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Sowing the Seeds of Friendship: Cultivating Hospitality Across Class Lines

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## **Abstract**

### **Sowing the Seeds of Friendship: Cultivating Hospitality Across Class Lines By Hammett N. Evans**

The Feed Our Neighbors ministry at First United Methodist Church of Monticello, Arkansas provides a free weekly meal for impoverished families in the surrounding neighborhoods. Through an eight-week period of ethnographic observation, the participant researcher worked with a group of church volunteers who prepare and serve the meal in order to cultivate better practices of friendship and hospitality across class lines. The servers participated in a five-week study of the book, "Friendship on the Margins" by Christine Pohl and Christopher Heuertz in order to identify and reduce "Othering Behaviors" (setting boundaries, distancing and rejection, stripping personal identity, and imposing stigma) on the part of those who serve.

Sowing the Seeds of Friendship:  
Cultivating Hospitality Across Class Lines

By

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## PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Feed Our Neighbors ministry at First United Methodist Church of Monticello, Arkansas serves persons living in poverty in the neighborhoods surrounding the church facility by providing a free weekly meal. I was appointed as the senior pastor of the congregation in July of 2018. Through an eight-week period of ethnographic observation, a book study with the core group of servers, and guided reflection upon the book in relation to the serving of the weekly meal, I hoped to cultivate improved practices of hospitality and friendship on the part of those who prepare and serve the meal. Part One introduces the reader to the congregation and its ministry context, the origins of the Feed Our Neighbors Ministry, the rationale for the project design, project implementation and measures, as well as the researcher's motivations, theology, and expectations. Part Two shares the research findings of the participant observer through two ethnographic observations and reflections on conversations from the book study. Part Three covers a summary of findings and learnings from the project. Pastors of congregations – particularly those in rural county seat towns – may find the study helpful as they seek to serve the neighbors in their community.

### *Community & Ministry Context*

Like the hub of a wheel with spokes reaching out to neighboring communities, Monticello sits at the center of seven state highways in southeast Arkansas.<sup>1</sup> The county seat of Drew County, Monticello is the second largest town in the southeast corner of the state. Sitting on a dividing line between the fertile farmland of the Arkansas delta to the east and the lush

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<sup>1</sup> Jewell, *History of Methodism in Arkansas*. Rev. Horace Jewell (who was the first full-time pastor of the congregation and served there twice) notes that the town was located where three railways converged (Jewell, p. 330).

forests to the west, the town serves as the cultural, educational, and economic hub for the surrounding area.

Monticello has the only movie theater within a fifty-mile radius as well as a variety of restaurants. Recently a new coffee shop opened in what once was the local Pizza Hut. These amenities plus college events and a Walmart supercenter draw people from surrounding communities to the town. Families drive fifty miles or more to shop and eat, see a movie, attend plays and other cultural events, or to attend the local state university.

As of 2017, approximately 9,730 people were living in Monticello proper with almost 1,000 others living within a three-mile radius of the church.<sup>2</sup> Two ethnic groups make up the majority of the population, with whites at 63% and blacks or African-Americans at 33%. Almost 3% of the remaining 4% is comprised of Hispanics or Latinos, and the remaining 1.5% are Pacific Islander, American Indian, or other.<sup>3</sup>

The diversity of the community is reflected in its economy. The average annual household income is \$42,921 and is expected to rise 10% over the next five years. The median household income is \$30,229 with a comparable five-year increase. Between 2010 and 2017 there was a decrease in average household income and median income.<sup>4</sup> There is disparity in median income by race, with African-American families making less than half of white families in the community.<sup>5</sup>

Many towns in the region have a single primary employer. Yet Monticello has diverse opportunities for employment. Located at the south end of town, the University of Arkansas at

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<sup>2</sup> "MissionInsite - Community Engagement Specialists For Faith & Nonprofit Groups," accessed February 15 and April 24, 2018, <http://missioninsite.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> "MissionInsite - Community Engagement Specialists For Faith & Nonprofit Groups."

<sup>4</sup> Further research would be necessary to determine the root cause(s) of lower income during that time period.

<sup>5</sup> "MissionInsite - Community Engagement Specialists For Faith & Nonprofit Groups." Median income for whites is \$45,579, for Hispanics and Latinos \$23,749, and for blacks or African-Americans \$16,817.

Monticello (U. A. Monticello) is the largest employer for the community. Other significant places of employment are two public school districts,<sup>6</sup> a county hospital, a lumber company, and a manufacturer of hardwood flooring. With U. A. Monticello, the hospital, three banks and many other businesses, Monticello has a higher percentage of white collar occupations than the state average. At the same time, the percentage of families living in poverty is significantly higher than the state average.<sup>7</sup>

The origins of First United Methodist Church of Monticello predate the incorporation of the city in 1852. Like many historic county seat congregations, FUMC Monticello has experienced transitions in the demographic makeup of people living in the nearby neighborhoods surrounding the church. When the church moved to its current location in 1911, the congregation chose a site in what was the heart of the town of that era. The Drew County Courthouse and the town square are just a short walk away.

In 1960, state highway 81 bypassed the town center and drew development further west. Wealthier families in the community migrated toward the neighborhoods around the country club west of town. Today, a higher number of families living within one-half mile of the church facility live under the poverty level than in the community at large.<sup>8</sup> Many of these families walk through the church parking lot on the way to the Cash Savers grocery store next door and return home carrying their bags of groceries.

For most of its history, FUMC Monticello was the flagship church of the Monticello District of the Little Rock Conference, striving to be on the cutting edge of ministry in this part

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<sup>6</sup> Drew Central began as a lab school for U. A. Monticello and is located on the university campus. While families in the area may now choose the school district their children will attend, in the past Drew Central served students who lived in the county, while the Monticello School District served students who lived within the city limits.

<sup>7</sup> "MissionInsite - Community Engagement Specialists For Faith & Nonprofit Groups." The poverty rate in Monticello is 29.06% compared to 13.71% in Arkansas.

<sup>8</sup> "MissionInsite - Community Engagement Specialists For Faith & Nonprofit Groups."

of the state. It still strives to do so and is open to trying new things to show their love of God by serving their neighbors.

Theologically, the congregation falls neatly within the historic Wesleyan Methodist tradition as expressed in the southern United States. Members of the church honor their Methodist roots with their open and inclusive spirit, their theological embrace of the primacy of grace, and in the ways they live out their understanding of the union of personal and social holiness. The church's Wesleyan heritage is on display when one arrives at or departs from the facility, with the covered area in the parking lot displaying the United Methodist motto, "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors," and John Wesley's General Rules, "Do No harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love with God."<sup>9</sup> On the whole, the congregation strives to be the Body of Christ in their community. This is reflected in the youth group's motto, "Striving to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world."

When it comes to finances, FUMC Monticello is a very generous congregation. Over the last ten years, giving to the church has more than doubled. Income in 2017 enabled the congregation to pay off debt incurred from a previous building project, complete \$450,000 in capital improvements, and end the year with a surplus. In 2018 the congregation purchased a new parsonage without incurring any new debt.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes that "*Christian community is not an ideal, but a divine reality*" and that it is "*a spiritual and not a psychic reality.*"<sup>10</sup> As a Christian community, FUMC Monticello is growing in awareness of several areas where it could grow in the likeness of Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> Job, *Three Simple Rules*.

<sup>10</sup> Bonhoeffer et al., *Life Together: Prayerbook of the Bible*, 35.



One such area is a need to reflect the diversity of the surrounding community, if not in terms of membership – which many would welcome – then at least in terms of community engagement in mission and ministry. While the congregation does serve the community in significant ways and hopes to do more along those lines in the future, the church has been primarily focused on insiders. This inward focus is gradually shifting outward as members of the congregation see the changes in the nearby neighborhoods and seek to find ways to serve the people who live near the church facility and in the community at large.

To more effectively address poverty in its mission field, over the last eighteen months, the congregation has formed partnerships with outside organizations. Partnering with Samaritan's Feet,<sup>11</sup> the congregation raised roughly \$11,000 and provided space and volunteers to provide new shoes for children in the community. The congregation has also partnered with 200,000 Reasons, an initiative of the Arkansas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church seeking to alleviate hunger for the 200,000 children in the State of Arkansas who suffer from food insecurity. Through a partnership with the Arkansas Food Bank and a grant from Starbucks, 200,000 Reasons uses FUMC Monticello as a drop-off location for a food distribution on an every-other-month basis. Coordinating with local school organizations, the congregation provides volunteers to assist with food delivery and distribution.

FUMC Monticello is located within a community where the poverty rate is significantly higher than the state average, and the median income for whites is 2.7 times that of African-Americans. Considering the financial abundance of the congregation, there is clear opportunity to leverage those blessings to bless others as the congregation pursues the restoration of creation and justice for all of God's children.

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<sup>11</sup> [www.samaritansfeet.org](http://www.samaritansfeet.org).

### *Beginnings of the Feed Our Neighbors Ministry*

When I moved to Monticello in June 2018, members of the congregation expressed a desire to connect with persons living in nearby neighborhoods. The congregation started by placing a “Blessing Box” outside the Family Life Center in the fall of 2017. Members of the congregation were invited to place non-perishable food items and toiletries in the box for anyone who needed them. Neighbors quickly discovered the box and began to frequent it as they walked through the church parking lot on their way to and from the Cash Savers grocery store next door.

The following January, two church members who were part of a group that prepares and serves the Wednesday night congregational fellowship meal lamented at how much food was going to waste every week. These two members – Ruth Langley and Brenda Wright – decided to reheat the leftovers the following day and offer free meals to anyone who would come.

Ruth and Brenda placed an invitation on the Blessing Box welcoming people to come to the Family Life Center kitchen on Thursday evening for a free meal. This was the birth of the Feed Our Neighbors ministry at FUMC Monticello. Ruth and Brenda’s original intent was to serve a full “sit-down” meal. However, the neighbors asked for their meals “to go” so that they could take them and feed their families at home.

For the first year, Ruth, Brenda, and a handful of others they recruited prepared and served seven to ten meals per week. Neighbors would come to the back door of the kitchen at 4:30 P.M. to pick up their meals. Brenda would prop the door open, and the neighbors would enter to place their orders and receive their meals. Over time, Ruth and Brenda began to develop a rapport with the few who came. Brenda describes the spirit of camaraderie with one neighbor in particular as, “It’s like we were best friends.”

In the early days of the Feed Our Neighbors ministry, Ruth and Brenda noticed when neighbors were absent and would follow up with them. Sometimes they would deliver meals to them at home or arrange for them to pick up at the church a day or two later. They also began to establish relationships with others who frequented the church parking lot. Noticing someone passing through, Brenda would say, “We’re giving away free meals. Would you like one?” Some of these neighbors became weekly regulars.

By late winter and spring of 2019, Brenda and Ruth and their small team of volunteers were serving twenty-five to thirty-five meals weekly. During the summer of 2019, however, there was a dramatic increase in the number of meals served as word of the ministry spread. Brenda attributes the growth to three things: 1) serving the meals regularly and consistently, 2) the slow, steady development of friendships with the neighbors who came initially, and 3) that the meal met a need for our neighbors.

Currently the ministry serves seventy-five to over one hundred meals per week. Additional church members were invited to assist in meal preparation, with ten to fifteen persons serving the meal in a given week. This growth has come with challenges, particularly in the ability of the servers to develop and cultivate friendships with the neighbors. Those who prepare and serve the meal are also aware that differences in race – and more significantly – *class* make it difficult to build bridges between the two groups.

### *Project Design and Implementation*

How might we improve practices of friendship and hospitality on the part of those who serve in order to build bridges between them and the families who are served? Over eight weeks, I worked with Brenda<sup>12</sup> and the group who prepares and serves the weekly meal. Five people

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth had to take a break from the ministry before the project began, making Brenda the *de facto* leader of the ministry.

who make up the core group of servers participated in a small group book study designed to help them cultivate better practices of hospitality and friendship with the people served by the Feed Our Neighbors ministry. As the researcher, this involved seeing and listening for specific behaviors (e.g. learning names, shaking hands, engaging in conversation) on the part of the servers, including me. It also involved helping the servers to recognize our own “othering” behaviors.

Theorists use the term othering to “summarize subtle discursive practices and behaviors that create discrimination and exclusion by differentiating between those considered ‘us’ and ‘others’ and evaluating the differences as manifestations of the other’s essential inferiority.”<sup>13</sup> Othering mechanisms include setting boundaries, distancing and rejection, the stripping of personal identity, and the imposition of stigma. Setting boundaries refers to the formation of symbolic or tangible walls that separate persons on the basis of social status. Distancing and rejection occur in soup kitchens when there is uncertainty about food ingredients and origins, which leads to a feeling of disgust. Persons are stripped of their identity when their own personal preferences and tastes are ignored. Stigmatization emerges when persons living in poverty are ascribed negative qualities. Working together, these four mechanisms lead to othering behaviors, which exclude.<sup>14</sup>

Through the project, I hoped to reduce the mechanisms of othering, particularly on the part of the servers, by helping them to develop better skills for seeing and listening to the neighbors whom we seek to serve. In order to cultivate better practices of hospitality and friendship, I facilitated a five-week small group book study of *Friendship on the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* by Christine D. Pohl and Christopher L. Heuertz.

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, Krumer-Nevo, and Avieli, “Bread of Shame,” 398.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, Krumer-Nevo, and Avieli, 402-407.

The book lifts up the practices of friendship and hospitality as instruments for creating liberative communities where justice and righteousness come to life across class boundaries.

Following Paulo Freire's pedagogy, the book served as a "coded situation," (in which participants sympathize with a concrete situation) intended to uncover "limit situations" (decisions and actions that prevent people from experiencing the fullness of their humanity, which may benefit or hinder them) present within those who serve the weekly meal.<sup>15</sup> By reflecting on personal experience and on the practices involved in preparing and serving the meal, the goals were twofold: 1) to bring to consciousness those practices that hinder cultivating friendship and hospitality, and 2) to identify and implement concrete practices (both spiritual and practical) to facilitate friendship with our neighbors.

### *Measures of Transformation*

For the duration of the project, I observed and recorded both quantitative and qualitative measures. Quantitative measures included 1) How many meals did we serve this week?, 2) How many persons helped in the kitchen?, 3) How many of our neighbors came for meals?, 4) How many meals did we serve?, and 5) How much and what kinds of contact were there between those who serve the meal and their neighbors? These quantitative measures helped me as a researcher to understand what is happening within the Feed Our Neighbors ministry on a week-to-week basis.

As important as these quantitative measures are, the primary focus of the project was to measure a change in the quality of relationship-building on the part of the persons who serve. To do that, I conducted one ethnographic observation before the small group book study began and another following its completion. By comparing and contrasting the two, I hoped to find an

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<sup>15</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 80–90.

increase in practices that facilitate friendship-building and a decrease in othering behaviors (e.g. choosing a job that limits contact with neighbors). I also noted stories of interactions with neighbors outside the bounds of serving the meal. The final group study session included an opportunity for participants to reflect on any changes in understanding and practice in relating to our neighbors.

During the eight weeks of the project proper, I sought to measure the hospitality and friendship behaviors as well as the othering mechanisms of the small group participants. This included things like: 1) How many one-on-one interactions take place between church members, and neighbors?, 2) How many neighbors' names do we know?, and 3) Are boundaries (symbolic or tangible) being identified and removed?

#### *Motivations, Theology, and Expectations*

I understand the Church universal to be a covenant community, created by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry forward the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. My earliest church memories are of Hunter Memorial United Methodist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, where my father, Rev. Nick Evans, was the pastor. Under my father's pastoral leadership in the mid-1970s, Hunter Memorial UMC became the first intentionally integrated United Methodist Church in the State of Arkansas. This congregation embraced boundary-crossing ministry across lines of ethnicity and class.

In the biblical narrative, meals are often occasions for theophany – encounter with God. In Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah extend hospitality to three strangers. Rather than taking a superior position, the couple endear themselves to the three men by making servants of themselves. By showing this form of kenotic hospitality, they encounter God. In return, God vows to fulfill the previously stated promise that Sarah will have a child.

Perhaps the clearest instance of the theophanic potential of friendship and hospitality practices is found in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus says that when people feed the hungry and welcome the stranger, they have done it for him, whether or not they intended to do so. As we share hospitality with others, we encounter Christ himself. Luke presents this scenario in narrative form when Cleopas and an unnamed disciple meet the risen Christ “in the breaking of bread” while sharing a meal with a stranger at table in Emmaus.<sup>16</sup>

Each of the synoptic gospel authors portrays Jesus as breaking down barriers of ethnicity and class in his earthly ministry. Mark vividly portrays this in his narrative with Jesus repeatedly crossing the Sea of Galilee, with the “result of these voyages [being] that the lake loses its force as a barrier and is transformed into a symbol of unity, bridging the gulf between Jew and Gentile.”<sup>17</sup> This bridging of social and ethnic barriers is also found in narratives centered around table fellowship. While all four gospels relate stories about Jesus sharing meals with the marginalized, the Gospel of Luke brings those encounters front and center in his telling of the story of Christ. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus shares at least ten meals with diverse people, from the highly devoted Pharisees to tax collectors like Levi and Zacchaeus to a man with dropsy.

In *Food and Faith*, Norman Wirzba notes the sociological and theological ramifications of Jesus’ table fellowship with the marginalized:

The gospels frequently show Jesus eating with people because table fellowship is among the most powerful ways we know to extend and share in each other’s lives. Jesus eats with strangers and outcasts, demonstrating that table fellowship is for the nurture of others and not simply for self-enhancement (Luke 14:12-14). Jesus rejects the social systems of rejection and exclusion by welcoming everyone into communion with him. Table fellowship makes possible genuine encounters with others. This is why it is appropriate for Virgilio Elizondo to see Jesus’ way of eating as a sign of the kingdom of God: ‘By freely eating with everyone, he breaks and challenges all the social taboos that keep people apart.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Luke 24:13-35.

<sup>17</sup> Kelber, *Mark’s Story of Jesus*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 198.

Through these prophetic sign-acts of boundary-crossing meal sharing, Jesus redefined kinship within the Kingdom of God, expanding it beyond Israelite tribal bonds through the family of Jacob. By eating freely with everyone – including tax collectors and sinners<sup>19</sup> – Jesus created what Reta Halteman Finger dubs a “fictive kinship” group: a new *family* based not on ties of blood, but on shared belief.<sup>20</sup> Finger describes this expansion in Luke and Acts in light of Greco-Roman customs of kinship and benefaction in *Of Widows and Meals*:

The communal sharing which Luke describes must have been similar to the generalized reciprocity that went on all the time among an extended family. What was different – and radical – about it was *who* the kin were. No longer were they just one’s blood relatives; all who believed in Jesus were now brothers and sisters together. Just as God, the primary benefactor, had given them the gift of the Holy Spirit of Jesus, so they saw their role as sharing whatever they had with each other ... The truly unusual aspect of the group was not its property-sharing per se, but its inclusiveness: it accepted women as well as men, people of all classes, and even the former enemies of Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

As depicted in Acts,<sup>22</sup> the early church continued Jesus’ practice of sharing barrier-defying communal meals. Through these regular communal meals, the disciples “tried to bear witness to Christ’s way of dwelling on earth.”<sup>23</sup> Such shared meals were tangible acts in which Christ “broke down the barrier of hatred that divided” Jews and Gentiles, thereby bringing reconciliation.<sup>24</sup> In 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, Paul argues that Christ has entrusted the community of faith with both the message and ministry of reconciliation.

In the first century, eating together across social boundaries was a visible sign of who Jesus Christ was and what he came to do. The Christological import of this is expressed in the

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<sup>19</sup> Luke 5:30.

<sup>20</sup> Finger, *Of Widows and Meals*, 130.

<sup>21</sup> Finger, 144.

<sup>22</sup> For a summary of historical-critical questions raised regarding the historical accuracy of the meals as described in the book of Acts, see Finger *Of Widows and Meals*, chapter ten (pp. 169-193). After reviewing the work of John Dominic Crossan and Dennis Smith, Finger concurs with S. Scott Bartchy, who sees the “practice of sharing meals across boundaries” as “a powerful theological lesson” that challenged the status consciousness and hierarchy of the first-century Greco-Roman World (Finger, p. 193).

<sup>23</sup> Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 200.

<sup>24</sup> Ephesians 2:14, Common English Bible.



Christ hymn” in Colossians: *he reconciled all things to himself through him—Whether things on earth or in the heavens. He brought peace through the blood of his cross.*<sup>25</sup> Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God reconciled people to God and to one another. For the New Testament authors – especially Luke and Paul – a regularly shared meal by people of differing classes followed by the Eucharist served as a prophetic sign-act, revealing both Christ’s identity and his reconciling mission.

In twenty-first century America, we seldom share meals across socio-economic lines. Rather, “we generally live with socio-economic equals and give a tiny percentage of our income to charity,” with the result that “The poor remain ‘the other.’”<sup>26</sup> In congregations comprised of a single affinity group, the communal meals the Church once shared across social boundaries have become potluck dinners shared among social equals.

In laying the groundwork and exploring the possibility of working with the core group of persons who prepare and serve the weekly Feed Our Neighbors meal, my initial interest was in converting it into a shared meal. I quickly learned that although a shared sit-down meal was Ruth and Brenda’s original vision for the ministry, the neighbors who came preferred to pick up their meals and eat them at home. Some neighbors were picking up several meals to deliver them to others. During the course of the project we discovered that some of these neighbors were not only taking meals to their families, but were delivering them to friends and other persons they knew who needed one or more meals. While the servers were pleased about the growth in the ministry, they were also aware that the increase in the number of people being served made it more difficult to know the families personally.

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<sup>25</sup> Colossians 1:20, Common English Bible.

<sup>26</sup> Finger, *Of Widows and Meals*, 281.

What concrete practices of hospitality and friendship would help those who serve better connect with the neighbors who are served? Might othering behaviors on the part of the servers be a limiting factor in developing connections with the neighbors? These were the questions I began to consider for further research.

In carrying out the project, several obstacles were encountered. One of the key participants was diagnosed with a serious health issue, which left him unable to complete the study. Schedule conflicts prevented several participants from attending all five of the study sessions. All did, however, keep up with the reading when they had to be absent.

As the researcher, the second obstacle I encountered was the difficulty of being a participant observer. Attempting to observe the other servers while simultaneously placing lids on cups, taking and delivering drink orders was no small feat. Sitting down with the small group afterward helped me to fill in the gaps I missed during the serving of the meal.

Another obstacle was the simple fact that building relationships takes time. The timeframe of the project was somewhat limiting. By the end of the eight weeks, however, we had made some progress in identifying particular barriers as well as developing better practices of friendship and hospitality.

A final difficulty with the project was its focus on those who serve the meal. The rationale for that decision was out of concern for the neighbors' privacy. As the project unfolded, however, the lines between server and neighbor became blurred. In fact, it came to light that at least one person considered to be a neighbor was actively engaged in the ministry by delivering meals to his neighbors. In the months since the project was complete, other neighbors who deliver to their neighbors have been identified as well.

As an ethical safeguard, the persons who prepared and served the meal were asked to sign an informed consent form.<sup>27</sup> This included the core group of persons who participated in the book study, as well as those who did not. In the interest of privacy, the names of all of the neighbors and some of their descriptions have been changed in what follows.

## **PART TWO: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### *First Ethnographic Observation and Reflections*

On an unusually warm afternoon in late October, I went to the church to help prepare the weekly meal for our neighbors. Robert, who retired as a professor of agriculture from U.A. Monticello twenty-one years ago, was hard at work, carefully filling plastic cups with ice. His wife, Sally, placed a pitcher of lemonade beside the tea dispenser. Sally too worked at U.A. Monticello in the counseling department before her retirement.

Linda arrives. After the death of her daughter a couple of years ago, she kept to herself. Sally has been encouraging her to get out, and Linda took her up on the offer to come and help last week. “Hey, Linda! You came back!” I quipped. “Yes,” she said, “and I forgot my bags.” We have been running low on plastic grocery bags. “I’ll run home and get them. Be right back.”

Wearing a blue and red FUMC Monticello apron, Brenda opens the oven door to check on the breakfast casseroles and grits leftover from the Wednesday night congregational fellowship meal. Like Robert and Sally, Brenda is a retired educator: an elementary school teacher and librarian. As the leader of the Feed Our Neighbors ministry, Brenda is kind and compassionate, yet firm and direct. After many years serving as a volunteer, she joined the church staff as children’s minister this past summer.

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<sup>27</sup> See Appendix II.

Brenda checked the casseroles in the other oven before opening two large cans of pineapple. “Let’s save that juice,” said Sally. “I’ll take it home with me.” Brenda replied, “Grab a colander and a bowl out of that cabinet down there, and put it in the sink. Here you go.” Brenda passes the first can to Sally, who lifts it up with both hands and pours its contents out into the bowl.

“Where’s Bill?” I ask. “He went to get more cups,” Robert replies. Bill is perhaps the friendliest person I have ever met. He is warm and kind, and could talk the ears off an elephant. Before retiring, he was the president of a local bank. Though he was a banker, Bill is quick to tell you that he was “in the people business.” He always remembers your face, usually your name, and if you talk with him long enough, he will figure out which one of your kinfolk he knows.

I begin to take the cups of ice Robert had been preparing and fill them with sweet tea or lemonade. We used what remained of the Styrofoam cups and began to use the new recyclable plastic lidded cups. Until today, we had been putting the cups in plastic grocery bags, but the new biodegradable drink carriers finally arrived!

Linda returns, grocery bags in hand. Shortly afterward, Joe arrives. Like Linda, he is a recent addition to the Feed Our Neighbors ministry. Several months ago, his wife had to move into assisted living. Joe kept to himself until Brenda encouraged him to come and help on Thursday. Each week, Joe bakes and brings homemade desserts for our neighbors. Today he brought brownies, cookies, and grocery bags. Joe is tall and thin, and in his eighties, he is the senior member of the group.

A few minutes after 4:00, Judy arrives, along with “The Sisters.” Local Mormon missionaries, Sister Dammery and Sister Thompson recently heard about Feed Our Neighbors, and came to see if they could help. Brenda quickly put them to work, washing the dishes with

Judy. Like Brenda, Judy is a retired elementary school teacher and taught several of the more recently-retired members of the congregation.

Bill returns with the new clear plastic cups and begins to fill each one with sweet tea or lemonade. “These lids are too small,” he says. “Are you using the new ones?” Brenda asks. “Let me look.” Bill forages through the box. After trying unsuccessfully to place one of the old lids on a new cup, he says, “This one’s too big.” I give it a try. It requires some effort, but eventually I hear the satisfying “SNAP!” of a lid sealing on a cup. “That’s your new job,” Bill retorts. “Yes, sir,” I agree.

While I struggle in my new role, Brenda says, “Oh! It’s 4:15. Time to open the door.” She walks through the door from the kitchen into the large multi-purpose room in the Family Life Center. The roll-up windows between the kitchen and multi-purpose room, which are normally raised for serving meals, are down. This effectively closes off the kitchen where the servers prepare the meal from the large room where the neighbors order their meals and wait for them to be delivered.

Because they are down, the roll-up windows serve as both a symbolic and tangible barrier, separating the servers inside from the neighbors outside. This places distance between the two groups and subtly strips the neighbors of their personal identity. It also may lead to a sense of uncertainty about the food and its preparation on the part of the neighbors. This is the essence of othering behavior.<sup>28</sup> I believe this barrier has been created unintentionally as a vestige of earlier days when the meal was both prepared and served to the neighbors in the kitchen. Nonetheless, it now serves to differentiate between the groups of servers and neighbors who now interact as separate, distinctive groups.

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<sup>28</sup> Cohen, Krumer-Nevo, and Avieli, “Bread of Shame,” 398.

In preparation for a wedding shower the following Saturday, a long serving table has been decorated with an arrangement of winter squash, pumpkins, and a large yellow mum. Round tables with six chairs each fill the room. On the opposite side of the multi-purpose room hang racks of warm winter coats and jackets as well as shoes. This summer we partnered with Samaritan's Feet<sup>29</sup> and our local schools to provide shoes for over two hundred fifty children in our community. This Sunday, we will distribute more shoes as well as warm clothing to school-age children from kindergarten through the twelfth grade.

Brenda unlocks the door, opens it, and greets three of our neighbors who are waiting outside. "Hi there! Welcome!" She returns to the kitchen to retrieve flyers inviting our neighbors to an event this coming Saturday. Several years ago, our Annual Conference began the 200,000 Reasons initiative to alleviate childhood hunger in Arkansas. Through a grant from Starbucks and in partnership with the Arkansas Food Bank, 200,000 Reasons arranged a quarterly food distribution in areas in the state where the risk of food insecurity is high. Conference leaders identified Monticello as one such location, and the first distribution will be this Saturday morning.

Returning to the multi-purpose room, Brenda greets our first three guests, "Okay. Hi there. Y'all come in and have a seat. Everybody is going to get one of these today. Saturday over in the other part of our church in the fellowship hall, there will be a distribution of things like bread, chicken strips, and some groceries. It's from nine to eleven. Each person will have to sign their name for one bag of groceries. So, if you pick up meals for someone else, they'll have to come too." As other neighbors enter, she shares the information with the newcomers.

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<sup>29</sup> [www.samaritansfeet.org](http://www.samaritansfeet.org).

Meanwhile, those of us in the kitchen have taken our places. Sheere, Sally, Linda, and Joe form an assembly line, filling to-go boxes with the breakfast casserole, grits, fruit salad, and dessert. Robert, Bill, and I work on the drinks while Judy, Sister Dammery, and Sister Thompson wash the dishes.

Brenda returns to the kitchen with the first two orders. After relaying the drink order, she places the meals in the plastic bags brought earlier by Joe and Linda. In the meantime, more of our neighbors enter the Family Life Center and take a seat. The group is diverse in terms of age and ethnicity. One man wearing a camouflage t-shirt walks in with the aid of a cane carrying a large bag of his own. After placing it on the long table, he removes a second bag from it and takes a seat.

Earlier this week a former mayor of Monticello, who is a church member, spoke with Brenda about a man who comes on Thursday with his own bags. His name is Henry, and he lives in the apartment complex across the street from the church. Each week, he orders meals and delivers them to his neighbors who live in the apartments who are unable to come on their own. The mayor said to “be sure and give him all the plates he asks for.” Brenda assured him that we always do that for him and everyone else.

The church administrative assistant, Lynne, accompanies Brenda into the multipurpose room bearing a small tray of drinks. Brenda hands a bag of meals to an elderly gentleman and once again shares information about the food distribution on Saturday. As she passes out more flyers, our neighbors read them. Lynne excuses herself to return to her office, saying, “If you need me, call me.” After taking two more orders, Brenda re-enters the kitchen.

Isabel and Nelly arrive at 4:30. Isabel, who was born in Nicaragua, is a faculty member at U.A. Monticello, where she teaches Spanish. She also heads up our Hispanic and E.S.L.

ministries at the church. Her friend, Nelly, is from the Dominican Republic and speaks very little English. She and Brenda are working together to help one another learn their respective languages. Seeing that there is plenty of help, Isabel and Nelly depart.

With a smile, Brenda continues the process of taking orders and retrieving meals from the kitchen. I help her by delivering the drinks and taking orders for them. Brenda greets one woman by name, making sure that she got it right. This is the first time today that any of the neighbors have been greeted by name. As one neighbor leaves by herself, carrying eight meals in her arms, a young man appearing to be in his twenties rises to open the door for her. About six minutes later, as the young woman he has been sitting with carries five meals toward the door, he stands and says, "Hey, baby, let me get the door for you," and helps her through the door.

As I take more drink orders, Brenda asks Henry how many meals he needs, and he replies, "Eight." After another trip to the kitchen, she returns with meals for the woman sitting beside him. As she hands her the bag, Brenda looks at Henry, smiles, touches him on the shoulder, and asks, "Is your name Henry?" He nods, and she says, "Thank you for doing what you do to help others."

While Brenda goes to the kitchen to Henry's meals, a church member who is a prosecuting attorney comes in to offer his help. Like Isabel and Nelly, he sees that there are plenty of volunteers in the kitchen and leaves. A young man comes in and sits at the table by Henry, and they strike up a conversation.

Returning with Henry's meals, Brenda thanks him once again. She explains that the Food Bank requires that we only give one bag of food per person who signs in on Saturday, and that if he wants to get food for others, he will have to get them and deliver them one at a time. Loading the meals into his bags, Brenda says, "We have you on our heart, and we're thankful that you



help so many, but we have to follow their rules.” He says, “I want to,” to which she replies, “I know you do. I just wanted to let you know.”

By 4:45 the crowd has diminished significantly, but we have run out of to-go boxes. Brenda starts to leave to retrieve more from the fellowship hall on the far side of the church facility. Meanwhile, I take the drink order for the young man who sat with Henry and go to prepare it. Brenda catches my attention to tell me that the woman she just gave meals to still needs her drinks. After handing the young man his drinks, I asked her for her drink order. She ordered two lemonades and two teas. After checking, I came back to report that we were out of lemonade. Immediately, the young man said, “You can have mine.” He handed them to me, and I traded them for two teas before filling her order. I was moved by Gabriel’s gift to the woman. It reminded me of the widow in Luke 21 who gave everything she had.

As I delivered the woman her drinks, another neighbor entered the door. I took her order. Back in the kitchen, the crew had five meals ready to go for a young woman and her son. I carried them out to her, and as I handed them over, the little boy reached out his hand and said, “Can I hold it?” I said, “It’s up to her. If she’ll let you hold them, that’s fine with me.” She handed one of the bags to him. I said, “You’re so kind and helpful and such a gentleman. Let me get the door for you.”

Brenda returns with more to-go boxes, and both of us return to the kitchen to fill the orders of the last two remaining neighbors. Sally emerges from the kitchen and chats with the young man who shared his lemonade and asks the other neighbor if someone had taken her order. Other than this interaction, only Brenda and I have had contact with the neighbors during the serving of the meal. Taking a seat near the young man, Sally asked him his name. He said,

“Gabriel,” extending his hand. Sally reached out hers and introduced herself. They continued to talk as I returned once again to the kitchen.

At 4:55 three more neighbors come in the door. Sally stands and greets the three men. One man says he needs six meals. Knowing that we were close to running out of food, Sally replies, “I gotta see what we got,” and exits to the kitchen. Brenda emerges quickly and says, “We’ve just run out of food.” After talking it through a bit, Brenda offers to go look and see what she could put together for the three men. I return with the meals we prepared for Gabriel and the other neighbor, and both of them leave.

Back in the kitchen, I begin to help the others clean up. Joe gathers the containers in which he brought the brownies and cookies and heads home. Out in the multi-purpose room, two of the three remaining neighbors took interest in the coats on the far wall. One man went to peruse them while another came to the kitchen and asked me about them. I explained to him that they were for schoolchildren. He shouts across the room to the other man that those are for kids. About that time, Brenda comes out with three bags of canned goods and non-perishable food items for the men. She too explains that the coats are for children. I brought trays of drinks as well, and then Brenda shared with them the information about the upcoming food distribution. As she walks with them out the door, Brenda invites them to attend the chili cook-off the following Wednesday. In all, we served ninety-two meals in forty-five minutes.

During this first observation, the closed roll-up windows created a barrier between the servers and neighbors. Intentional or not, this tangible barrier separated each group from the other such that the servers primarily interacted with one another while the neighbors interacted with one another, save for ordering and receiving their meals and learning about the food distribution the following Saturday.

In addition to the distancing created by the physical windows, the work of the volunteers (specifically Brenda and me) precluded us from having more than cursory interaction with the neighbors. As the leader of the group, Brenda's time and attention was divided between serving as hostess, taking orders from the neighbors, filling the bags, coordinating the filling of the to go boxes, and traversing the church facility to procure materials. Personally, I felt a bit overwhelmed with my responsibilities in assisting with drink preparation, taking and fulfilling orders in Brenda's absence, and keeping observational notes.

In the weeks leading up to the observation, there were conversations between the servers about neighbors who, like Henry, were taking many meals with them. There was some suspicion on the part of the servers about what might be happening with the extra meals (Were they being delivered? Sold?). Although the imposition of stigma directed toward the neighbors by the servers was clearly part of the conversation, the view that prevailed in the end was that Jesus calls each of us to do our part. As one participant said, "We are to feed, not to judge. What happens beyond that is in God's hands."

By speaking on Henry's behalf in private, the former mayor had the social capital to secure the trust of the volunteers. When Henry's undisclosed ministry of delivering meals to the homebound neighbors in his apartment complex was revealed, the volunteers were humbled. Over the coming weeks, the group invited Henry into deeper participation as a ministry partner.

As we began the book study with the core group, I was curious about how the servers understood the dynamics of the meal service. Would they sense the distance created by the closed-off windows and the demands of preparing and serving the meal? Would they see ways to overcome both the symbolic and tangible barriers? What gifts might our neighbors offer so that they are no longer seen simply as recipients of ministry, but as ministry partners?

### *The Study*

Over the course of five sessions, the core group of servers read *Friendship on the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission* by Christine D. Pohl and Christopher L. Heuertz. In this section, I will share the highpoints of the study as well as key discussions that impacted the way the meals are served and delivered.<sup>30</sup>

After the first observation, we convened the first session of the book study, which covered the first chapter of *Friendship on the Margins*. In the book, the authors assert, “our emphasis on community included rejecting certain assumptions that had shaped some mission approaches: that gifts flow in one direction only and that a substantial social distance between donors and recipients is necessary if not good.”<sup>31</sup> This led to a discussion of social distancing behaviors.

Reflectively, the group noted that there is a divide between “donors and recipients” or “givers and takers” because all of the servers are in the kitchen. Several assumptions on the part of the servers regarding barriers between the people who serve and the neighbors were clear. Although Pohl and Heuertz argue that friendship across class lines is essential to Christian service and mission, one member of the group pointed toward the kitchen and said, “Community begins first in there.” Another made the claim that the “vast majority who come see us as the rich folks.” In response, Brenda stated that it begins with simply looking people in the eye and saying their name. Overcoming the sense of “the other” will take time and investment. We need to show that we care.

During the discussion, two participants made three important suggestions. First, Sheere proposed raising the windows to reduce the barrier between the kitchen and the Family Life

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<sup>30</sup> The curriculum may be found in Appendix I.

<sup>31</sup> Heuertz and Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins*, 26.

Center. Her second proposal was to have some volunteers whose purpose would be simply to visit with the neighbors as the meal is served. Third, influenced by the reading, Sally suggested that we ask one or more neighbors to “give us a hand” in the kitchen. The other participants were willing to try all of these suggestions.

Brenda also related an encounter she had with a neighbor earlier that week. As she was walking from her home to the church, she passed through the grocery store parking lot and recognized one of our neighbors. When she told him we missed him last week, he said he had traveled out-of-state to visit his daughter, who is seriously ill. Brenda asked her name and offered to pray for her. Tonight when he arrived for the meal, the man gave Brenda a hug.

The second book study session was held after serving one hundred thirteen meals on Halloween. The book mentions a story from John Wesley’s journal, in which he had purchased some expensive pictures for his room. Responding to a knock on his door, he discovered a poorly clothed young woman clutching a malnourished baby in her arms asking for alms. Wesley was embarrassed at the little bit of change that remained in his pocket from his shopping excursion. He realized that the “plunder of the poor” was in his own house.<sup>32</sup> One participant took exception with this phrase, finding it difficult to make the economic connection between their purchases and the poverty of others.

The following week, we served seventy meals. It was a difficult day. Bill received a troubling diagnosis earlier in the week and will be unable to participate in Feed Our Neighbors for the foreseeable future. To help compensate for Bill’s absence, we followed up on Sally’s suggestion what we ask one or more neighbors to help. Brenda invited Lucas, the young man who opened the door for others during the first observation, to help. He said he would love to

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<sup>32</sup> Heuertz, *Simple Spirituality*, 92.

and volunteered to help with the drinks. We introduced him to everyone in the kitchen, and he stayed through the end before gathering his meals and going home with his family. After serving the meal at the church, I went with Brenda to deliver meals to people living in the apartment complex across the street.

The fourth week got off to a rocky start, but then settled down. There were some adult-sized coats left over from the Samaritan's Feet the previous weekend, so Brenda invited Henry to help pass them out. I took the meal orders, and rather than simply asking how many meals each person needed, I asked each neighbor their name and wrote down their order on a sheet of paper. During the small group session, we reviewed the names, and tried to match them to the neighbors and where they sat in the room. It is also notable that Henry attended worship for the first time the previous Sunday. He came with another neighbor who has been attending for almost a year, and they sat together with Brenda. In addition to the Feed Our Neighbors volunteers, he received a warm welcome from at least one long-time member who said he reminded her of her step-dad.

Brenda was away on a mission trip to Africa the next week, so we took a break from the small group. We served a Thanksgiving meal, and further refined the process of taking names and orders. After breaking for Thanksgiving,<sup>33</sup> the small group completed their book study the first Thursday in December.

In our final reading, several of us were touched by a quote from John Wesley in which he encounters a beggar and sees “through all these rags that he is purpled over with the blood of Christ.”<sup>34</sup> The last session included a discussion of what we are doing well to create community. Responses included “knowing our neighbors as people who are ‘purpled over with the blood of Christ,’” “learning about the situations in which our neighbors live,” “helping to overcome the

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<sup>33</sup> The week prior, we shared a flyer promoting a free meal provided by another church on Thanksgiving Day.

<sup>34</sup> Heuertz and Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins*, 133.

feeling of degradation; we want to give people what they need,” and having Henry and Lucas involved in serving. We also celebrated the three neighbors who have attended other church events, including worship.

Our discussion concluded as we reflected on new practices of hospitality and friendship that we would be willing to integrate into the Feed Our Neighbors Ministry over the next month. Ideas included blessing the food before serving it, learning more about the life situations of our neighbors, not only seeking to befriend others, but to allow ourselves to *be* befriended by our neighbors. Long-term goals included identifying the gifts our neighbors bring and seeking to involve those gifts in the life of our church family.<sup>35</sup>

### *Second Ethnographic Observation*<sup>36</sup>

On the second Thursday in December, I arrived at the Family Life Center at 3:00 P.M. to help Brenda prepare the meal. The aroma of vegetable soup, warming on the stove, permeated the kitchen. The meal included ham and cheese sliders, pimiento cheese sandwiches, cornbread, and desserts from the congregational fellowship meal the previous evening. Brenda and I had a brief discussion about the study in which I mentioned social distancing, and what happens in soup kitchens when the people being served are unsure about food preparation and ingredients.

At 3:45 there was a knock on the kitchen door. It was Henry, and I let him in. He entered the kitchen, holding in one hand the cloth bags to carry meals to his neighbors across the street, and his cane in the other. He set down his bags on the counter in front of the roll-up windows, which were shut.

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<sup>35</sup> See Mather, *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*. Brenda read Mather’s book on her trip to Africa, and this part of the conversation was influenced by that reading.

<sup>36</sup> For the second ethnographic observation, I will focus on practices that contrast with the first observation.

Walking toward me, Henry lifted his cane. “Did you see this?” he asked. “No. Tell me about it,” I responded. Henry said he was walking the other day when he found a straight walking stick. Someone else had already peeled the bark off it, so he picked it up and carried it home. “It was too tall for me, so I took my saw and cut off the top. I took the top and trimmed it down and made me a handle. Then I took my drill and put one screw right there and tightened it up. I had some sandpaper, and I sanded the whole thing down real nice. Then I painted it all black. It works pretty good.” “It’s beautiful,” I said.

As Henry and I continued our conversation, he told me about where he grew up. I asked how he came to Monticello, and he brought me up to speed. Meanwhile, Judy, Sheere, Linda, and a new volunteer arrived. With Christmas approaching, several of the regular volunteers had to miss, so Brenda invited her to help out today.

Promptly at 4:15, Brenda walked over to the roll-up windows, unlocked them one-by-one, and sent them rising up into their hiding places with a flourish. Then she walked to the rear door, where several neighbors have already lined up outside. Knowing that we were shorthanded, I looked for Lucas, but he was nowhere to be found.

We really could have used his help. Neighbors continued to pour in, filling up all the tables on the east side of the large multi-purpose room. Brenda was needed in the kitchen, so I began taking meal and drink orders, then returned to the kitchen to ready the drinks. When I came to a young couple, they informed me that Lucas and his wife couldn’t make it today because their car broke down.

I sat down with the couple and asked if Lucas and his wife would like someone to deliver their meals to them tonight. They said they thought they would. I asked if they knew where Lucas lives. They did not know the exact address, but they shared directions and described the



house and yard. I made notes at the bottom of the paper I was using to record meal and drink orders. After taking the couple's order, I returned to the kitchen.

“Lucas' car broke down, and they can't make it tonight. Do you think we could deliver their meals? I wouldn't mind taking them, if you know how many they usually get.” Brenda knew their regular order. We added Lucas' meals to the bottom of the page.

Though we were shorthanded, we prepared and served one hundred meals within thirty minutes. Seeing the large crowd, Brenda realized we were going to run out of food. She pulled a pan of spaghetti she had been saving out of the freezer and popped it in the oven to reheat.

At five minutes until five o'clock, Patty arrived with desserts she had purchased at a local store. She also had two of her grandchildren in tow. Patty is one of the unsung heroes of the Feed Our Neighbors ministry. Every week she goes to a local grocery store. She knows when they mark down their desserts. She buys as many as she can, brings them to the church, and places them in the cooler to be served on Wednesday.

Once everyone in the Family Life Center had been served, Brenda and the other volunteers prepared to go boxes for Lucas. A couple of weeks earlier, one of the neighbors told us about a family living nearby who might appreciate a meal. Brenda contacted them earlier in the day and prepared meals to deliver to them as well as to a church member who is homebound.

Brenda and the volunteer she recruited loaded the meals for the two homebound persons into her car for delivery. I did the same for Lucas' family. After making a wrong turn, I pulled up to Lucas' house. Immediately, he and his wife came out to greet me. Lucas shook my hand and gave me a chest bump. The couple were thankful for the meals and drinks and told me about the issue with his car. It was his hope to trade his services for the required part. Before departing, I offered to deliver their meals again the following week.

### PART THREE: SUMMARY

The primary purpose of the project was to reduce the mechanisms of othering, particularly on the part of the servers, by helping them to develop better skills for seeing and listening to the neighbors served by the ministry. Through the discussions of the book, two obstacles to cultivating deeper relationships were identified by the study group: 1) the lowered roll-up windows formed a physical barrier between the servers and the neighbors, and 2) the work of preparing and serving the meal made it difficult for deep interaction to occur between the two groups. In addition to these self-identified barriers, some participants found it difficult to confront their own potential complicity in the systemic conditions that produce poverty in the community.

The self-identified obstacles were addressed in three ways. By raising the roll-up windows, the physical obstruction between the servers and the neighbors was lessened. Secondly, adopting a new way of taking orders, which included taking names along with the desired number of meals and drinks, enabled those of us who take the orders to learn the names of the neighbors. The neighbors, in turn, have learned the names of those of us who take the orders. In the months since the project ended, the relationships between the order takers and neighbors has continued to develop. It is common for neighbors who attend regularly to catch up with us and even to share prayer concerns when there is a need.

While these changes have taken place as a result of the project, the deeper connections between server and neighbors are fairly limited to Brenda and me. I must admit my initial disappointment that more of the core group has not continued to connect with the neighbors. There are several interconnected dynamics at work. The authors of *Bread of Shame: Mechanisms of Othering* conclude that “the gap between the overt messages transmitted through

discourse supervised and managed by the rules of political correctness, and covert ones transmitted through nonverbal channels of communication, including suspicion, alienation, and devaluation, exposes the status of soup kitchens in societal power relations and structures.”<sup>37</sup> Tribalism based on class is difficult to overcome, even within the Church. One of the limitations of the project was that in focusing on the othering practices of the servers, the experience of the neighbors was omitted. Perhaps both volunteers and neighbors alike feel discomfort at crossing lines of socio-economics and class.

Nevertheless, following the way of Christ compels us to cross such boundaries. Through barrier-defying communal meals, Jesus formed fictive kinship groups across class lines. The early church continued this practice. At the same time, it is worthy to note the class tension within the shared meals of the early Church. Several of the controversy narratives in the gospels take place within the setting of a meal shared between the wealthy and the impoverished. Paul addresses class divisions within the church in Corinth where the wealthy members gorge themselves on the shared meal and get drunk, while the poor members go hungry.<sup>38</sup> The early church was not foreign to class conflict in shared meals.

Paul transitions from his address on class conflict to a discussion of spiritual gifts. It is here that I find hope for the future of Feed Our Neighbors. Paul asserts that there are many spiritual gifts, ministries, and activities, yet they are all empowered by God through the Spirit.<sup>39</sup> If we are to serve as the Body of Christ – to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus as our youth say – then we must respect and appreciate the diverse gifts within the body. I have been pleased with the recent addition of two new persons who now serve regularly who have the gift of hospitality.

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<sup>37</sup> Cohen, Krumer-Nevo, and Avieli, 410.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

Upon review of the project, I must also note that there were several surprises. I did not expect Henry to begin attending Sunday morning worship. While he has not officially joined the congregation, he is a regular attender and recently joined a Sunday school class. He also brought another neighbor with him to worship. The friend he sat with on his first Sunday has also remained active in the life of the church. Within the past month, she joined a group who went on a mission trip out of state. I find it promising that barriers are being overcome beyond the Thursday evening meal.

Those of us who serve have also been surprised to learn that Henry is not the only neighbor serving other neighbors as a partner in the feeding ministry. Since the completion of the project, we have discovered that several of our neighbors pick up additional meals and deliver them to others. One gentleman, like Henry, delivers eight to fourteen meals per week. Some meals are delivered to extended family members, while others are taken to neighbors who are unable to attend in person on a given Thursday.

Another surprise has been the deepening of relationships between me and the others who serve on a regular basis. I have discovered that there was a degree of mistrust on the part of some of the other servers when I invited them to be a part of an ethnographic study for a Doctor of Ministry project. There were concerns that I would become involved and then desert the ministry once the project was completed. I have remained actively involved with the ministry since the end of the project's timeframe and plan to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Spending one hour per week with others who seek to use their gifts to bless their community remains a joy to me. It warms my heart to see how the Feed Our Neighbors ministry creates community not only for the neighbors, but for the servers themselves. Brenda is correct when she describes us as "a motley crew."

Several of us who help on a regular basis have suffered tremendous loss and are undergoing seasons of change. Others experienced loss long ago and are able to help navigate the chaotic waters of grief. The ministry has enabled persons isolated by their loss to come together in service to others. My sense of it is that those losses are the source of our compassion for the neighbors we serve out of love, however imperfectly. In the ways that it embodies Christ's love in yet-to-be-fulfilled ways, the Feed Our Neighbors ministry may be seen as an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, a microcosm of the Body of Christ.

The authors of *Bread of Shame: Mechanisms of Othering* describe ethnography as a “performative practice, with the researcher’s body as a key research tool.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps the biggest surprise of all has been the love that I as the researcher have come to feel for our neighbors as well as the other servers. We are becoming friends. We are getting to know each other by name. We have begun to pray for one another. When one of us is absent, they are missed. When one of us experiences a loss, others hurt. Have we overcome class divisions through this research project? No. But as Brenda loves to say, “Baby steps.”

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<sup>40</sup> Cohen, Krumer-Nevo, and Avieli, 411.

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**APPENDICES**  
**APPENDIX 1: Book Discussion Curriculum**  
**FRIENDSHIP AT THE MARGINS**  
**Introduction & Chapter 1**

**PARTICIPANTS:**

**MEALS SERVED:**

**Genesis 18:1-15 CEB** The LORD appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he sat at the entrance of his tent in the day's heat.<sup>2</sup> He looked up and suddenly saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from his tent entrance to greet them and bowed deeply.<sup>3</sup> He said, "Sirs, if you would be so kind, don't just pass by your servant.<sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought so you may wash your feet and refresh yourselves under the tree.<sup>5</sup> Let me offer you a little bread so you will feel stronger, and after that you may leave your servant and go on your way—since you have visited your servant." They responded, "Fine. Do just as you have said."<sup>6</sup> So Abraham hurried to Sarah at his tent and said, "Hurry! Knead three seahs of the finest flour and make some baked goods!"<sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the cattle, took a healthy young calf, and gave it to a young servant, who prepared it quickly.<sup>8</sup> Then Abraham took butter, milk, and the calf that had been prepared, put the food in front of them, and stood under the tree near them as they ate.<sup>9</sup> They said to him, "Where's your wife Sarah?" And he said, "Right here in the tent."<sup>10</sup> Then one of the men said, "I will definitely return to you about this time next year. Then your wife Sarah will have a son!" Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.<sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were both very old. Sarah was no longer menstruating.<sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, I'm no longer able to have children and my husband's old.<sup>13</sup> The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Me give birth? At my age?'"<sup>14</sup> Is anything too difficult for the LORD? When I return to you about this time next year, Sarah will have a son."<sup>15</sup> Sarah lied and said, "I didn't laugh," because she was frightened. But he said, "No, you laughed."

- What does this story say about friendship and hospitality?

“...our emphasis on community included rejecting certain assumptions that had shaped some mission approaches: that gifts flow in one direction only and that a substantial social distance between donors and recipients is necessary if not good”—*Friendship at the Margins*, p. 26

- In the story of Abraham, Sarah, and the three men, how do gifts flow in both directions?
- As we prepare and serve meals, do you see “social distancing” between servers and neighbors? If so, how? (list examples)

“In relationships and friendships with those who are poor, we were learning to follow our friends to God’s heart. Along the way, we redefined success in terms of faithfulness”

—*Friendship at the Margins*, p. 34

- How do we define success for Feeding Our Neighbors? What would it look like to redefine success in terms of faithfulness?

“Don’t tell someone about Christ unless you’re willing to give them your bed.” – Jackie Pullinger (*Friendship at the Margins*, p. 42)

- How would your life be different if you took this to heart?



## FRIENDSHIP AT THE MARGINS

### Chapter 2

#### **PARTICIPANTS:**

#### **MEALS SERVED:**

**James 1:27 CEB** True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

- According to this verse, what are the two parts to true devotion (holiness)?

“righteousness and justice (*sedeqah, mispat*)...have to do with living justly and according to God’s purposes, a rightness in relationships, a wholeness to life for the individual and the community.”—*Friendship at the Margins*, p. 52

#### **Sedeqah:**

#### **Mispat:**

“One afternoon [John] Wesley had gone to town to buy some pictures for his room. After hanging the images around his house, he heard a knock at the door. It was bitterly cold outside, and the wind was blowing. There stood a young woman and her obviously undernourished baby in arm, both poorly clothed. They were going from door to door, begging for food and money to provide them with warmer clothing.

“Wesley put his hand in his pocket and pulled out what little change was left over from his day of shopping. He handed it over and sent the woman on her way. When he closed the door behind him and turned around, the pictures on his walls faced him as judges—the money he had spent on those very frames could have helped the young mother.

“The plunder of the poor was in John Wesley’s house...”

—*Simple Spirituality: Learning to See God in a Broken World*, by Christopher L. Heuertz, p. 92

- Considering our neighbors, do can you identify any “bridges between our unrighteousness and major injustices in the world”? (see *Friendship at the Margins*, p. 53)

“One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that ... one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness of heart.”

– John Wesley (quoted in *Friendship at the Margins*, p. 58)

- How would your life be different if you took this to heart?

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## FRIENDSHIP AT THE MARGINS

### Chapter 3

#### PARTICIPANTS:

#### MEALS SERVED:

**Matthew 25:31-46 CEB** "Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne.<sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.<sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left.<sup>34</sup> "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began.<sup>35</sup> I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.<sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.'<sup>37</sup> "Then those who are righteous will reply to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?<sup>38</sup> When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear?<sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'<sup>40</sup> "Then the king will reply to them, 'I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.'<sup>41</sup> "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels.<sup>42</sup> I was hungry and you didn't give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn't give me anything to drink.<sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you didn't welcome me. I was naked and you didn't give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn't visit me.'<sup>44</sup> "Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn't do anything to help you?'<sup>45</sup> Then he will answer, 'I assure you that when you haven't done it for one of the least of these, you haven't done it for me.'<sup>46</sup> And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life."

"In meeting with [Mother Teresa], she would frequently say, 'We need the poor more than the poor need us.'" —*Friendship at the Margins*, p. 76

What do you make of this?

**Luke 14:7-24 CEB** When Jesus noticed how the guests sought out the best seats at the table, he told them a parable.<sup>8</sup> "When someone invites you to a wedding celebration, don't take your seat in the place of honor. Someone more highly regarded than you could have been invited by your host.<sup>9</sup> The host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give your seat to this other person.' Embarrassed, you will take your seat in the least important place.<sup>10</sup> Instead, when you receive an invitation, go and sit in the least important place. When your host approaches you, he will say, 'Friend, move up here to a better seat.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.<sup>11</sup> All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward.<sup>13</sup> Instead,

when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind.<sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed because they can't repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected."<sup>15</sup> When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus' remarks, he said to Jesus, "Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom."<sup>16</sup> Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people.<sup>17</sup> When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.'<sup>18</sup> One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.'<sup>19</sup> Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.'<sup>20</sup> Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'<sup>21</sup> When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.'<sup>22</sup> The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.'<sup>23</sup> The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled.'<sup>24</sup> I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner."

### **Prepare**

Psalm 46:10: "Be still, and know that I am God."

Pray, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide your reading. Open your mind, allowing Christ to lead you, teach you, find you.

### **Read**

The passage silently to yourself. When you are finished, look up.

### **Meditate**

Read the passage again. Slow down, ponder each verse, each phrase, each word. Open your heart. Allow yourself to become part of the story (dinner guest, a Pharisee, someone who made excuses, someone who was invited from the streets, whoever you want to be). Listen for the message the Holy Spirit wants you to hear.

### **Pray**

Read the passage once more. Engage in a dialogue with God. Ask God any questions you have. Allow God to answer or to be silent. Allow God to ask you questions too.

### **Contemplate/Imitate**

Listen to the passage one last time. Be attentive.

[After reading, ask: How does this scripture invite you to love more deeply?]

**LECTIO DIVINA**

**Luke 14:7-24 CEB** When Jesus noticed how the guests sought out the best seats at the table, he told them a parable.<sup>8</sup> "When someone invites you to a wedding celebration, don't take your seat in the place of honor. Someone more highly regarded than you could have been invited by your host.<sup>9</sup> The host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give your seat to this other person.' Embarrassed, you will take your seat in the least important place.<sup>10</sup> Instead, when you receive an invitation, go and sit in the least important place. When your host approaches you, he will say, 'Friend, move up here to a better seat.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.<sup>11</sup> All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."<sup>12</sup> Then Jesus said to the person who had invited him, "When you host a lunch or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives, or rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return and that will be your reward.<sup>13</sup> Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind.<sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed because they can't repay you. Instead, you will be repaid when the just are resurrected."<sup>15</sup> When one of the dinner guests heard Jesus' remarks, he said to Jesus, "Happy are those who will feast in God's kingdom."<sup>16</sup> Jesus replied, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people.<sup>17</sup> When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.'<sup>18</sup> One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.'<sup>19</sup> Another said, 'I bought five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.'<sup>20</sup> Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'<sup>21</sup> When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.'<sup>22</sup> The servant said, 'Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.'<sup>23</sup> The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled.'<sup>24</sup> I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner."

## FRIENDSHIP AT THE MARGINS

### Chapter 4

#### **PARTICIPANTS:**

#### **MEALS SERVED:**

What stood out to you in chapter four?

“When we allow ourselves to be disarmed, we become both vulnerable and strong. The only weapons then at our disposal are those of the Spirit. We choose the way of Jesus, laying aside all the earthly resources that give us power—in order to be present to those we love.”—*Friendship at the Margins*, p. 97

In our work in Feed Our Neighbors, how might we be “disarmed...vulnerable...and strong ... in order to be present to those we love”?

#### **Read Silently, then in Unison:**

**Philippians 2:1-11 CEB** Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy,<sup>2</sup> complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other.<sup>3</sup> Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves.<sup>4</sup> Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others.<sup>5</sup> Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:<sup>6</sup> Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.<sup>7</sup> But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human,<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names,<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow<sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In what concrete ways may we “adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus” as we serve the meal each week?

Over the next month, what new practice(s) (1-3) of hospitality and friendship are we willing to integrate into our ministry?

**FRIENDSHIP AT THE MARGINS**  
**Chapter 5**

**PARTICIPANTS:**

**MEALS SERVED:**

“A poor wretch cries to me for an alms: I look and see him covered with dirt and rags. But through these I see one that has an immortal spirit, made to know and love and dwell with God to eternity: I honour him for his Creator’s sake. I see through all these rags that he is purpled over with the blood of Christ. I love him for the sake of his Redeemer. The courtesy therefore which I feel and show toward him is a mixture of the honour and love which I bear to the offspring of God, the purchase of his Son’s blood, and the candidate for immortality. This courtesy let us feel and show toward all.” – John Wesley, *Friendship at the Margins*, p. 133

In Feed Our Neighbors, what are we doing well in creating community?

Where is Improvement needed?

How do my actions help community?

How do my actions hurt community?

Over the next month, what new practice(s) (1-3) of hospitality and friendship are we willing to integrate into our ministry? What spiritual practices will help us?

## APPENDIX 2: Informed Consent Form

My name is Hammett Evans, and I am a student at Candler School of Theology at Emory University conducting an ethnographic study for my final project. My cell number is (501) 944-9719. My faculty consultant is Dr. *Steffen Lösel*, and his phone number is (404) 727-2816. You may contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this study.

**Purpose:** *The purpose of this research is to study practices of friendship and hospitality in the Feeding Our Neighbors ministry at First United Methodist Church of Monticello, Arkansas. I am trying to learn more about the theology and practice of friendship and hospitality across difference in class.*

**Procedure:** If you consent, you will participate in a five-week short term study of *Friendship at the Margins* by Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl. An audio recording of the small group meeting will be made each week. As a part of the group, you will be observed during the preparation and serving of the meal once prior to participating in the study, and once following.

**Time Required:** Including the observations, the total timeframe for the study will be seven weeks. Preparing and serving the meal typically takes one hour. The five-week small group study will last no longer than thirty minutes. You will read one chapter of the book per week. While reading times vary, it is expected to take approximately one hour per week for the average reader. If your schedule prohibits you from participating for all seven weeks, you will be expected to keep up with the reading during your absence.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

**Risks:** There are no known risks associated with this study.

**Benefits:** While there is no guaranteed benefit, it is possible that you will enjoy the experiences of serving our neighbors and being a part of the small group. The study is intended to benefit the Feeding Our Neighbors ministry by enlivening our discourse on the theology and practice of friendship and hospitality with people living on the margins.

**Confidentiality/Anonymity:** Your name will be kept confidential in all of the reporting and/or writing related to this study. I will be the only person who listens to the audio recordings. When I write the ethnography, I will use pseudonyms – made up names – for all participants, unless you specify in writing that you wish to be identified by name.

If you wish to choose your own pseudonym for the study, please indicate the first name you would like me to use for you here: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Sharing the Results:** I plan to construct an ethnography – a written academic account of what I learn – based on the observations and group discussion together with my reading and research. This ethnography will be submitted to my faculty consultant this coming February, followed by an oral presentation to faculty and peers in April.



**Publication:** In addition to the academic paper, a digital summary will be published at <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/candleradmin/>.

**Before You Sign:** By signing below, you are agreeing to be observed and recorded for the purpose of this research study. Be sure that any questions you may have are answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you.

**Participant's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name: Hammett N. Evans