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Health Incarnate:  
Growing a Healthier Community through Youth Ministry in Greene County, Georgia

By

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Doctor of Ministry

Candler School of Theology

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## **Abstract**

Health Incarnate:  
Growing a Healthier Community through Youth Ministry in Greene County, Georgia  
By Avis Evelyn Williams

The Health Incarnate Project engages young people in partnership with churches, schools, health care providers, individuals, and community groups to build healthier communities in Greene County, Georgia. The Health Incarnate Project addresses the crisis of food insecurity and lack of access to affordable health care by engaging the entire community. Community transformation in this project may decrease the dire condition of hunger that is present in this traditionally underserved community by introducing classroom and community gardens. Youth ministry is an opportunity for youth to be co-leaders in this project. The youth are students at Greensboro Elementary School in Greensboro, Georgia. The school founded a garden club in 2017 to assist in shifting the thinking of the Greene County community towards the attitude of a healthier community. A healthy church partnership works to meet the needs of the entire community in an equitable and just manner. Health Incarnate points to Christ's presence in community in biblical reflection as a model and one of the guiding forces behind communal practices. Jesus spent times in conversation and fellowship with persons in community. The project demonstrates how food and faith are vital ingredients for engaging the Greensboro Elementary School community. This is a youth-led movement that is bringing sectors of the gated and non-gated community together to transform a poverty-stricken community into a healthier one. The ministry of this project encourages community members to come together for the good of the body, regardless of socioeconomic status. The partnership of the garden club and the faith community, along with the local hospital, clinic, and some physicians, will be hosting quarterly community health fairs. The project involves seeds and planting, both ideas of transformation, into physical soil. Local pastors and church leaders are working together to imitate the work of God through Jesus Christ in community. The efforts of Health Incarnate over time will suggest a decrease in health disparities as we remain vigilant in our project efforts.

Health Incarnate:  
Growing a Healthier Community through Youth Ministry in Greene County, Georgia

By

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A Final Project submitted to the Faculty of the  
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Health Incarnate Project engages young people in partnership with schools, health care providers, individuals, churches, and community groups to build healthier communities in Greene County, Georgia. I was introduced to Greene County, Georgia, as Pastor of Community Transformation for the Lake Oconee Community Church (LOCC). The church is located within a gated community; the congregation is affluent and primarily white American. The initial charge for my position in 2007 was to help the members of the church realize their desire to positively affect the community outside their gates and that they might see God's hand move in transforming the community.

In 2010, I started the Youth Alliance, initially called the Youth Academy, as a summer program offering cultural, educational, and historical enrichment for youth ages six to twelve. The high school workers were funded by the Federal Workforce Opportunity Investment Act, the Greene County School System provided breakfast, lunch, and transportation for the students. The initial program site was held at the Greensboro Housing Authority Afterschool Building and after two years there, moved to classrooms in the Greensboro Elementary School. Lake Oconee Community Church provided the funding for the site managers, program supplies, and field trips. The church also managed daily volunteer program volunteers that shared their careers with the students. The Youth Alliance continued until 2017.

I started the Health Incarnate Project in 2017 as a partnership of community groups working to confront some of the challenges faced by poverty-stricken communities in Greene County. Educational Consultant Ruby Payne reports, "There are many realities in generational poverty that impact children: gangs, inadequate health and dental care, substandard housing, greater environmental pollution, drugs etc."<sup>1</sup> In this, the richest country on earth today, all citizens do not have equal access to healthcare or food. There are children dying unnecessarily

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<sup>1</sup> Ruby K. Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, TX: Aha! Process, 1996), 15.

on the cross of poverty, injustice, and inequality. The Health Incarnate Project aims to change these statistics and has started this work with the mobilization of community partnerships.

Healthy food is not readily accessible to persons in poverty. People in poverty face barriers that many people are not aware of. Hidden rules challenge the poor in their ability to live and thrive when they are being overshadowed by those in power. Educational consultant Ruby Payne writes that “hidden rules are about the salient, unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that this individual does or does not fit.”<sup>2</sup> Hidden rules keep those in poverty from necessary positions at the table. They are unable to discuss their walk toward liberation and freedom and are kept from being able to question those in power. Block writes that “the hidden agenda...is to maintain dominance and to be right.”<sup>3</sup> Communal and equitable participation eliminates hidden rules. Proper support systems will aid in combatting and overcoming these hidden rules that exist in the greater Greene County community. The first steps to reducing or eliminating hidden rules started with communal conversations.

The Health Incarnate Project addresses the crisis of food insecurity and lack of access to affordable health care by engaging the entire community. Many communities suffer from food insecurity, and the lack of access to food may cause these communities to be labeled “food deserts.” The late Sen. George McGovern wrote about the effects of hunger on children. He noted that “academic performance, enjoyment of learning, athletic ability, and overall health improve dramatically when empty stomachs are filled with nutritious meals.”<sup>4</sup> The physical decline of a person’s health occurs at a much faster rate in underserved communities than in more affluent communities. Healthy, affordable, grocery stores are rare in poor neighborhoods.

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<sup>2</sup> Payne, *Framework for Understanding Poverty*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2008), 105.

<sup>4</sup> George McGovern, Bob Dole, and Donald E. Messer, *Ending Hunger Now: A Challenge to Persons of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 30.

Schools in underserved communities have less money for healthy foods. It is harder for children to be transported to the doctor in most rural communities. Community transformation in this project may decrease the dire condition of hunger that is present in the community by introducing classroom and community gardens. It will also nourish the minds of the children as they become active agents of community health transformation for themselves and their families.

### **Community Demographics**

The Greensboro Elementary School Community is located within a predominantly black, underserved community in Greensboro, Georgia. There are no full-service grocery stores or supermarkets in the Greensboro Elementary School neighborhood. Many families shop at the local convenience stores for their families' needs, where prices are higher and fresh foods, especially vegetables, are not readily available. Often, the drive is fifteen to twenty miles to shop at a full-service grocery store to purchase fresh bread, milk, and vegetables. The price of gas at local convenience stores averages twenty to forty cents higher per gallon in underserved neighborhoods than in the gated community neighborhood where the fresh food grocery store is located. Targie Folds, Executive Director of the Greene County Family Connection Partnership, reports shared that 100% of the student population at Greensboro Elementary School eat breakfast and lunch at no cost.<sup>5</sup> Many of these students live in the three sets of public housing apartments, two sets of subsidized housing apartments, and many rental houses within a one-mile radius of Greensboro Elementary School.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Targie Folds, interview by author, Greensboro, February 21, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Targie Folds, interview by author, Greensboro, March 6, 2018.

The TenderCare Center is the local federally qualified health center in Greene County.<sup>7</sup> The campus has a medical and dental clinic and a daycare center with a pre-kindergarten class. I serve as chair of TenderCare’s board of directors. Ninety percent of the Greensboro Elementary School children receive healthcare at TenderCare. Children in the greater Greensboro Elementary School community are suffering from food insecurity that adversely affects their health. TenderCare CEO Lisa Brown reports that “the children in the project’s target area have different medical and dental conditions than children who live in more affluent areas.”<sup>8</sup> These conditions include tooth decay, multiple cavities, and gum disease. Many of these conditions are caused by families being under- or uninsured and not having access to preventative medical care.<sup>9</sup>

TenderCare serves a total of 1,707 children, aged seventeen and under, in its medical and dental clinics. A few children have insurance coverage; the majority have little or no insurance. One hundred fifty-four of the children are covered by Medicaid, and eleven hundred seventy-one are uninsured.<sup>10</sup> TenderCare reports through data from the Annie Casey KIDS COUNT Data Center that “the trajectories of children and youth are shaped by the resources and relationships that surround them.”<sup>11</sup> The number of resources and quality relationships may be limited in traditionally underserved communities. The Health Incarnate Project, through a collaboration of resources—spiritual, fiscal, and physical—has started a program that teaches the importance of healthy living to children at the TenderCare Center and at the Greensboro Elementary School, with plans to implement this teaching program at community events also.

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Brown, email to author, Greensboro, March 9, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Brown, interview by author, Greensboro, January 8, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Brown, email to author, March 10, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



## Youth and Community Partners

The Health Incarnate Project makes the claim that youth are integral parts of community transformation. However well-intentioned, many community efforts that focus on adults often have led to outcomes that eventually prove more cosmetic than profound. On the other hand, I believe that approaching the adult community through children can lead to transformative changes. Health Incarnate encouraged youth participation and leadership as part of the community organizing effort. There is work for all persons at the community table of involvement, especially the young people. The project is not limited to youth or adults but is focused instead on youth and adults working together to envision and grow a healthier future.

Working collaboratively with adult volunteers, young people can make positive contributions that will affect their families and their neighborhoods in rural Greene County. Community activists John Kretzmann and John McKnight note, “If their dreams are viewed as assets, they can at any given moment become partners in creating a better future for everyone.”<sup>12</sup> Peter Block claims that “youth are a unifying force in community.”<sup>13</sup> Youth Ministry is an opportunity for the entire community to get involved. As children become involved, parents and guardians are encouraged to take part.

Healthy communities are grown with intentionality by inviting cross sections to take part in conversations, meetings, and the mapping of local resources. The youth in the Health Incarnate Program learned how to conduct meetings to generate ideas for a community action plan for their neighborhoods. The Health Incarnate Project aims to achieve its goal by working in partnership with: Greensboro Elementary School (GES) and its garden club; Joseph Nesbitt, agricultural teacher at Greene County High School; the Greene County Sheriff’s Department; a

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<sup>12</sup> John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing A Community’s Assets* (Chicago, ACTA Publications, 1993), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Block, *Community*, 165.

group of Greensboro Elementary School parents; Lisa Brown and the TenderCare Clinic; the Greensboro Public Library; St. Mary's Good Samaritan Hospital; Jonathan Lamar, a local farmer; Rev. Peter White, youth minister; Targie Folds, Executive Director of the Greene County Family Connection Partnership and Interim Food Services Director for Greene County Schools; Robert Motley, Executive Director of the Greensboro Housing Authority; Lake Oconee Community Church; and Greensboro Elementary School principal, Dr. Jacqueline Jackson.

The Health Incarnate Project brought together members of the affluent, gated community with the traditionally underserved Greensboro Elementary School community in a partnership to enable growth from the inside out, as we learn what it means to be in communion with each other. The project members are community architects and engineers, and the youth are the junior scientists who aid in planning and building the healthier communities they want to see. We must work with our community partners to see problems as ones that need to be addressed as a team. Our thinking must undergo a major shift. Emory University's Dean of Public Health, Dr. James W. Curran noted that "while examples of effective partnerships are very common, we have lacked a conceptual map to help public health and religious leaders understand their common values and shared intelligence that should so effectively serve their communities."<sup>14</sup>

Greene County communities are divided among socioeconomic lines and by race. Greene County residents who were not accustomed to interacting with each other, from the wealthy and not so wealthy Greene County communities, were invited for initial discussions on how to grow the community. The two groups started working together on bridging the gap between them; the youth were the common denominator. The entire community must work together as a fluid unit by caring for and respecting all members—if it is to grow into a healthier

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<sup>14</sup> Gary R. Gunderson and James R. Cochrane, *Religion and the Health of the Public: Shifting the Paradigm* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), xviii.

place for people to live. There are enough physical, communal, and fiscal resources in Greene County, Georgia, to do the collaborative work necessary to achieve the desired results of the Health Incarnate Project.

### **Greensboro Elementary School Garden Club**

The Greensboro Elementary School garden club was founded in 2017 to assist in shifting the thinking of the Greene County community towards the attitude of a healthier community. The club members are eight fourth and fifth grade students. The GES garden club meets monthly with community volunteers at the school and the public library. The meeting attendees use library resources such as documentaries and videos as they plan their garden projects. Greensboro Elementary School principal, Dr. Jacqueline Jackson, fully supported the students in their desire to create the club, and she welcomed the idea of inviting community members to work with the students through the Health Incarnate Project.

The parents of the members of the Greensboro Elementary School garden club were invited to participate in focus groups to talk about the aims of the club. Parents committed to the project and worked with the children to distribute the club information to family members via word of mouth and social media. We needed to build trust and a sense of belonging between the garden club and community members before others were invited to join us. McKnight and Block write that “a community forms when people have enough trust that they can combine their properties and capacities into gifts.”<sup>15</sup> Conversations at meetings with the students and community persons are building capacity. Each club member feels that he or she belongs to that community and trusts that their gift of conversation is welcomed and

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<sup>15</sup> John McKnight and Peter Block, *The Abundant Community* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2012), 79.

appreciated. McKnight and Block assert that “the capacities of an abundant community are kindness, generosity, cooperation, forgiveness, and the acceptance of fallibility and mystery. All come from within and are part of nature.”<sup>16</sup> The group has grown into a cohesive one, and the members are excited that other students and adults have joined the group.

The students started their inquiries on campus. They mapped the school building for assets relating to food, nutrition, and healthy bodies. They conducted a silent walking tour of the school, making notes of pictures and messages on the wall. They cataloged what they saw as it related to food, nutrition, and health. The students reported their findings in meetings with their club advisor. They noted that while their textbooks showed healthy foods and discussed the importance of nutrition, more visible signs of healthy eating were needed on the hallway and cafeteria walls of the school. They observed the cafeteria worker giving students choices about foods for breakfast and lunch, but they also noted that students were not offered many fresh vegetables. The students commented that vegetables were healthy for one’s body, but they also said that they didn’t like them very much. As a way of modeling healthy eating, for our first three meetings, I brought apples and bananas for snacks and water for our beverage. Coupled with health literacy activities, an increased focus on healthy food choices at the school should help encourage support of the garden club and participation in the club members’ efforts to create a healthier community.

The youth have taken seriously the task of transmitting information to their school community about health, wellness, and nutrition. This is a youth-led movement that is bringing sectors of the community together to transform a poverty-stricken community into a healthier one. Joseph Brown, a fifth grade Greensboro Elementary School student shared that “a healthy

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<sup>16</sup> McKnight and Block, *Abundant Community*, 84.

community includes healthy habits.”<sup>17</sup> Joseph’s classmate, “Quinasia Daniel stated that “we need to have the right seeds and soil to grow something healthy.”<sup>18</sup> The garden club students returned to their classrooms and gave reports about the meetings, and they have spoken with the school administration about their desire to grow a healthier community. The students also think that health education should be taught as a part of their school curriculum. They do not want their friends or any young person to suffer or die from a sickness possibly caused by lack of social or physical resources.

The Health Incarnate Project involves seeds and planting, both ideas of transformation, into physical soil. Youth in this traditionally underserved community will be empowered to do the scientific work of classification and analysis. Anthropologist Mark Auslander believes that youth “need to do this to study the current causes of environmental, ecological, and public health crisis, and to help develop strategies to remediate those crises of environmental health.”<sup>19</sup> The students believe that more gardens will improve their environment and impact the health crises they see many persons experience.

The Greensboro Elementary School’s first three gardening projects involved growing tomatoes, kale, and turnips, in pots. The group started with tomatoes. An LOCC volunteer, who was also a master gardener, taught the students about growth charts and the proper nutrition and care for the tomato plants. Students took care of their own plants. When the tomatoes were ripe, the students took them home and showed them to their families and then ate them. Not all tomatoes grew at the same rate or ended up the same size, but there was one tomato per student. Our subsequent group discussion and evaluation of the success of the project centered around the students’ experience during the process of growing, harvesting, and eating the tomatoes.

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Brown, interview with author, Greensboro, September 8, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Quinasia Daniel, interview with author, Greensboro, October 20, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Auslander, email to author, January 21, 2018.

The Health Incarnate Project is working to ensure the community will become more enlightened with the possibility of shared resources and the knowledge of how to plant, grow, and harvest their own food. The students wanted to talk more about gardening and community ministry and how working together they could make a difference. They asked the question: “Why are children in rural communities of poverty not as healthy as others who live in wealthier ones?” The Health Incarnate Project is tackling the issue by teaching students to act as junior scientists and lab technicians using the scientific method. The first step in the method is to ask questions. The youth asked questions about the health of their community and its residents.

### **The Theological Claim**

Dr. James Cone, in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, writes that “Jesus’ life and teachings are important for the black community to understand his meaning, especially in seeing him in complete solidarity with the oppressed.”<sup>20</sup> Both Jesus’ ministry and liberation theologians express concern for the oppressed. They also teach and emphasize that the oppressed are to be liberated through works of ministry. When bodies are healthy, minds and spirits are liberated from the oppression of poverty and lack of access. The basis of the Health Incarnate Project starts with Cone’s assertion but expands beyond the black community to work with all oppressed people in the community, regardless of race.

Liberation theology can uplift the poor in rural communities by organizing local resources to improve the physical and spiritual health of children, freeing them from many of the diseases caused by poverty and food insecurity. Pastors must be able to lead congregations, groups, or individuals to act to minimize, and if possible, prevent crises that harm their communities. Disciples of Christ are encouraged to follow Jesus’ example and be active

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<sup>20</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 25-26.

participants in the everyday life of the community. Mary McClintock Fulkerson tells us that “all are invited to participate in the freedom that characterizes God’s Kingdom, where truly seeing is recognizing Jesus and partaking of the bread of Life, where entering the Kingdom of hospitality compels us to feed the hungry and do justice.”<sup>21</sup> The Health Incarnate Project is a way to model community involvement with one’s neighbors, as Jesus encouraged being in ministry with neighbors. Jesus encouraged youth being present as he ministered and taught within the community. Jesus was concerned with liberating the poor and professed his love for all. “No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation.”<sup>22</sup> The Health Incarnate Project is a grass roots effort that empowers youth while also making sure that we involve a cross-section of the community to work towards the common goal of creating a healthier place for children to grow up.

A healthy church works to meet the needs of the entire community in an equitable and just manner. Kretzmann and McKnight help us understand that “religious leaders often provide the community a visionary framework for the development of programs promoting greater social and economic justice.”<sup>23</sup> The Health Incarnate Project is an opportunity to point to Christ’s presence in community in biblical reflection as a model of the guiding force behind communal practices. Jesus spent time in conversation and fellowship with persons in community. The Health Incarnate Project demonstrates how food and faith are vital ingredients for engaging the Greensboro Elementary School community.

### **Pastoral Role**

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<sup>21</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 119.

<sup>22</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1968), 78.

<sup>23</sup> Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities*, 144.

As pastors and church leaders, we must imitate and mirror the work of God through Christ Jesus to bring about healthier bodies and healthier communities. Ministry and community leaders must lead these efforts if walls of lack are to be torn down. The good news of the Gospel is acknowledged, celebrated, and lived out in community. Theologian Samuel Wells states that “it is a miracle of grace that God meets our scarcity through the abundance we discover in those apparently more exposed to scarcity than ourselves.”<sup>24</sup> Grace is the gift from God that keeps on giving as we can receive from people we thought we could only help. All members of the body need each other to be a healthy body.

The ministry of the Health Incarnate Project encourages community members, regardless of socioeconomic status, to come together for the good of the body. Wells further helps understand that “poverty is not fundamentally about the absence of money, or about the lack of conventional forms of power. It is about the impoverishment, or the perversion of relationship.”<sup>25</sup> Jesus Christ, member of the Triune God, was the one member of the Trinity who had a body because of the Incarnation. Jesus experienced human vulnerability, illness and suffering, political and social injustice, and oppression.

Health Incarnate promotes community as faith leaders work with youth and other community stakeholders. God gives us resources to live out our faith. Hawkins writes that “the tool kit needed to live in communion with God and others can be accessed through the concrete practices of actual spiritual communities.”<sup>26</sup> Pastors and community leaders in the Health Incarnate Project are committed to mobilizing the community to transform. The Ministers Union is putting together a map and resource booklet to pair community members with the nearest

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<sup>24</sup> Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 28.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>26</sup> Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community*, 28.



church congregations. The booklet will include the contact names, addresses, webpages, and phone numbers of the churches.

Rev. Peter White leads bi-monthly focus groups at local churches to discuss health, nutrition, and wellness with GES garden club members and other youth. Block writes that “community building requires a concept of the leader as one who creates experiences for others that in themselves are examples of our desired future.”<sup>27</sup> The garden club members discussed the possibilities of church youth groups merging with adults to imagine how we can construct a healthier community through education and gardening.

Conversations between communities of lack and wealth are happening during Rev. White’s meetings. Block helps us understand the urgent need when he says, “The way to a different future is to build relatedness between these groups. Beneath their social positions is a common concern for the wellbeing of the city.”<sup>28</sup> The premise of the Health Incarnate Project hinges upon the faith community ensuring that the right conversations about community building are taking place. Gunderson and Cochrane write that “the first step toward that new normal is the vision, even in broad outlines, of the possibility of something new emerging in the boundary zones that otherwise block imagination and separate people.”<sup>29</sup> There has not previously been a healthy community initiative and garden project at the Greensboro Elementary School.

Kretzmann and McKnight help us understand that “religious leaders often provide the community a visionary framework for the development of programs promoting greater social and economic justice.”<sup>30</sup> The Youth Alliance met with the faith community and joined the community resource directory which is to be published in Summer 2018. The youth felt that the

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<sup>27</sup> Block, *Community*, 86.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Kretzmann and McKnight, *Building Communities*, 144.

community's ill health was related to socioeconomic conditions. Generative themes of illness and poverty came out of initial group discussions. The students met with the local Ministers Union, and the ministers have begun advocating monthly health fairs at local churches. The first fair was held on April 14, 2018, at a local church with representatives from the Health Incarnate Project, St. Mary's Good Samaritan Hospital, the Greene County Sheriff's Department, and TenderCare present. There were free screenings for blood pressure and blood sugar with a session for the youth on nutrition, safety, health, and the relationship to the spiritual body. The youth served as ushers and technology consultants.

The faith community felt this partnership was necessary to confront the negative health conditions facing many of their community members. Gary Gunderson and James Cochrane write that "the intersection between faith and health is properly understood not only as a reflection of the current condition of any one person, but also of their longer journey of health, where others are always present."<sup>31</sup> The Health Incarnate Project suggests that the partnership of the faith community and other community groups, first in discussion, then working together on specific projects, will move them towards transformation. We will hold quarterly health fairs at local churches and community buildings going forward.

### **Health Literacy**

Education is a key component of the Health Incarnate Project. Educational consultant Ruby K. Payne writes, "Community development is becoming more imperative because of the relationship between the intellectual capital in the community and its economic well-being."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Gunderson and Cochrane, *Religion and the Health of the Public*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Payne, *Understanding Poverty*, 80.

The Health Incarnate Project aims to engage this intellectual capital, the talents of the citizenry, and put them into action for the benefit of the whole community's healthier pathway.

Intellectual capital presents essential practices to move the oppressed children of the community and their families from constant pain, suffering, lack, distress, and anguish, to a healthier condition. The Health Incarnate Project promotes health literacy as a spiritual imperative with the goal of mitigating health disparities within the small, rural, economically, disadvantaged communities in the county.

A health literacy program provides some of the necessary community building blocks that lead to a healthier community. Unhealthy children grow into unhealthy adults unless there are successful measures of intervention. Many times, these children don't grow up at all and succumb to disease at young ages. The East Georgia Cancer Coalition reported in 2015 that the mortality rates for African Americans in Greene County with breast, lung, colon, and prostate cancers are the highest in the region and among the highest in Georgia.<sup>33</sup> The project's intent is to begin to decrease these numbers as we focus on healthier living to produce healthier bodies.

The students also met with the retired teachers group to talk about community food insecurity and health statistics. This type of meeting and discussion must become common practice for community transformation to take place and be effective in achieving the goal of equal access to healthy food. The teachers have now made the topic of health a part of their bi-monthly meeting agenda.

The community partnership and the Greensboro Elementary School garden club will begin a seasonal growing project in April 2018 to provide vegetables for the children's families and for the school cafeteria. The club programs and progress will post regular project updates and news on the Greensboro Elementary School and Greene County Schools web page. There is

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<sup>33</sup> Gene Vassy, interview with author, Greensboro, November 10, 2017.

an ongoing photo journal of our progress that will turn into promotional posters for recruitment and informational purposes. The members also will talk to their classmates, and students at other schools, once per quarter about the project's progress and upcoming plans.

A community garden cooperative is a way to increase community involvement in cultivating Christian community. The next steps for the Greensboro Elementary School garden project involve more planning and organizing to continue to grow stronger relationships in the community. Hawkins helps us understand this better as he shares, "Community satisfies two basic human needs: the need for relationship and the need for participation in purposes larger than ourselves."<sup>34</sup> The Health Incarnate project started building these relationships, with children, joined by adult partners, to build a stronger Greensboro Elementary School community.

The students are part of a larger group, not just the garden club, but a community group centered in the school but focused on health literacy activism that will bring about a change in their own neighborhoods and beyond. There is power in associations and groups. The project is building community capacity through the gardening and education effort with the goal of food justice and access to healthy food for everyone.

Hunger is not a new problem. The garden club's plan is to diminish the hunger problem in their community through these projects. The youth are the energized human capital needed to jumpstart the community initiative in the Greensboro Elementary School community. God is calling people to action to end the problem of hunger. The students are engaged in systemic transformation related to rural poverty, hunger, and racism, not just planting tomatoes, kale, and carrots. Donald Messer writes that "God has been seeking to unleash the principalities and powers of this earth to liberate people from the slavery of starvation and the hopelessness of

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<sup>34</sup> Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community*,73.

hunger.”<sup>35</sup> The garden club youth are leaders and co-activists in the effort of growing a healthier community to feed hungry bodies with food and to confront the injustices in the community. The energy and enthusiasm of the youth combined with their commitment to assist with the project are the necessary communal components to push forward against former systems of power to achieve the desired results.

The garden club’s community partners provided valuable assistance in the project. Their commitment to the project echo McKnight and Block’s thought that “our neighborhoods are the primary source of our Health.”<sup>36</sup> Neighbors and community members have the power and capacity to bring about a healthier community as they work together to achieve the desired results and answer the questions of possibilities. The assets of the greater Greensboro Elementary School community came together and are working to grow a healthier place. The partnership has shifted the community paradigm as groups have come together across Greene County to work on this project.

### **Research, Evaluation, Outcomes, and Assessment**

The initial research investigated the history of Greene County, Georgia, and reviewed the 2013 Community Health Needs Assessment conducted by the local St. Mary’s Good Samaritan Hospital. The initial garden club meetings focused on the members’ vision to have a community without hunger. Greene and Haines helped us understand that “visioning is a process by which a community envisions the future it wants and plans how to achieve it.”<sup>37</sup> The project visioning group conducted research on food desert communities and how persons within the affected

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<sup>35</sup> McGovern, Dole, and Messer, *Ending Hunger Now*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> McKnight and Block, *Abundant Community*, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Paul Green and Anna Haines, *Asset Building & Community Development* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008), 49.

communities work to alleviate or improve their situations. We viewed the documentary “A Place at the Table” which describes communities coming together to help children across all spectra of life who live in food deserts, some in rural, traditionally underserved areas like the project area in Greene County, Georgia. The youth volunteered at the local food pantry to organize and bag food to assist those in need.

I visited Urban Recipe, a community Co-Op in Atlanta. The members of the Urban Recipe Co-Op are working to move their community from food insecurity to food security. The community has been able to gain access to healthy food with the active participation of the clients served by Urban Recipe. They came together, both volunteers and paid staff, to manage the process; they unload deliveries, organize food boxes, and manage food distribution. I also visited the Oxford College Organic Farm and spoke with Daniel Parson. Daniel is both an educator and a farmer. Fruits and vegetables are grown in the garden and harvested by students and professors. Produce is sold to the local community at a weekly farmers’ market. Produce also moves from the farm to the table at the Oxford College dining hall. The visits helped me understand more about farming and the intersection between education, land use, sustainability, planting, and harvesting crops.

Detroit activist Devita Davison discussed urban agriculture and the transformation going on in her city during a recent TED Talk in which she noted that Detroit was formerly “a poster child for urban decay.”<sup>38</sup> She described the grass roots agricultural practices that are transforming Detroit into a city with healthier communities and neighborhoods. I recognized in her community descriptions a much larger scale version of the rural poverty scenario in Greene County, Georgia. Davison talked about the community assets that were used as part of the

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<sup>38</sup> Denita Davison, “How Urban Agriculture is Transforming Detroit.” *YouTube*. TED Talk, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G88JZ1Didg8> (accessed January 7, 2018).

agriculture project. Detroit and Greene County have something in common—poverty-stricken communities longing for partnerships and projects to grow them into healthier places for the citizenry to live and thrive.

The first measurable outcome of the Health Incarnate Project is the organization and mapping of activities of the garden club. The first plants have been planted and harvested. The group has been organized, and phase one goals have been met. Plans for meeting and growth are in place. Following phase one, the club members plan to move the localized school gardening effort onto the school grounds into a larger space to plant and harvest their crops. Phases two and three, the raised bed garden between the wings of Greensboro Elementary School, and community plots, both at the school and the Sycamore public housing apartments, have been identified and are on the school and community calendar. With the guidance of high school teacher Mr. Nesbitt and a local farmer, Mr. Lamar, these phases should be implemented by Fall 2018. A field trip to a local farm will give the students additional learning opportunities where they will participate in harvesting seasonal fruits and vegetables.

Each garden club member is keeping a journal on his or her health education journey. There will be quarterly meetings with parents and other community stakeholders to map and report the progress of the project going forward. The high school video department will assist the elementary students by making a chronological video of the project to capture the garden club's initial vision and the completion of phase one. Subsequent videos will detail the progress of the gardening project for information and recruitment purposes. These videos will share with other communities the possibilities of a youth-led effort to grow a healthier community. There will be a presentation to the Greene County School Board at the end of the current school year detailing the project activities completed during the school term.

The project evaluation initially began with monthly partner interviews and questionnaires about the effectiveness of the initial goals. The current project partners will evaluate whether other community members or groups, such as elected officials at the state and local levels, need to be included to strengthen the partnership. The project partners are also assessing the project's sustainability to determine the need for volunteers and donations of materials going forward. The garden club members have suggested some fund-raising projects to fund their work. These are planned for the next school year. Based on meeting conversations, additional teachers from Greensboro Elementary School will be invited to join the project.

### **Conclusion**

The Greensboro Elementary School Garden Club cannot completely solve the hunger problems of the school or the community. However, their efforts of ministry, of being the transformation they want to see, have shifted the thinking of many of their classmates and community partners. Hawkins writes that “when we faithfully seek God’s will through discernment, shared vision emerges from unexpected places and unforeseen people.”<sup>39</sup> The group has a shared vision of the health literacy partnership between youth and adults becoming a model for other communities to emulate.

The faith community must do more than pray and hope that hungry communities get food. The project took that a step further and mapped a plan for youth to be empowered to work in tandem with community groups to plant food to eat as well as to germinate “food for thought.” The garden club has as one of its goals and desires to keep hunger/food insecurity at the forefront of school and community discussions. The club members hope for a time when the hunger

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<sup>39</sup> Hawkins, *Cultivating Christian Community*, 78.



problem in the Greensboro Elementary School community and Greene County will be greatly diminished through collaborative community efforts like gardening.

This project is an attempt to answer the dilemma of injustice and poverty seen in rural, Greene County, Georgia, by engaging the church as an active participant in community transformation. The residents of the gated community, from their seats of perceived power, engaged with youth and their families from traditionally underserved communities to begin to make a difference. The Health Incarnate Project has established a pathway to a healthier community through convening and engaging community members in dialog and collaborative work to imagine the community they want to see and to begin plans to create it.

The project is also a faithful response to the persistent problem of poverty, need, and food insecurity in the school community today. The health literacy practices are teaching tools on farming and how the community and students can come together to produce a healthier Greene County. The youth want to see a community free of the injustices they see in the racist and discriminatory practices that segregate community members based on their socioeconomic condition. They desire a future and a community filled with the opportunity for dreams and promises, one filled with justice and equity.

In this project, the Lake Oconee Community Church and the Greensboro Elementary School communities came together and actively engaged around school and community tables. Block writes that “engagement is the means through which there can be a shift in caring for the wellbeing of the whole, and the task of the leader as convener is to produce that engagement.”<sup>40</sup> The engagement produced positive results. Relationships developed between the most unlikely persons, those of fiscal wealth and those of meager fiscal means. Both were receptive to learning about each other and willing to talk about the community they wanted to design and build. Each

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<sup>40</sup> Block, *Community*, 87.

group learned about the other and are now working together not only to improve their own neighborhoods but to build a better Greene County,

The initial goal of the Lake Oconee Community Church was met through the Health Incarnate Project. Pastors and community members first listened to the youths' ideas about the need for community transformation. Youth approached adults from the gated community with questions instead of the other way around. This started the conversations that led to residents from the gated community being willing to share their experiences with elementary school students who were looking for ways to grow their community. LOCC members established working relationships with the youth at Greensboro Elementary School. It was discovered that the assets needed to transform the community were present in the meetings.

The Jesus model of community involvement directed me to engage young people as integral components of our project. I am no longer working for LOCC or full-time in Greene County. I am working in the neighboring county as the community outreach pastor with a local school system. I will continue to work with the Health Incarnate Project as the next two phases are implemented. It is my hope that this project will demonstrate to other rural communities that transformation through collaboration is possible.

The Health Incarnate Project provided evidence that elementary school students could lead a project to realize a more connected Greene County, regardless of socioeconomic status or faith belief. Conversations in meetings led to action plans and action. The energy and enthusiasm of the student-led, stakeholders engaged and encouraged the adults that all might be able to see Greene County, Georgia, grow into a stronger and healthier community. Community leaders partnered with local churches through the youth-led project to disseminate information

about health and nutrition while learning about Jesus Christ. These churches also have committed to teaching and preaching about justice in the community.

McKnight and Block write that “an abundant community is one that values our capacities and assumes that they already reside within us. What we contribute makes our community grow.”<sup>41</sup> All of the Health Incarnate Project team members stated that they had learned from each other during their involvement with the project, and they realized that the outcomes they wanted to see in a healthier community were within their control. The youth of the Greene County Elementary School community have been engaged along with the faith-based community leaders, and the community is now growing in a healthier way.

The despairing statistics of food insecurity, discrimination, and injustice have not completely gone away. There are still health-related conditions in young persons that we are working to improve. The efforts of the Health Incarnate Project over time will decrease health disparities as we remain vigilant in our project efforts.

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<sup>41</sup> McKnight and Block, *Abundant Community*, 84.

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