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Starved to Death for Love:
Working with Children in Rural Poverty

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Abstract

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Wonderful Wednesday is an example of a small rural Appalachian congregation with a successful after school program. The program is designed to nurture the spiritual development of children in an impoverished area. It does this by increasing knowledge of the basic teachings of the Christian faith. It encourages character development and educational development of the participating students from the local elementary school. The program provides for different needs of the students. The program has adapted to deal with issues that arose from its success. The biblical, theological, and devotional principles behind the development of the program help volunteers ascertain whether their goals are being achieved. The students' understanding of God, Jesus, and church is important to understand this achievement as well.

Starved to Death for Love:
Working with Children in Rural Poverty

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INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS PROJECT?

The need for church partnerships with local public schools is ever growing in impoverished areas. This project will detail the program known as “Wonderful Wednesday.” It is an after-school program conducted by the Parrottsville United Methodist Church in Parrottsville, Tennessee. The congregation administers this program for students ages kindergarten through fifth grade from the Parrottsville Elementary School.

The primary goal of this study is to understand both what the program is intending to teach and what the students in the program understand being taught to them. The secondary questions to be asked and understood include,

1. How are the children in the program being taught the Bible and religious practices?
2. How do the children involved receive the information given to them and develop an understanding of the idea of “church”?
3. Do the students put the information into practice, and if so, how?
4. How has the Wonderful Wednesday community changed over the years?
5. How do the leaders see the program developing in the future?

Answering these questions will help this study realize its primary goal.

The program is unique to its own context. This study will not recommend reproducing this program in any other place. The principles that brought this program about may be applied in developing similar ones in other impoverished rural areas.

WHERE IS THIS PLACE?

Cocke County, Tennessee, borders North Carolina. Interstate 40 runs through it into the Nantahala gorge just bypassing the county seat of Newport. It is sometimes called the five rivers area, the Pigeon and French Broad rivers being the most prominent. The town of Parrottsville boasts of being the “third oldest” town in Tennessee even though there is no documentation to support that claim. The town is named for John Parrott, who built a tavern there in the late 1700’s.

Cocke County is known for its rough and tumble reputation of crime, drugs, and has a near mythical status as a moonshine producer. The annual “Popcorn Sutton” festival commemorates the legacy of the last notoriously revered resident. The video “Popcorn Sutton’s Last Run” is a colorful presentation of the now deceased moonshiner making his last run of bootleg whiskey. A 1998 Community Diagnosis report conducted by the Tennessee Department of Health demonstrates very inadequate access to important medical treatment along with inadequate access to Drug and Alcohol prevention and abuse treatment as well as mental health services. Unemployment is high most of the year with around 47 per cent of the children living in poverty. The Cocke County school system recently began providing free breakfast and lunch to all students. The behavioral risk factor survey shows “definite problems” in areas of

Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drug use as well as cancer, teen pregnancy, and other “environmental issues.”¹

Cocke County is in the middle of the region known as “southern Appalachia.” It is not known for the coal industry. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a nearby neighbor that brings some tourism to the area. Like all rural Appalachia, there has been a history of attempts to define the problem and attempts to help. The War on Poverty relied on the idea of a white rural Appalachian child to win over people to the program.² Others have attempted to define Appalachia in various ways.³ The most prominent is the image of a backward but pure colony within the United States. The racially motivated romanticizing of the area has been a plague on it ever since by ignoring the contributions of African-Americans and other non-whites in the area. The Popcorn Sutton Festival is an example of this kind of approach to the context of Appalachia. The idea of brutally honest people trying to live without interference from others, especially the federal government, prevails in the myth. Cocke County has some racial diversity. Yet, old names and family farms appear to be what people prefer amidst new vineyards planted and maintained from new residents and Confinement Animal Feeding Operations type factory chicken houses supported by Koch Foods in nearby Morristown, where the poultry processing plant is located. The Highlander Center, once led by the late Miles Horton in conjunction with a host of others, is an attempt by religious radicals to offer direct aid in the way of education and activism for people in East Tennessee.

¹ Tennessee Department of Public Health. *Community Diagnosis Status Report: Cocke County* (Nashville, TN 1998), 6.

² Isserman, Maurice. *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington* (New York: Perseus Books 2000) 217.

³ Catte, Elizabeth. *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* (Cleveland, OH: Belt Publishing. 2018) 85.

The town of Parrottsville itself is interesting. The town is a very small community with a post office that serves the larger area from the French Broad River to the Greene County line. There is an important sense of self in the community. The local churches host community times of worship, especially during the Harvest Festival in October. The town hall, the post office, and the Volunteer Fire Department are within a few yards of each other. The Parrottsville Public Library is nearby as well, with a plan to move it next to the small park near Parrottsville United Methodist Church. The local Ruritan Club holds some important property that houses the local Rural Medical Services clinic which provides a vital service in the area. The club also owns the local softball field. Basketball and tennis courts are part of the recreational property held by the town and are located behind Parrottsville United Methodist Church. The park is the center of activity for the community annual Harvest Festival and is very prettily decorated for the Christmas season every year.

The primary institutions that brings the town together are the Parrottsville Elementary School which holds all the local public-school students from kindergarten age to the eighth grade in one building. High school students attend Coker County High School in Newport. The school football and basketball teams are a source of pride for the town. The other main institution is the Volunteer Fire Department which is also a source of civic pride. The people of the town turn out for the major fundraising functions of the fire department. In November 2016 with the drought and subsequent wildfires on Neddy Mountain and the Chimney Tops Fire that threatened nearby Gatlinburg, the community poured out support in the way of relief supplies, bottled water, and food for the firefighters and any refugees from the fires. The school and the fire department in turn support other community efforts.

The local churches have been supporters of these institutions. The memberships of the churches also work or volunteer with the school and fire department. The difficulty in the community was that the churches had no actual ministries of outreach directly to the town. When Reverend Chris Stanfield was appointed to serve the Harned's Chapel and Parrottsville United Methodist Circuit, he had recently ended a term of active duty as a U.S. Navy chaplain. He made an appointment with the Cocke County mayor and asked what the church could do. The mayor said that no pastor of any church in the county had ever asked him that. The idea that a church would directly engage the needs of the community by first asking local officials their view was apparently not considered prior to his visit.

Churches in Cocke county had historically done "church works" in their communities. There were Vacation Bible Schools, revival meetings, support for local food banks, and other good works. Reverend Stanfield decided to begin two direct ministries from the centrally located Parrottsville United Methodist Church. The first was a "clothes closet" that would provide free clothing, toys, dishes, sheets, and some furniture to the residents of the town in need of such items. The clothes closet ministry continues.

The other and more ambitious ministry was Wonderful Wednesday. The difficulty Reverend Stanfield faced was that his family homeschooled. He did not have strong connections to the local school. The first four years of Wonderful Wednesday saw only a small group of children attending, the majority of whom were his own. When the Holston Conference moved Reverend Stanfield two years into his ministry in the area, Wonderful Wednesday attendance hovered between six and nine students with four to five adult volunteers. These numbers changed in 2015 following a new pastoral appointment the previous year (me) and a

renewed interest in reaching out to the local elementary school that was spearheaded by a teacher in the local church.

A teacher employed by the elementary school who was also a member of Parrottsville UMC approached me about putting a flier in every student's orientation bag at the beginning of the school year. The church also partnered with Second Harvest to do a weekend "backpack" food ministry. We were giving notices to the teachers about that program already. When we approached the school principal about including a notice concerning Wonderful Wednesday too, he was receptive. We produced a one-page notice to go into the student's orientation bag along with the notice for the backpack food ministry. We found that because of this action parents were interested. Since the church building was along the main road in town, the school system allowed the buses to drop off students at our building. I made it a point to greet the students and the bus stop in front of the church annex building. The attendance mushroomed from nine students in 2014 to 25 regular attenders in 2015 and 30 to 35 in 2016 and 2017.

Other churches in the community took notice. The pastor of Bethel Baptist Church commented to me that we had the best ministry going on in the town. Our District Superintendent claimed that the attendance at Wonderful Wednesday constituted my "third church" on the circuit. It was that statement along with a few others, including from some of the students themselves, that caused me to take a closer look into what this ministry was doing for the children from "unchurched" and "churched" families in this impoverished area. There are no fees charged of the students or their families. What does this outreach program communicate to the students about church?

THE WONDERFUL WEDNESDAY PROGRAM

John Wesley asked an important question of the preachers, “Will you diligently instruct the children in every place?”⁴ It is an important question for several reasons. One reason is that children do possess a spirituality. And then as Richard Heitzenrater points out, “He was concerned enough about their intellectual and spiritual welfare that he warned the Methodist preachers under his supervision either to spend regular time with the children in their societies or else to cease being Methodist preachers and go back to their trade.”⁵ There is also a biblical mandate to teach the children the law of God (Deuteronomy 6:7) along with each member’s baptismal vows. With these reasons in mind, it is important to develop methods to teach children. The most common time for a clergy member to teach children in mainline churches is the Confirmation class. The most common time for the congregation to teach the children is Sunday School or the summer program known as Vacation Bible School for children in the community. Parrottsville UMC does not have many children for either Sunday School or the Summer Art Camp which takes the place of Vacation Bible School.

An after-school program like Wonderful Wednesday seeks to take the program of teaching the Christian faith beyond the walls of the local church. The Wesleyan question concerning teaching the children in every place can be taken rather broadly. Like fasting, there is no real prescription for the action even though there is an implicit understanding that it

⁴ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House) paragraph 336.

⁵ Bunge, Marcia J. ed. *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 298.

should be done. It cannot be ignored in spiritual development. The spiritual development of a community requires the spiritual development of the children within that community.

The Wonderful Wednesday program in Parrottsville meets every week the local schools are in session. The program begins around 3:30pm. Some of the “car rider” students arrive around that time. They are asked to either begin their homework or play one of the boardgames. The school buses arrive between 3:40 and 3:45pm. I always made it a point to stand outside when the buses arrived to greet the children. The students were usually excited about being able to attend. The children who get off the bus run to hug me first or straight to the door of the annex building. I followed the students into the building where they were greeted by “Miss Janie” Puckett, the director of the program, who also instructed the students to wash their hands in preparation for the snack meal. Once the snack meal is served, the students eat and then are allowed when finished to either do their homework or play some boardgames. Sometime near the 4:25pm mark, the students are gathered into a circle for the story time. The story is a Bible story with a brief lesson drawn from the story. The students are then invited to share their individual joys or concerns for prayer. The joys of the children range from new places to live, new pets, new siblings, to a family member being released from the hospital or jail. Concerns are then the opposite of the joys. Someone goes to the hospital or jail, a pet dies, or a sibling moves to live with another relative. If a new student is present, this is the time to introduce the new child with everyone else in the program including the adult volunteers. New children often come with friends and are immediately received into the group. The circle time would end with a prayer. At this point chaos ensues if the weather is agreeable. The students who wish to play outdoors prepare to go outside by either getting shoes and coats

on, helping get the various balls, sidewalk chalk, or other outdoor toys, and then line-up at the door. Adult volunteers then walk the students to the park for about thirty-five minutes of outdoor playtime. The parents arrive around 5:30 to pick up the children.

The question now may be asked, how is this program church? There are some interesting considerations here.

The first consideration is that the volunteers in Wonderful Wednesday understand themselves to be working for the students. The approach is how to be friends of the children. This approach entails three important factors. In *Child Poverty* we find this claim: “Friendship in our care for children enhances our ability to respect children as full human beings who have agency and independence. Friendship in our evangelism presents faith to children without either being reductionist or overwhelming. Friendship in mission means that we don’t allow our friends to die of hunger, thirst, or violence.”⁶ Essentially, the three factors are pastoral care, evangelism, and mission.

The thought about how to work for the children continues to unfold when we look again at the question of why the church would do this type of program. Mary Anne Fowlkes gives three reasons. “Because Jesus welcomed children (and) held up a child as an example of how we are to receive the realm (or kingdom) of God (and) because of the vows that the

⁶ Couture, Pamela. *Child Poverty; Love Justice, and Social Responsibility*. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007) 65.

congregation takes at the time of baptism.”⁷ Bishop James Swanson (formerly of Holston Conference) set a call for the churches to serve children in poverty.⁸

I was appointed the pastor to this charge in the summer of 2014. My own views concerning what the mission of Wonderful Wednesday should be grew out of my experience with the program in the first year. The students who attended asked me direct questions. They were concerned about two issues. Why are you taking part in this program? How long will you be here? The latter question had to do with the fact that the two previous pastors only stayed two years each. The students wanted continuity. The former question had to do with the apparent continuity of the volunteers versus the involvement of the pastor. It was with these questions in mind that I settled upon John Wesley’s question concerning teaching the children in every place. Why was I taking part? Because it is part of my work to teach the children.

The lay volunteers in the program were mostly retired teachers and/or grandparents who had a special feeling to work with the children. The lay volunteers were almost entirely female. There were also some supervised high school-aged volunteers doing the “community service” required by Cocke County High School. While these students were not required to go through extensive background checks, they were always all supervised with the elementary-age students as is required by *Safe Sanctuary* standards and policies.

The view of church most prominent among the volunteers was the church as a body of disciples of Jesus. This view was essential because not all the volunteers were formal members

⁷ Williams, Cassandra ed. *Children Among Us: Foundations in Children’s Ministry* (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press 2003) 129-130.

⁸ Jones, Scott J. and Bruce Ough. *The Future of The United Methodist Church: 7 Vision Pathways* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010). Chapter 5.

of Parrottsville United Methodist Church. By formal members, I mean that they did not take the formal vows of membership to either the denomination or the local church. Still, the idea of church as a *committed* body of disciples or Jesus was important to each person's involvement in the after-school ministry. What they did in the program was a part of the overall work of the church.

One of the volunteers, Reba Faye Sane, who is a formal member of Parrottsville United Methodist Church and a retired public-school teacher, would often observe to me that many of the children were "starved to death for love." The phrase first appeared to be a "catch-all" type of comment about the students wanting attention. Further observation demonstrated that certain of the children – mainly children from either impoverished backgrounds or who had one or both parents in either active addiction or in jail – required more attention from the volunteers. The "request" for attention and presence would take the forms of asking more often for help with homework, asking the volunteer to play a game, or merely staking out a place to sit in the circle with an adult volunteer. Reba Faye herself would often have three students sitting around her during the circle story time.

THE PRACTICES OF WONDERFUL WEDNESDAY

Spiritual practice implies an understanding of spiritual life. When children are introduced to spiritual practices, it is assumed that some sort of spiritual life may be developed within children. What then is the spiritual life of children? Bonnie Miller-McLemore has this to say: "Their spirituality takes shape in concrete activities of day to day and the varied contexts

where children and adults live together...”⁹ What she refers to as an “*activity of knowing*” (emphasis in original) is as much about how the spiritual instruction comes into their lives as much as the content of the information.

The issue then comes back to pastoral care for the students especially for students suffering from the stress and anxiety poverty puts into their lives. John Florell argues that children do not think in abstract terms. Rather, they think and act in concrete ways. “They act out their stress in the way they play, the stories they tell, their school behavior, peer relations, and almost every aspect of their lives.”¹⁰ It is important then to pay attention to what children do in order to understand what the situation is that is on their minds. When it comes to the issue of spiritual practice, pastoral leaders must interpret the students and interpret the practices to them so that the students can learn the value of the practice for their lives. Spiritual practice can become especially helpful in learning how to respond to the stresses in which they live. Later, there will be an example of how that worked in a certain instant at school for some of our students in Wonderful Wednesday.

THE SNACK MEAL

The first activity the majority of the students encounter in Wonderful Wednesday is the snack meal. It is a modest meal, as the name implies. The existence of both free breakfast and lunch in the local school system can give one a false impression about meeting the nutritional

⁹ Grab, Wilhelm and Lars Charbonnier, eds. *Secularization Theories, Religious Identity and Practical Theology: Developing International Practical Theology for the 21st Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 229.

¹⁰ Lester, Andrew D., ed. *When Children Suffer: A Sourcebook for Ministry with Children in Crisis* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 161

needs of the students. In some cases, the breakfast and lunch were simply not enough calories for active children. Many children would often go home after school and look for a snack. The students in Wonderful Wednesday were not guaranteed an evening meal at home. One little girl observed to me that the only food in her mother's refrigerator was hotdogs. This child was being taken care of part of the time by her grandparents. Her situation was not as dire as her statement might lead one to believe.

The snack meal changed from week to week. It may be hotdogs one week, pizza another, or mac n cheese another. Occasionally a meal would be prepared by someone outside of the usual volunteers. We attempted to have a main course, fruit, and cookies for dessert. The drink was often a powdered drink or water if the children did not like the flavor of the drink. We avoided soda and potato chips. Our goal was to provide something nutritious that the students would also eat so that they would feel welcomed and cared for in order to be a part of the program.

HOMework HELP

One of the main draws for parents to this program is the offer of homework help to the students. The adult volunteers for Wonderful Wednesday that are retired teachers are very important to this aspect of the ministry. A few parents were adamant about expecting the students to do their homework and to have it completed while attending the program. The few times this did not happen we explained the program to the parents to show that this was not primarily a study time as much as it was a time for healthy interaction. There never was a big problem over this issue.

Homework help allowed the students to work together with a helper. This aspect of the program allowed students to find some sense of acceptance with their school teachers and their peers as the work was being completed. Many times, the virtue of patience was displayed by the adult helper to model for the children. There were times when the student had to explain the teacher's instructions to the adult helper. We found that this relieved some of the student's anxieties about the work their teachers expected. The adult helper modeling a "non-anxious presence" was as important as getting the calculations or appropriate vocabulary on the student's work sheets. Such anxiety reduction proved an important part of the overall ministry of Wonderful Wednesday when circle time came each week.

THE CIRCLE/STORY TIME

Sometimes the noise level produced by thirty or more students makes getting Legos and games put away and bringing everyone into the circle difficult. Eventually, it happens. Every person including adult volunteers take part in the circle time. We begin with a centering statement, "God is good," to which the students reply, "all the time." Then, "And all the time," where students reply, "God is good." This act called the students to attend what would be happening next. Parrottsville United Methodist Church used the same call and response to set aside the time of prayer during worship.

The student who volunteered to read the Psalm then is given the Bible by Miss Janie and reads Psalm 51:10 from the New International Version. "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." The text is used as a goal in spiritual growth. A pure heart and steadfast spirit will be needed to deal with the problems that are and will be presented in

the life of the student. This verse is also printed on the back of the Wonderful Wednesday T-shirts that the United Methodist Women donated to the group.

The story is taken from the scripture. Miss Janie or the Pastor reads the story and offers a lesson based on it. A narrative portion from the scripture is always used. This practice began a few years ago when Janie and I decided we would use stories of Jesus for one year. It was part of an attempt to “be who we are.” A student was beginning to be disruptive during the story time. He was homeschooled. And his family took part in a small Sabbath-observing congregation that forbade eating pork, or celebrating Halloween, Easter, and Christmas. The student talked about Muslims “belonging to the devil.” His repeating the teachings he received at home was disruptive for the other students. Janie and I met to discuss the issue. I argued for being United Methodist in our attitude and teaching.¹¹ To approach our teaching in any other way I believed would be dishonest. If that student or any other student persisted in pushing his congregation’s viewpoint, we would respectfully disagree with him. We would also inform his mother that we would be teaching the stories of Jesus as we understood them. We never had to do that. Eventually, the student decided he did not wish to attend. We were never given a reason for this decision.

Time was allowed after the story for students to ask questions or make points about the story or the lesson drawn from it. The most interesting points made by the students was when the students had watched a video presentation of the story. Watching the stories happened both at home and in the Sunday School class at a student’s home church. Occasionally, the

¹¹ Joyner, F. Belton Jr. *Being Methodist in the Bible Belt: A Theological Survival Guide for Youth, Parents, and Other Confused Methodists* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 16-23.

student would refer to a video that had been viewed during the summer at a local Vacation Bible School. Rarely, did the version of the story viewed contradict in the actions of or the number of characters portrayed in the version of the story as read.

A question that arises here is how the children experience the teaching. Is a video more engaging? Yes. Does it become a matter of observation rather than application? Again, yes. There are often no examples or potential examples applied to the lives of the students. We fail as Richards argues by treating “the Scriptures as information and children as minds.” He continues to argue three important pedagogical points: “1. The Bible is God’s revelation of reality...2. Children are persons...3. Therefore, we can teach the Bible to children...We can find ways to communicate the Word of God meaningfully.”¹² Teaching the story as Holy Scripture in ways that include reading and hearing it is very important for the student.

It is important to tell the stories in ways that can make application to the lives of the children beyond simply demonstrating them to the students. It is a matter of ongoing disciple making. There are two pitfalls that need to be avoided. Namely, that being a disciple of Jesus means being simply converted to a belief or “saved” or that knowing the content of the stories is the primary goal involved. The first is described by reality television star and Christian fundamentalist Phil Robertson where he tells the story of his son Jep describing what it means to be a Christian, which came down to asking Jesus to be your Lord around age thirteen or fourteen and being baptized in the nearby river. This what Phil Robertson calls “preaching the

¹² Richards, Lawrence O. *A Theology of Children’s Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 67.

gospel.”¹³ On the other side is the mere informational issue in Western Europe where children ask their parents why churches have “plus signs” on their steeples.¹⁴ Eventually, information is deemed essential if there is a practical purpose involved. If the Bible is treated as a collection of stories, the stories themselves will be lost. The teachings from Jesus in the gospels and other examples from scripture must be communicated to children in ways that allow them to consider them for how they will choose to live. The two extremes lead to distorted understandings of Christian discipleship. The Wonderful Wednesday leaders chose a method to begin teaching the lessons of the Bible. The leaders wish to enable the children to “hear the Bible story, play with it, hear it again...and discover meaning from it for themselves...”¹⁵

THE PRAYER TIMES

There are two important prayer times in Wonderful Wednesday, the prayer before the snack meal and the prayer that closes the circle time. Karyn Henley says, “When we teach children to pray, we don’t just teach a ritual or one of the Christian disciplines. We actually introduce children to God.”¹⁶

The snack meal prayer is a thanksgiving prayer. The snack meal begins Wonderful Wednesday for most of the students. It is a time to celebrate leaving school and beginning the time for after school. “Be alert to the times in your curriculum or your everyday life when you

¹³ Robertson, Phil with Mark Schlabach. *Happy, Happy, Happy: My Life and Legacy as the Duck Commander* (New York: Howard Books, 2013), 202-203.

¹⁴ De Wall, Franz, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* (New York: Norton, 2013), 221.

¹⁵ Beckwith, Ivy. *Postmodern Children’s Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21st Century* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2004), 137.

¹⁶ Comstock, Judy, ed. *It Worked for Us: Best Practices for Ministry with Children and Families* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 221.

can naturally include a prayer of thanksgiving.”¹⁷ A meal is a common time for giving thanks. The prayer is led by one student or an adult leader if no student volunteers (which is rare). It is a prayer all the students can recite together.¹⁸

The other prayer used is the petition form of prayer. It comes at the end of the story time in the circle. Whoever leads the story time then invites each student to voice a prayer concern or praise. The students will express whatever they wish. The adult volunteers are encouraged to vocalize a joy or a concern in order to pattern the practice for the students involved. The concerns expressed can range from a desire for a family pet’s health to improve to a child’s upcoming doctor’s visit to asking for a sick relative to get better or be released from jail. A joy would be improvements in these areas of concern or thanksgiving for a gift or upcoming birthday celebration. One child expressed thanks for me presiding at her mother’s wedding.

Early in the program when we only had a handful of students, each child would during the time following the sharing of joys and concerns be encouraged to take his or her turn praying either silently or vocalizing their own prayers. When the attendance at the program grew larger this, became a problem. It was a lesson for the leaders when other students expressed that the prayer time “took too long.” Freda Gardner gives a reason for this. “It cannot be stated too often that for children faith is a matter of feelings far longer than many adults would care to think.”¹⁹ Some children desired to pray about every person or situation

¹⁷ Halverson, Delia. *Teaching Prayer in the Classroom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 44.

¹⁸ Halverson, Delia. *How Do Children Grow? Introducing Children to God, Jesus, the Bible, Prayer, Church* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 76.

¹⁹ Allen, Holly Catterton, ed. *Nurturing Children’s Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 39.

they could think of. Some of the other students would grow impatient. It was difficult to remain standing and hold the person's hand next to you. I proposed a change in the format. The students would continue offering joys and concerns. They would then stand in the circle holding one another's hands. An adult volunteer would offer a prayer for the group. This was only to be done for a brief time until the new pattern for intercessory prayer time would take hold in the children's way of thinking about the time. Since then the program has grown to over forty children in attendance on some Wednesdays.

Patterning prayers of petition had an interesting development for the students during school time. The local elementary school devotes a couple of days at the end of the school year to field days. It is a time of outdoor competition and play. During a game of kickball, a student climbed over a fence to get a home run ball when he tore his hand open on the fencing. He was taken to the emergency room by his mother. The boy's younger sister stayed at the school. She was very upset that her brother was injured and bleeding badly. Some of the students who attended Wonderful Wednesday were standing with a teacher who was attempting to console the child. One of the girls said, "We will pray." The others gathered in a circle holding hands with some other students who did not attend Wonderful Wednesday. The girl who suggested the prayer for the student who was hurt, and his younger sister instructed the others on how this would be done. When it came time for a student to take a turn at prayer but did not know what to do, she would suggest something to say in the prayer. The students from Wonderful Wednesday made it clear the teacher was invited (perhaps expected) to participate too. The adults in the after-school program always took part. Why couldn't the teacher as an adult participate? That teacher attended Parrottsville United Methodist Church and related the story

to the congregation during worship the following Sunday morning. The Wonderful Wednesday volunteers were pleasantly surprised and received in the telling of the field day story an affirmation that what we were doing was ultimately important for how the children would approach a crisis in their lives and the community of their fellow students. Needless to say, the story has been repeated more than once in the larger community of Parrottsville.

Play

The play time after circle is important for the children and the adult volunteers. The first reason is that a lot of pent-up energy from the day needs to be expended. The other reason is that the interaction provided is important for the spiritual development of all involved. Bonnie McLemore-Miller claims that in Western Christianity we think of spiritual development happening in quiet solitude, whereas children are active and noisy.²⁰ Play time is a social time. Children learn during such times how to play a physical game such as kickball, whiffle ball, or basketball together. They learn how to settle disputes. Other children learn about sharing playground equipment or sidewalk chalk.

The play time in Wonderful Wednesday begins with most of the students lining up at the door while a few others retrieve the “outside” toys of balls, chalk, and other toys. We then leave for one of two sections of Parrottsville Park. The basketball and tennis courts are available behind the church if the ground is really wet. The park with the picnic pavilions and playground equipment is located a few yards down the main road from the church. We walked the students down the sidewalk with adult volunteers in the front and the back of the “line.” The

²⁰ Grab, 223.

children then have about forty-five minutes of time to pursue any activity within the small park. Clear Creek runs behind the park. Students are not permitted to go down there without two adults present.

Many parents who arrived early would come to the park to pick up their children. A few would simply stay and visit with the volunteers until time to go back to the church. Rarely would a parent decide to take part in some game in which adult volunteers also participate. If no other adult is involved, parents did not volunteer to play. It is difficult to draw a conclusion about whether or not parents play at home with their school-aged children. Such parental interaction would aid in the development of the children. It could be telling if the students with the most behavioral problems get this interaction at home.

HOW THE STUDENTS REACT AND BEHAVE

There have been very few behavior problems with the students at Wonderful Wednesday. There have only been two cases of chronic behavior problems. Both of these situations have been challenges for the adult volunteers. The high school-aged volunteers were told to have little interaction with those two students and to report any problems rather than attempt to deal with them.

A visiting teacher who is a member of the Parrottsville congregation and works at the Parrottsville Elementary School observed the program one day. She told me that the children were rowdy and “do not behave this way at school.” She meant it as a criticism of the how the program was conducted. I decided to make some observations that compared and contrasted

what I knew in a limited sense about the student's behavior at school with their actions at Wonderful Wednesday.

I have already described what happens when students arrive at Wonderful Wednesday. Some were early and began homework or played board games. All students upon arrival placed coats and backpacks on or around the tables provided for this. Some removed their shoes and socks and remained barefoot until either time to go outside for play time or to be taken home. This action struck me as significant. I confirmed my conclusion with Janie Puckett. Removing their shoes was something they did upon arriving home. When arriving at Wonderful Wednesday, these children were making themselves comfortable in their surroundings. When they did this, they were also letting go of the more regimented expectations of the school and the school bus. Of course, Wonderful Wednesday is not the same as being home any more than it is the same as school. It is in the minds of the students an in-between time. Some students recognized the importance of such time in the words they used to describe it. One kindergarten student said at the end of his first year in the program. "Other kids laughed at me because I was dumb and couldn't read. Now I have been to school and Wonderful Wednesday. I am not dumb anymore." Wonderful Wednesday to this child was not merely an extension of his school day. It was offering something more from which he believed he benefited. Another child would hug the adult volunteers and claim each of us was "the nicest person in the world." An older student defended a wrong answer on her homework by claiming "Pastor Don said it was right." The teacher knew me and diplomatically said, "It has been a long time since Pastor Don did this kind of work."

The children tended to regard Wonderful Wednesday as a beneficial time of instruction, physical nourishment, story, prayer, and play. The program was neither school nor home. In many ways it was how they came to think of Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and church. We would about twice a year introduce the children to the church sanctuary where we discussed worship and activities during that time. On few occasions older students would ask us about the meaning of baptism. I would discuss the sacrament with them once I had parental permission to do so. One father remarked, "I trust you to talk to her about it more than I would most other people." One student received baptism two years ago. His family became members and now attend Parrottsville United Methodist Church.

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY REACTIONS

There have been some criticisms of Wonderful Wednesday as a program for children in the area. The most common criticism is that it is "merely babysitting." One example of this complaint was given by a local church member. There are two possible responses here. One is to say that if "babysitting" was being accomplished, it was at least saving working parents the expense of after-school child care. The other is very simple. Congregations need to look around themselves to see their own circumstances.²¹ It is important for a congregation to be engaged in the community. Delloff uses the passage from Jeremiah 29 where the captive Israelites must look at the place where they now find themselves in order to one day return to their homeland. If we "seek the welfare" of the places where we live, then we save ourselves by saving our circumstances. The people living in Parrottsville recognize that importance. As stated above,

²¹ Delloff, Linda-Marie. *Public Offerings: Stories from the Front Lines of Community Ministry* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2002), vii.i

one local pastor claimed it was the best ministry in the community. One parent in discussion with his spouse claimed that what we were doing on Wednesday was very important for their daughter. Her dance and gymnastic classes could be rescheduled. The same approach was taken by a family with regard to their child's music lessons.

Wonderful Wednesday thrives on these positive understandings. The ministry is for the children. And because the school is one of the most popular institutions in the community, the people in Parrottsville and Harned's Chapel United Methodist Churches are generally very supportive of Wonderful Wednesday. The school year of 2017-2018 saw a new initiative to give Bibles to all the students in Wonderful Wednesday. Janie asked me, "Where will we get the money?" My reply, "I don't know yet." We decided we wanted to do this. We made an announcement and Janie went to both congregations on the circuit to give a report on how the program was working to this point in time. Two weeks later two donations came to us.

One family presented us with a number of King James Version "Gift and Award" Bibles published by Thomas Nelson. These copies of the scripture were not exactly what we had in mind. But we decided we would present these Bibles to the families of the children along with each student receiving his or her own copy. The second donation was handed to me as I left the morning service of Harned's Chapel. It was a letter-sized white envelope with the words "Bibles for Wonderful Wednesday" handwritten in blue ink. Inside the envelope I found ten one hundred-dollar bills. An old farmer had given us one thousand dollars to purchase Bibles! We chose to buy two kinds. One was for the reading level of Kindergarten thru third grade. The other kind for the reading levels of fourth-grade and fifth-grade students. The critics who called what we were doing as babysitting saw that for us Wonderful Wednesday is a mission.

The issue of how to accommodate special needs students while not a criticism was always on our minds. The two students with chronic behavior problems presented a special challenge. On the one hand all students needed to feel safe. On the other, all students needed to be welcomed. The two primary barriers to working with children with mental health issues are stigma and anxiety.²² Grcevich argues students learn to avoid other children who exhibit aggressive behavior borne from emotional stresses. He continues to give five other barriers to churches working with persons with mental health issues. The one that applied to both students had to do with executive function, especially emotional self-regulation. The two children (from different families) had a difficult time coping with opposition behaviors from other students. Both took medication to help with emotional self-control. The problem the adult leaders faced was how to maintain composure and compassionately redirect the students when problems arose with them. Often, we were successful. Only once did we call a child's grandparents to pick him up early.²³

Donations to the program have already been mentioned. It seems now is a good time to discuss how Wonderful Wednesday is financed. There is \$250.00 budgeted by Parrottsville United Methodist Church for Wonderful Wednesday. The church annex building has no debt. The utility bills are already written into the budget. Food for the snack meal and teaching materials, pencils, paper, first aid supplies, and games and toys are all paid for by donations. These donations come from individual church members, community members, and mission programs like United Methodist Women. There has been no time there was a shortfall of any

²² Grcevich, Stephen D. *Mental Health and the Church: A Ministry Handbook for Including Children and Adults with ADHD, Anxiety, Mood Disorders, and Other Common Mental Conditions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 54-67.

²³ We never administered any behavioral modification medicines to the children.

needed items. The students did not leave hungry. School supplies were always available. The adult volunteers sometimes made up the differences from their own pockets. Wonderful Wednesday never lacked resources. We were making do with what we had and allowed for all the possible good to come from it.²⁴ In the book *Ministry in Hard Times*, one chapter is titled “Budget Items You Always Increase in Hard Times: Worship and Children’s Ministry.” The authors give clear reasons for expanding children’s ministries when money is tight, and times are hard. “Children’s ministry continues to be one of the two key ministries in growing churches.”²⁵ Parents need to know that their children will be in a safe environment. “The changing family structures mean that parents take less responsibility for their children and their spiritual development.”²⁶ So, then the church should “make sure you put as much time, energy, and *money*” into this area of ministry (emphasis in the original).²⁷

It is possible that one day Wonderful Wednesday will become a line item in the congregational budget. If that comes about, an advisory board for Wonderful Wednesday is recommended to give account of how funds are expended.

WHAT IS THE PREVAILING THEORY THAT FITS THIS MINISTRY?

Bowdon’s “model 132” offers a brief description of how a rural church can reach unchurched children.²⁸ This program model includes recreation, fellowship and meal, and a music program with no cost to the children or families. Wonderful Wednesday follows the same

²⁴ See Rosario Ricardo’s helpful book *Funding Ministry with Five Loaves and Two Fish*, Abingdon Press, 2016.

²⁵ Easum, Bill and Bill Tenny Brittan, *Ministry in Hard Times* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 68.

²⁶ Ibid. 69.

²⁷ Ibid. 70.

²⁸ Bowdon, Boyce. *The Child Friendly Church: 150 Models of Ministry with Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 114-15.

pattern except for purchasing a van to transport the students to church. Parrottsville United Methodist Church still has a light children's Sunday School attendance. Even with that information the Lay Leader of the Parrottsville Church has said, "Don't tell us we don't have a children's ministry." His remark had to do with the low numbers reported for Sunday School on the Year End Reports turned in every January to Holston Annual Conference.

After-school programs can be administered by many different civic institutions. There is a long history of these efforts and of people within the larger community trying to put them in place." The work has historically been "to help children feel valued and recognized, to provide an alternative to a 'negative identity.'"²⁹ An after-school program does not necessarily need to be done by a church or other religious institution.

Churches that do provide after-school programs offer a distinctive approach. Scripture and Christian traditions including making disciples are that approach. The Manna After School program in Fort Worth puts it the following way. It includes within its multiple goals one that allows the program "to help students develop spiritually by addressing needs for spiritual growth through providing opportunities for children to assist others by participating in community service events and by leaders modeling and teaching positive character traits from a Christian foundation."³⁰

The work of the after-school program must include recognition of changes within a community. John Fuder argues that those doing a ministry for the larger community should

²⁹ Halpern, Robert. "A Different Kind of Child Development Institution: The History of After School Programs for Low-Income Children." *Teachers College Record* 2002, 199.

³⁰ Atkinson, Margie. "Manna After School Program, Bread of Life, Fort Worth, TX," *Family Ministry*, Winter 2000, 4-5.

“exegete” that is interpret the surrounding community by applying ethnographic approaches to discovering the needs within it. He makes heavy use of the experience of evangelist Dwight L. Moody to justify his idea.³¹ Likewise, Glen Kehrein, in his discussion of the suburbanization of poverty, points out that the twenty-seven evangelical churches on Chicago’s west side community of Austin did not survive in place when the community changed. “Did it make any difference whatsoever that Christians lived in those communities? Was their perspective any different from that of their neighbors? Were they hearing sermons that would bring Christ’s perspective?” None of the congregations survived the racial change in the community.³²

The town of Parrottsville is changing in many ways demographically. How does the after-school program address that change? It does so through the school. The church partners with the local elementary school to help the students from the school.³³ Helping the families of the students is equally important. One local family experienced a double tragedy in the accidental shooting death of a child and the child’s grandfather dying in an automobile accident while trying to get to the hospital. The school and the local churches pulled together to help the family with funeral expenses. Another family lost a child during an asthma attack. The family was helped by the church and school leaders partnering together to help pay funeral expenses. If the church can do these things, the church can work with the local elementary school to help children and families while they live.

³¹ Fuder, John and Noel Castellanos, gen. eds. *A Heart for the Community* (Chicago, Moody Bible Institute, 2009), 68.

³² Ibid. 309.

³³ A good resource guide is *The Mission-Minded Guide to Church and School Partnerships* by Jake McGlothlin.

These partnerships can take many forms. Weekend food backpacks, providing school supplies at the beginning of the school year, partnering with a teacher and classroom to provide supplies for the classroom, and after-school programs are all done by the Harned's Chapel and Parrottsville charge. These ministries also opened the door for religious clubs in the school to invite the pastor to take part in their club meetings.

What the people in the churches are doing has been discussed. We may now ask how God is at work in Wonderful Wednesday. Has any room been left where God can work? Deuteronomy chapter six is the primary biblical text taken for this discussion. The section often referred to as the *shema* reads, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise" (NRSV). The interesting point for this writing is the command to recite the words of the law to the children. The LXX specifically states "sons." However, John Wesley argued for educating all children. "This commandment to love God is so important to salvation that, for Wesley, parents must teach it to their children frequently, diligently, and earnestly by recitation and oral, visual, and written means so that it pierces their heart."³⁴ More than merely this command to recite the law, the text continues in verses twenty to twenty-four to say,

When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?" then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to

³⁴ Green, Joel B. and William Willimon. *The Wesley Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 225.

give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, to keep us alive, as is now the case.”

The Deuteronomist ties observing the commandments of the law to the story of redemption from Egypt. This is an important point for educating children in Christian discipleship. The narrative sets the foundation for observing the teachings. It was for this reason we devoted an entire school year to stories about Jesus in the circle time of Wonderful Wednesday.

There are also the questions the students will raise from time to time. A child’s question can often catch adult volunteers off their guard (including pastors). The students want and expect direct answers. Sometimes they are hard to give. However, the text of Deuteronomy 6 assumes the child will ask. Elizabeth Caldwell states, “If we encourage their questions and curiosities about God and the world, we help them with a growing sense of autonomy. And the opposite happens if we refuse to allow their questions that are the foundation for their growing sense of a healthy self.”³⁵

Taking this closer look at the text of Deuteronomy allows us to develop an understanding of how God works within the program. We teach the children to love God. We teach the children that God is love and thereby is involved in everything we had the children doing in Wonderful Wednesday. God is present in the snack meal, working on homework with mentors practicing loving-kindness, during the time to play games, and in the care demonstrated by each other and the adults.

³⁵ Caldwell, Elizabeth F., *Making a Home for Faith: Nurturing the Spiritual Life of your Children* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press), 50-51.

God is not dependent on what we do for the children or what the students do for each other. The Holy Spirit inspires the students in many ways. The incident at the field day is one such time. The children offered prayer as a means of comforting another student who was very distraught. Where did the students get the idea of praying to comfort as opposed to offering a hug or words of encouragement? Why did the students from Wonderful Wednesday choose to make a connection to the divine in prayer?

God has been working through everything being done in such a way that the students learned where to turn for helping them help others. The narratives from the gospels do not often show prayer as a beginning to point to comfort. The story of the ten lepers show one Samaritan returning to give thanks after the healing. However, it does show the ten coming to Jesus asking for healing (Luke 17:11-19). Did the students pick up on this without an explanation of the nature of the Triune God? Did they assume that since Jesus as God is eternal that they could call now for help? It is difficult to pinpoint why. But it is not difficult to realize that without the teaching and demonstrating a practice of prayer, the students would not have chosen that method of comforting a classmate.

What then is church in the minds of these students? On the one level it is a place. The students arrive at the church for Wonderful Wednesday. The program happens at the church. It is not like a Sunday morning worship time. It is as one child said very much like Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. Wonderful Wednesday is a time where more about church, God, and Christian living is learned.

Viewed at another level, church is Pastor, Miss Janie, Reba Faye, Becky, and Miss Kathy. Church is the people they count on to be present every Wednesday afternoon. These people are mentors, cooks, servers, people to play games with, people to ask for help, and people who maintain the activities each week. When someone is missing, there is concern from the students. And that missing person is often remembered during the prayer time.

The third level is church is the other children they see. Students on different grade levels are present. Siblings are present. Classmates are present. And as they get older, boyfriends and girlfriends are present. These levels are all concrete in the minds of the children and are intertwined. It is difficult for them to separate the differing levels because there is a constant interaction of all at once.

The needs of each child are also present and can be safely voiced. The need will be for many different things in their lives. Perhaps a loved adult in their life is ill or in jail or trying to get off drugs. Maybe the home does not have enough food. Or perhaps the child is afraid from something in the school, community, or home. Being an impoverished area and impoverished people, there is also a lack of stability concerning where the family (or just the children) might be living. Will the family move in the summer? There is little security among their friends. Will any of my friends move soon? What happens when such persons are removed or there is a threat of them being removed from their lives? These questions have often carried over between generations in rural Appalachia. J. D. Vance makes this abundantly clear in his book

Hillbilly Elegy. The changing of his own name demonstrates this kind of insecurity and anxiety involved.³⁶

The last level of consideration is do the children take church with them when they leave Wonderful Wednesday? Once a student has finished fifth grade, we send a letter home thanking parents or guardians for allowing us to be part of the children's lives. We explain that the program is meant for students from kindergarten through the fifth grade. We ask that older children not to be sent the next year. The decision to do this was difficult. The adult volunteers love working with the children. We recognized that many churches begin their youth groups in the sixth grade. Often, this is the age confirmation classes begin. There are different developmental issues between middle school-aged children and elementary-aged children. We recognized that we were not equipped to manage all the issues involved. Therefore, we made Wonderful Wednesday for elementary school-aged students.³⁷ Sometimes the departing fifth grade students ask if they can return next year to be helpers. Indeed, some of them are very mature for their age and likely would be an asset to the program. We reply that we allow high school students to help so that they may receive community service hours with Cocke County High School.

Many times, these middle school-aged former Wonderful Wednesday students assume leadership roles in school based religious clubs such as Primary Focus at Parrottsville school. I have attended some functions of that program such as "meet at the flagpole" or one of their

³⁶ Vance, J. D. *Hillbilly Elegy* (New York, HarperCollins, 2016), 61-63.

³⁷ When we provide school supplies at the beginning of the year, it is for all school-aged students including high school students.

weekly gatherings. If I lead the function, I call out to the Wonderful Wednesday alumni and ask if they remember, "God is good." They shout. "All the time!" I catch myself smiling and say, "And all the time?" They reply, "God is good."

CONCLUSION

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

The adult volunteers for Wonderful Wednesday tend to be retired people. As they get older, there needs to be trained replacements for them. A couple of newly retired teachers are beginning to step up. As one said to me, "I still need my kid fix." That is the first problem Wonderful Wednesday faces in the future.

Wonderful Wednesday has also reached a critical mass in attendance. Without a larger space and more adult volunteers, the program is unlikely to have attendance higher than fifty students.

The next issue is what can be done about the students who become too old for the program while they and their families need a continued connection. Could Wonderful Wednesday expand to "youth group" age pre-teens and teenagers? I envision that becoming a separate group with only adult volunteers. When would that program meet and where?

The next question is the small amount budgeted for the program. The present model is unsustainable. Once the church adopted a Safe Sanctuaries policy, the program became eligible for a few grants from the Holston Conference Change for Children program. Unfortunately, those grants cannot be relied upon every year. There are many programs for children in Holston

Conference. The apparent success of Wonderful Wednesday has encouraged other small rural United Methodist churches to begin weekly outreach programs to the children of their communities.

Finally, further study is merited concerning the long-term effectiveness of the program. How many of these students will become adult followers of Christ? Will they attend churches? Will they participate in their communities as Christian leaders? And will they seek out programs like Wonderful Wednesday for their own children?

Wonderful Wednesday at Parrottsville United Methodist Church is now in its seventh year. It continues to adapt and change in order to fulfill its mission to the children of Parrottsville to provide a space for Christian care and growth for all children.

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