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**My Work in Relation to the Mission of Saint Paul School of Theology
and the UMC 2008 Quadrennial Four Foci**

Like Saint Paul School of Theology, I too am **rooted in the Wesleyan tradition**. I, like both my mother and father, was raised in the Methodist church and since 1994 have been an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. There are three aspects to this heritage that seem to have had a central place in my formation. First, is understanding the Gospel as essentially a message of love. Second is the importance of living out that message of love in the world by caring for the poor, the sick and the outcast. Third is the necessity of learning, which means taking advantage of all available knowledge to continually enrich life for all of creation. This last aspect of Wesleyan tradition means that also that I have come to understand “tradition” as something to be understood and valued but also something that cannot remain static. It also suggests that openness to other, non-Wesleyan, traditions is essential to Christian life. In the context of this rootedness in the Wesleyan tradition I was called into the specific ministry of ordained elder and theological educator.

Ministry as a theological educator is, for me, a continuance of local church ministry. When a roomful of students sits before me in class I see not just an individual pastor but the many congregations they are likely to serve in their years ahead. In **educating church leaders** seminaries have a vital role in the church and society through the reach of their graduates but also as an institution of status in the community and denomination. As I contribute to the ministry of Saint Paul School of Theology through the discipline of pastoral theology I emphasize the interdependence of healing and justice-making as a means to **make disciples, renew the church, and transform the world**. This is the central commitment of my life, a core aspect of my Wesleyan roots, one of the predominant messages of the Gospel and essential to pastoral ministry. Where there is healing and justice-making in the name of Christ, disciples are made, the church renewed and the world transformed toward a more abundant life.

Currently my research focuses on two areas: rural ministry and resistance to violence. I am particularly interested in the intersection of these two but the broader project in each case takes me into different areas of research. The vast majority of people in the United States live in cities but most of the land, and many of the churches, are in small towns and rural areas. An estimated 80% of the church’s pastors will, at some point in their ministry, serve a rural church. The research I am involved in, with Shannon Jung of Saint Paul School of Theology and Joretta Marshall of Brite Divinity School, has involved in depth interviewing of leaders already working in the area of rural ministry and consultation with a group of especially adept pastors of rural churches from all over the United States. It will culminate in a text book appropriate for theological education in seminaries or lay pastor trainings. This work can make a significant contribution to “creating new places for new people and revitalizing existing congregations” and to “developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world,” two of the four foci. Even in this postmodern era of stressing the particular and contextual, there are few resources for church leaders that explore rural ministry in depth and there are no substantive texts on pastoral care in rural congregations and communities.

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Our study of town and country congregations and communities has revealed a particularly deep wisdom, some of which has emerged from deep struggle, for what it means to be a caring community that can hold communal interdependence along with individual autonomy, for what it means to be a close knit community but also open to the newcomer or the different, to be both pastoral and prophetic, facilitating individual healing and social transformation. Some of the common teachings of pastoral care, such as bounded relationships with parishioners and referral to agencies and mental health professionals, are challenged by the lack of anonymity and geographical distance in rural settings. Rural churches also tend to be either idealized or denigrated in larger society. It is our hope to make the challenges real and to raise the value of the ministry of these small churches by suggesting that the whole church can learn from them. Through our work we hope to inspire church leaders to get excited about town and country ministry, to “revitalize” and establish new forms of ministry in these areas.

Both my research into rural communities and resistance to violence make contributions to “engaging in ministry with the poor” and to “combating the diseases of poverty.” Many would be surprised at the diversity of small towns and rural communities in the United States. Our consultants represent a mining town in Appalachia, a Mexican border town and a Canadian border town, a farming community, a tourist destination, and a community that has changed with the development of a meat packing plant. Poverty concerns were consistent across these churches. Most of the persistent poverty in the U.S. is located in rural counties. The health concerns related to poverty are ever present in these communities, not the least of which is the problem of access and availability to health care, as are the other manifestations of poverty.

One of my other areas of long term research involves thinking about how the church, corporately and individually, might foster resistance to violence. Poverty has very close links to some forms of violence. In addition, violence is a health issue around the world. The increasing rates of violence in the USA over the last five years have been largest in the rural Midwest which is something the rural project will explore. While we often see violence as something that happens elsewhere, in Sudan or Iraq, the USA is, arguably, the most violent industrialized country in the world. Violence permeates our world. I have spent the last twenty years working on issues of violence against women and children and have more recently expanded that interest to looking at violence by and against youth as well as violence based on hate toward particular groups. On a global level, I have learned much about the intersection of war, poverty and gender on student immersion trips with Dr. Jim Brandt. If we want to “improve health,” do “ministry with the poor” and “develop principled leaders,” I believe it is essential that we inform pastors about the destructive dynamics of violence and give them tools to foster more resistance to violence in their churches, communities and across the globe.