**

**Mission and Ministry**  
**Unevolving Church**  
**New Life in the Face of Death and Dying**  
**Embracing New Ideas**  
**Community Self-care**

**Time**

Time is a challenge for rural communities of faith. They are challenged by time physically as they look at the

- 1) viability of their communities
- 2) an ageing demographic

For my participants, time has taken its toll on the people. As they struggle to maintain their worship spaces, and keep from sustaining the loss of members, the reality of how long they can exist as communities of faith is very tangible. My participants voiced that unless something changes within their current context, most of them are looking at closing the doors within less than a year to about 10 years.

To constantly have this reality staring them in the face is worrisome for these communities. Each participant has affirmed the need for the community of faith in their life. For my participants, the church is more than a space to worship, it is a family and support network. For the majority of the demographic in our rural communities of faith, the church community and church events are important to their lives. The love, support and family they find in their communities reminds them that they are cared for.



The community as the body of Christ and as God's tangible witnesses are there to offer all these things, plus, the outreach these communities embody as their mission and ministry through pastoral care to each other. As Mary said, "It's the small things – I hear people asking "How are you?", "Are you feeling better?", "Do you need anything?" - it's the little daily things that make a difference."

For people in rural communities, they feel time is against them in other ways, as the communities continue to age and they aren't seeing anyone younger people excited about joining them. The mission and ministry of the community has had to shift based on the lack of twenty to forty year-old people. Due to the decline in attendance numbers, the ageing community, and the lack of energy they are experiencing, they have had to reevaluate how their mission and ministry are seen as life giving rather than life draining.

Gentzler uses his writing to remind the church that, "...the future of the church is in the hands of our older adults".<sup>28</sup> It is the 60 plus demographic who make up the bulk of church membership now that have the gifts, time and energy for mission and ministry of the community. Our 60 plus demographic are an untapped resource for new ways of visioning the church. Time has challenged the churches to a point of fatigue in rural communities. Many of the people have given of their energy and time over the years but have not seen any return from it except to be faced with their current situation. This is the churches opportunity to develop a ministry that is intentional about offering a vital, life giving ministry to a group that often gets over looked.

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<sup>28</sup> Richard H. Gentzler Jr., introduction to *Ageing and Ministry in the 21st Century: An Inquiry Approach* (Nashville: Discipleship Resource, 2008), 12.

## **Shifting Society**

All of my participants noted that the lack of 20 to 40 year old people is not the fault of the church community but of the shifting society we live in today. Their communities have all been touched by people who have left the church to move away for school, or work. Their communities have been impacted by Sunday shopping bylaws, over programmed families who use Sunday as a day catch up from everything they missed during the week, and extracurricular activities like sports have taken people away from the church community. My participant Naomi said,

“I just hope that generation, the 20 to 40 year old's show up when they have time to come back to church because their kid's hockey practices are done on Sundays and they don't have to go anymore, and they can come back to the churches.”

My participants also touched on the impact that technology has had on our society in the last twenty years. No figures have been found which draw a correlation between the lack of young people attending church and technology, however, advances in technology now allow us to keep in closer and faster contact with other people. For years the rural church the information hub of the community. It was the place to meet neighbours, share the news of the community, and make plans with people. With this shift in society has come a shift in people's attitudes towards church, and this has impacted rural communities of faith. As Mary noted, church is now just one more activity on people's schedules, something else they have to do. She commented,

“I have friends who say “I feel bad about dropping the kids off at Sunday School, I want to go too, but I have to get my work done, I don't want to treat

Sunday School like a babysitting service – or the one hour a week when I can have time to myself.” Church is just looked at like another activity that needs to be done.”

In our Canadian context, there are three groups in society that Bibby's research focuses on: the religious, the secular, and a group that Bibby's research has grouped as “the ambivalent middle”.<sup>29</sup> Those in this third group are the ones who are either going to start coming to or return to the church, or they will walk away from faith and church completely. Because of this shift in the attitude of people towards church, it is this third group that the rural church communities could be reaching out to. Because the “ambivalent middle”<sup>30</sup> are the group who have not made up their minds whether they want to be in community with church attendees, rural churches with their small attendance numbers have a gift to offer through intimate worship spaces and community opportunities to get deeply involved in the life and work of the church, and be the members of Christ's body that have the gifts to re-member.

### **Mission and Ministry**

All of my participants noted that at some point in the life and work of their church, their mission and ministry has been impacted. Without the young people in the community, a number of events and ministries have fallen by the wayside. Each of my participants mentioned specific ministries and events that did not take place in their own communities because of the lack of bodies and hands to help out. Without people to help

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29 Reginald Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back: Religion's Demise and Rise and Why it Matters* (Lethbridge: Project Canada Books, 2011), 52.

30 Reginald Bibby, *Beyond the Gods and Back*, 52.

with set up, serving, take down, clean up, many of the groups in my participants' churches have had to let go fundraisers that were a mainstay of their communities of faith.

These events were not only financially important to the community, but also vital to the spirit of the community, because it was how they offered their ministry to the community. Sarah recalled a time when all the young people would come and help serve at all the community events,

“We had Christmas sales, yard sales, chicken pie supper, sugaring offs, Shrove Tuesday suppers . Oh we had fun. We did a lot of wedding receptions, receptions after funerals and baptisms, but as over the years, it all dwindled off. When it comes time to do any of our activities, we don't have anybody. As we get older, it's more and more hard work. We didn't have that age group of workers.”

### **Unevolved Church**

One of the struggles the church has faced and continues to face is the ability to evolve. While my participants all pointed out that the lack of twenty to forty year-old people in rural communities of faith is not the fault of the church community, they also point out that the church struggles to be open to changing. Abraham shared his story of how a group in his church helped the community to unevolve,

“There was a group in the church a number of years ago replaced the seat cushions in all the pews. So there was this edict that went up and I even think it was motion to the board, that there wasn't to be allowed, any coffee or drinks in the sanctuary, for fear that they might spoil the new cushions. That is unrealistic, so I think that we need to change our attitude.”

The unevolving church is a church which prefers the status quo. Resistance to change and the lack of awareness of others needs and desires can be detrimental to a

community of faith. If church congregations are too comfortable in how they act as the body of Christ, this can lead to stagnancy and becoming rutted. It can stop a church community from evolving and moves them from being a living, diverse body to a dying body. Examples of what can lead a community of faith to becoming “unevolved” can include the attitude of the community of faith as a whole, attitudes of groups within the community of faith and individual attitudes, non-active listening, and being resistant to change (as mentioned above). If the church expects to evolve into something new and exciting to bring people back or encourage them to come for the first time, then the rural churches need to be open to new ways of being the church and doing the mission it is called to as part of the body of Christ. Because of the diversity of the United Church and the needs of its communities, how they vision these ways is a path they need to discern, while also seeking out resources that are out there.

For all my participants the lack of twenty to forty year-old people in the community has been a gradual decline. For these communities, they have been watching the decline for over twenty years. This has been a hard time for rural communities of faith, and the challenges have been mounting – high turn over of ministry personnel in the past, fatigue and resignation have set in at some point in their life, and questions about the lack of young people and the lack of their involvement have strained them mentally.

### **Experiencing New Life in the face of death and dying**

In the midst of the lack of twenty to forty year old people these faith communities are experiencing new life. All of my participants noted that they are constantly visioning

new ways of being the church, continuing to evaluate their mission and ministry, and living into hope that what they are experiencing will turn around. Sarah, Ruth and Rachel have affirmed that even with the loss of their full time ministry personnel due to retirement coming in the 2017, their communities have found alternative ways of being the body of Christ in their area. Ruth shares that,

“Our church community is about to embark on this path as our minister is retiring at the end of June. We are committed to continuing our church community with this new reality at least in the short term. Our retiring minister has agreed to do two services a month and continue to perform weddings, funerals, communion, baptisms and attend meetings. We are also fortunate to have Licensed Lay Worship leaders that we can hire.”

It is hopeful to hear from the people in the rural communities of faith that even with the lack they are living through, they still embody the Spirit to continue the mission and ministry they have. In her book, *Christianity after Christendom*, Diana Butler Bass shares a framework developed by anthropologist Anthony Wallace to show how communities can move through religious and cultural change to a new awakening of their identity. William McLoughlin, former historian and member of the faculty at Brown University, used this 5 stage framework of in his work *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* to “explore North American Christian awakenings.”<sup>31</sup>

In her chapter on “The End of the Beginning”, Butler Bass references McLoughlin's work of moving through change in communities of faith from a space of fatalism to a space where the whole community is able to move forward and embrace

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<sup>31</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Christendom*, (New York, New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 2012), 33.

where God leading them. As the church community finds new ways of moving forward, so does the wider community, using the church community as an example.

### **Embracing New Ideas**

Each of my participants noted that for the rural church to be a sustaining presence in the community, they need to embrace new ideas when they come to them and think about ways they are able to do outreach and community events that they know they can sustain physically, financially, and that are emotionally and spiritually fulfilling. Embracing new ideas and creative ventures not only revitalizes the church community, but the wider community too, allowing for the body of Christ to extend beyond the church building. Mary's creative outreach idea's flowed from her in our interview,

“I would like to see events, whether they surrounded the holidays or not. I would like to see a welcome for volunteers in the community to start a soup kitchen or start community luncheons, or do a community walk, anything that gets kids off of the television and out in the community, maybe helping out dog walking, helping an elderly person walk their dog, car washes- it's a good way of fundraising and advertising the church as an active community.”

Even though they are older communities with older members it does not mean the mission and ministry of the community has to end. There are other ways of encouraging the Spirit to be sustaining to communities that are looking for new ways of being community.

### **Community Self Care**

Too often the community is concerned with numbers and getting people back into the community. All of my participants concur that while they would like to see their

numbers grow and see people who have left the church return, they are also moving into a space where they know that if the body that is in the church wants to remain healthy, they need to stop looking at who they do not have in the church and start looking around and who they do have and appreciating the gift of the bodies that are there.

Rachel mentioned this has been a struggle for her church community: “Do you say well, sorry you're not here, but we are thankful for the ones who are coming every Sunday or do you try to get the young people into church? At some point you have to say ok, we've tried, now we're just going to be happy with who we have here.” For my participants they are realizing that if you consistently go seeking people who aren't there, you overlook the people you already have and in overlooking them overlook the gifts and insights they have to share with the community.

### **Evaluation and Implications**

There are a few limitations to this research. Most of my participants were from the Quebec region except for Abraham who resides in Ontario. It would be helpful to have spoken with members of rural churches across Canada, but due to the time constraints of this project it limited how far I could reach out, while staying true to my methodology. While this research focused on rural communities of faith, it would be interesting to speak with urban churches who are struggling with a lack of young people to see what their experiences are.

The research questions asked of each participant were about their experiences of



the lack of 20 to 40 year old people in rural communities of faith. It would be interesting to complete a further study by talking to whole congregations to get the community experience.

Talking with people about the project seems to peak their interest, but I found that very few people wanted to talk about this research. With the help of other colleagues, I was able to find participants. I would be interested in exploring why people are reluctant to talk about the lack of young people/young adults in not only rural communities of faith, but in the wider church.

The implications of this study would suggest rural communities of faith have many unanswered questions about why the 20 to 40 year old people have left the church. As they wrestle with these questions, they need good leadership to walk with them. As more ministers retire and the age of our communities increases, we need to be looking at how we facilitate the pastoral care our of 60 plus demographic in the church.

One of the questions I asked each respondent was if they could tell me what their mission statement is. When most of them couldn't tell me, this raised concerns. How does the church live out it's mission as a community of faith, if them members of our community do not know what their mission statement is or if their community even has one. I would suggest that the leadership in our communities could be doing more to help the rural communities of faith understand their mission through their mission statement, or if they don't have one, to encourage a task group or committee to vision one into birth, using a diverse cross section of voice from the community.

This research is just scratching the surface of a topic that needs more in depth study. Each of my participants had unique ideas to offer the church on how we address the needs of this lack. More evangelization from our communities to the wider community is needed. If we want to consider how to keep the rural communities energized and healthy, perhaps and input and more resources for small churches from the National Church level are needed.

My participants all affirm that new life is occurring in the midst of challenging and changing times. While this is encouraging there is still much discouragement that they live with as society continues to shift . Self reflective questions continue to persist as they live in tension with their value in both the body of Christ and the wider local community. They question their mission and measure it by their physical abilities to be the church. They mourn their losses of people, buildings, and other abilities that made them “the church” in their communities. Better training for clergy in rural ministry would be helpful so clergy entering rural communities of faith have a better understanding of the task ahead of them.

The website for the United Church lists the different communities it supports from Aboriginal Ministries to United Church Women. One of these is ministries with children, youth, and young adults as mentioned earlier in this paper. There is no denominational ministry directed towards older adults or seniors. If we affirm that our ministry of outreach and care is an important function of the body of Christ, then we need to ensure that we are offering the best ministry we can to all people.

Rural churches are a vitality important member of the body of Christ. These communities are the one institution left in many communities, they are a reminder to us of the past, the present and future. The members are the keepers of not only the local churches history, but of the wider communities' history. Just as the church value the youth and their presence in the church, the church also needs to consider the value of their older members. If we do not start acknowledging their worth in our communities now, when the wider community needs and when the wider church need their wisdom and experience it will be too late.

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## Appendix 1

**Name of Student Investigator:** Tami Jill Spires

**Title of Research Project:** How is the lack of 20-40 year-old people experienced in rural communities of faith?

### Summary of Proposed Research

<b>Description</b>
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This project will address how the lack of 20-40 year-old people is experienced in rural communities of faith. I grew up in a rural community of faith in Southern New Brunswick that up until early 1990's could boast a solid and growing church with many youth and young adult participants varying in ages from 20 to 40. After the 1990's the attendance of youth and young adults in my rural context shifted and the gap between the ages of church members widened. In my current context, I serve a multi-point English speaking pastoral charge in the Eastern Townships of Quebec. The age demographic of the membership in the pastoral charge is currently 60 years and older, with no youth or young adult population in the 20 to 40 age range. With the current age of my rural congregations, there is a noticeable lament amongst the members of the community with concern to the future of the church and the wider community the church lives in.

Rural ministries and the communities they serve have had their fair share of challenges in the past as well as told. In my current context, the English speaking people I minister to are lamenting the loss of jobs, of generations of young people, and the loss of their culture with the rising tide of support and services for the Francophone population. The pre-war and baby boomers who were once the 20-40 - year old people in the church are now the 60 years and older demographic. The challenge to rural communities of faith is there is no new 20-40 age group interested in being part of the church community.

Sociologist Reginald Bibby, who has published many books and articles on the state of religion in Canada, summarized the statistics of membership in the United Church of Canada. In responding to an interview in the Chatham Daily News, he comments,

“Members are disproportionately old,” Bibby writes. “Among adults who are involved in the United Church, some 75 per cent are over the age of 55 ... and just 10 per cent are under 35.”<sup>32</sup>

Similarly the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan research group offers these statistics, “Recent generations of Canadians are significantly less affiliated than earlier generations. For example, 29% of Canadians born between 1967 and 1986 have no religious affiliation as of 2011, 17 percentage points higher than Canada’s oldest living generation (born 1946 or earlier) and nine points higher than Canadians born between 1947 and 1966. Canadians born between 1987 and 1995 – which includes the youngest generation of adults, who are still coming of age – have rates of disaffiliation similar to the previous generation of Canadians (29% unaffiliated, as of 2011).<sup>33</sup>

With the decline in church membership, there is concern for the future of rural communities of faith, the impact it has on the vitality of the wider community, and to explore the experiences of rural communities of faith who are living through this loss. The research question, subsequent presentation and paper will offer a forum for the voice of the people in rural churches. It will offer up a picture of how the people view their role as the church in the midst of a changing period in the wider church, which is also in a period of transition.

#### **Proposed Research Field Sites**

The proposed fields site for obtaining data will be rural churches with ageing demographics where there are few youth and young adult participants within the United Church of Canada.

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32 Louis Pin, “Declining attendance backdrops church's 90th Anniversary”, *Chatham Daily Press*, Sunday June 7, 2015, accessed July 20, 2016 <http://www.chathamdailynews.ca/2015/06/07/declining-attendance-backdrops-churchs-90th-anniversary>.

33 Pew Research Center, “Canada's Changing Religious Landscape”, June 27, 2013, accessed July 20, 2016 <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

### **Principal Research Consultants**

I have sought out two experts who have background and training in rural church ministry. Canon W. Lynn Dillabough is a colleague of the researcher, and has served rural parishes in the Anglican Church of Canada for several years.

Rev. Dr. Samuel V. Dansokho is a colleague of the researcher. He has been in pastoral ministry for several years in Sengal, the United States, and Canada.

### **Methodology**

Using the phenomenological methodology, with a hermeneutical phenomenological lens, the researcher will interview six attendees of rural churches, each currently living and worshipping in the rural church, offering people an opportunity to express their experiences of a church they love and are afraid of losing. Using the phenomenological methodology, the researcher is listening for the common, lived experiences of the participants. The phenomenon is identified through the experience and feelings of the participant. Through the interpretation of the people's lived experiences, the participants stories will inform the basis of the data for the research.<sup>34</sup> Interviews will be conducted face to face, recorded, transcribed and analyzed for their data. Using this theory, the researcher will extrapolate their data through peoples' narratives, lived, and shared experiences. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, a 30-minute presentation on my findings will be held in a public forum.

### **Potential Benefits from Study**

From this study we may learn how church members feel living in the wider community with people who do not attend church regularly but still want the church for special times, such as marriages, baptisms and funerals.

It could give rural communities of faith insights on where to focus their ministry and

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<sup>34</sup>John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 2nd Edition, (California: Sage Publications, 2007), 60-61.



energy for the future. This research project is not looking to offer a solution on how to rebuild the church, but to meet the church of today where it lives in the wider world, and to hear what current attendees are thinking and feeling. This is a topic which contributes a voice to the broader discussion of the church in decline.

#### **Potential Risks from Study**

As with any research, there is a degree of risk. There is the risk with this research question that people could become upset when speaking about church decline and lack of youth and young adults in the community of faith. At any time during this process if there is any hurt expressed, pastoral care will be available through the researcher's student supervisor, the Reverend David Lambie of the Creek -Waterloo Pastoral Charge, Waterloo, QC.

#### **Process for Obtaining Informed Consent**

After I have identified potential participants, I will telephone or email them to ask if they are willing, in principle to participate. If their answer is affirmative, I will arrange an interview place and time. I will indicate to them that they will be asked to sign an informed consent form, which I will send ahead of

time, but they are free to decide at that point or at any point to withdraw. At the beginning of the meeting and before the interview begins, I will share the background of my project, answer questions they might have and ask them to sign the consent form (see appendix C). I will inform them that should they become distressed in any way during the interview that I can refer them to a helping professional. They will be able to end the interview at any point and I will delete the recording if they decide to withdraw from the study.

#### **Process for Protecting Identity of Participants and Confidentiality of Data**

##### **Protecting Identity of Participants and Storage and Destruction of Data:**

- 1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants on the date of the interview, I will:**

- a) **provide one copy for the participants**
  - b) **keep one copy for myself which I will place in an envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.**
  - c) **provide one copy for my supervisor Dr. Susan Willhauck, also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST.**
- 
1. **Participants will be given code names. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent until deleted permanently from my device at the completion of the research December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016.**
  2. **Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final paper is due December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016.**
  3. **When the final paper is submitted to my supervisor on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016 the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to Dr. Susan Willhauck, either printed as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.**
  4. **My supervisor Dr. Susan Willhauck will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year and all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing.**

Appendix A: Proposed Question

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Appendix C: Informed Consent

## Appendix A: Proposed Interview Questions

1. Can you verify for me that your community is age 60 +?
2. When did you begin to notice the impact of the lack of 20-40 year old people in your current context?
3. Do you remember a time when the younger generations were here? And if so, tell me about it?
4. Have you noticed an impact to your church/faith community as a result of 20 – 40 year old people being absent? If so, what have you noticed?
5. How is the lack of 20 to 40 year old people affecting the mission of the congregation?
6. Has your church / community of faith tried anything to change what it has been experiencing? If so, what have you tried?
7. Outside of Sunday morning, are there other opportunities for your community to worship together?
8. What are your feelings towards 20-40 year old people and the church?
9. Does your church community have mission statement?
10. With the age of your church community, how do your community maintain its Spirit for it's mission and ministry?
11. Where is God in the life of your community?
12. What does the lack of 20 to 40 year old people say to you about the nature of church today?
13. How does the church live with this reality?
14. Predict the future of your congregation. How long do you think your congregation is viable?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate (Bulletin insert sent to rural united churches)

**Invitation to Participate**

Greetings!

My name is Tami Spires, and I am a Graduate Research Student with the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, NS. As part of my Master of Divinity program, I am required to complete a research project.

I am conducting research on how the lack of 20-40 - year old people is experienced in rural communities of faith?

I am interested in hearing your stories and gathering your experiences around the lack of youth and young adults in your church and offering a forum for the voice of the people in the church. The stories you share with me will be kept in full confidence.

If you are interested in being a part of this exciting research and time in the church, please contact me by telephone at 819 884 1203 or via email at [spiresta@hotmail.com](mailto:spiresta@hotmail.com)

I look forward to spending time with you and hearing what you have to say to the church!

In Christ,

Tami Spires – Candidate for Graduation

Atlantic School of Theology, 2017

## Appendix C: Informed Consent

### **Title of Project:**

How the lack of 20-40 year-old people is experienced in rural communities of faith?

**Name of Principle Investigator:** Tami Spires

Atlantic School of Theology

660 Francklyn Street

Halifax, NS B3H 3B5

**Contact Information:** 819 452 3685 or spiresta@hotmail.com

I am a student enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at Atlantic School of Theology. As part of my course work under the supervision of Dr. Susan Willhauck, I am conducting a study on how the lack of 20-40 year-old people is experienced in rural communities of faith?

I will be interviewing people who are current members of rural communities of faith in the United Church of Canada.

I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purposes of this work are to examine what ideas and experiences participants may have; to increase the body of knowledge on the topic of the peoples' experiences, and to explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. I will ask you a series of questions on your experience and will audio tape your responses.

The recordings and transcript will be held in a secure environment throughout this study and after the final project is completed, they will be held in a locked file in Dr. Susan Willhauck's office for one year, at which time they will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by giving your signature at the end.

I acknowledge that the research procedures outlined have been explained to me, and that I have been given a copy of this consent. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I can contact the researcher at any time should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary and I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that the personal record relating to this study will be kept confidential.

I know that the researcher will make every effort to keep all information obtained in this study as confidential and anonymous as possible. Names and potentially revealing facts will be changed, thus affording me anonymity. To further protect individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. Furthermore, the results of this study will be aggregated and no individual participant will be identified.

The following is a timeline for the storage and destruction of data:

1. Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent form from research participants, the researcher will:
  - a) Provide one copy for the participants.
  - b) Keep one copy which will be placed in an envelope separate from all other materials and stored in a secure location.
  - c) Provide one copy for my supervisor Dr. Susan Willhauck, also placed in a separate envelope.  
The supervisor will store these in a locked file cabinet.
  
2. Audio files of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device or password protected computer. These devices will be kept locked and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent through the public Grad Project presentations and until deleted permanently from the device on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016.
  
3. Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document or pdf. The Word document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016..

The public Grad Project Presentations take place on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 and the final project paper is due December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. On that day I will delete recordings of interviews and give all transcriptions and copies of Informed Consent to my supervisor by December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The supervisor will store these documents in a locked file cabinet at AST for one year, at which time they will be shredded on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

If you have questions, please contact me, the principle researcher at 819 884 1203 or by email at [spiresta@hotmail.com](mailto:spiresta@hotmail.com)

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology in keeping with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. If you have questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber, chair of the Research Ethics Board, at [afaber@astheology.ns.ca](mailto:afaber@astheology.ns.ca).

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.**