

Rural Perceptions of Poverty & the PRWORA:
An Ethnographic Study of Black and White Rural Church Responses*

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I think on the whole, its great theory. I'm not sure it will work in a small town, I mean, at the end of five years,. . . . I'm not sure exactly what will be the answer for them. Although, I don't think a small town is going to let those people, especially if they have children, suffer. Church Leader, Eads, Colorado

The church plays a big part. If the government can't do it maybe the church can. The church and the government should work together. Church Leader, Sylvania, Georgia

Church leaders are increasingly interested in how the new welfare legislation will affect their communities. As the leaders above indicate, there is great concern that the new welfare legislation will abandon members of their impoverished communities. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) assumes that the non-profit sector will continue to deliver social services and that faith-based organizations and religious congregations will take on additional responsibilities as detailed in Title I. Section 104. This section, often referred to as the "Charitable Choice" clause, authorizes states unprecedented encouragement to treat faith-based organizations and specifically, individual religious congregations, the same as other social service providers. Safeguards protecting congregations' free expression of belief and individual program participant and social service recipients rights are also detailed in the law. Federal policy makers are acutely aware that religious communities are financially incapable of replacing publicly funded welfare assistance (Blank, 1997, p. 205).

The questions that remain to be answered are how faith communities might respond to this new environment and how they perceive themselves in relation to government welfare policy. This article explores these questions. It reports findings from ethnographic studies in southern and western pervasive poverty areas. Field work during 1997-98 in United Methodist Churches in Georgia and Colorado reveal what lay and clerical leaders of two rural communities think about PRWORA and their attitudes toward what role churches can play in the provision of social support. The participants in this study are from St. Andrews United Methodist Church (UMC), in Sylvania, Georgia and Eads UMC in Eads, Colorado. The Georgia church is in Screven County and the Colorado church is in Kiowa County. Sylvania and Kiowa counties are rural counties in rural regions of their respective states.

Response to the questions that launched this research are varied and richly articulated by the members of the subject congregations. As delineated below, these congregations are actively, though ambivalently, heeding the call to renewed community development participation that is explicitly assigned them in the new welfare law. This is evidenced by the programs they offer their communities and the perspectives they hold regarding specific provisions of the new law. Raising the question of attitudes towards welfare law inevitably sparked conversation about personal relationships with government programs and descriptive definitions of the polysemic dimensions of the term, "poverty." These narratives provided response to the second research query of how congregations in impoverished communities perceive themselves in relation to government policy.

The first primary finding from this study is that there is widespread and strong support for most of the key features of the new welfare law among these groups. Even though these

groups were selected because they are culturally and regionally different, their attitudes reflect more similarity than difference. Indeed, given the limited economic circumstances of these church communities, it would be reasonable to assume a great deal of animosity toward the new welfare law. This was not found. Time limited cash assistance, mandates for employment and reductions of the incidence of teen pregnancy are all supported. There is also, however, the kind of hesitation voiced by the Colorado church leader above who speculates that the five year lifetime cap on cash assistance may cause undue stress on some families. She is acutely aware of the limited employment opportunities in small communities. She hopes, however, that communities such as hers will be able to respond compassionately and reduce "suffering."

This study also found that church leaders articulate relationships between church supported and government sponsored social welfare programs with great complexity and nuance. Concerns about government oppression, ignorance and distance were coupled with hope that churches could provide service and support in local communities ways that are unavailable to government bureaucracies. As the Georgian church leader above states, this study found great optimism that the new welfare environment may open a space for acknowledging and supporting the types of service that fall within the mission of their church lives. This too, was tempered by concern about conflicts between policy mandates and program implementation realities. These folks embody the essential characteristics of the type of "Christian realism" specified by Protestant theologian and social activist, Reinhold Niebuhr (Niebuhr, 1919; Niebuhr, 1924; Niebuhr, 1927; Niebuhr, 1929; Niebuhr, 1932; Niebuhr, 1953; Niebuhr, 1960). They are optimistic without succumbing to the dangers of sentimentalism.

Finally, the third primary finding from this study suggests a set of themes that contribute to poverty policy-making discourse. Similar to David Ellwood's seminal work that sought to correlate the values of poverty policy with key American civic values, this work suggests that it is necessary for poverty policy to account for the tensions citizens perceive between issues of "imprisonment" and issues of "integrity" (Ellwood, 1996; Ellwood, 1988). While specific applications to policy are beyond the bounds of this article, this work makes clear that the themes of imprisonment and integrity can serve as critical conceptual tools for understanding how activist church leaders articulate their beliefs about poverty and about the new welfare law. This is due, in part, to the ways these people's actions and attitudes are structured by their faith positions. It is also due to influences of some of the cultural particularities on these community's lives. As the lay leader from Georgia states above, these leaders agree with the new law's vision of church-state partnerships. This view coupled with new understandings of the meanings ascribed to "poverty" can lead to innovative construction of antipoverty law and policy.

This article begins by describing key features of the rural areas in which the subject churches operate and examining the research discourse surrounding the intersections between religion and poverty. The methodology used in the study is then detailed and the findings from the study presented. Discussion of the findings and the implications of them for further policy development draw the article to an end.

Case Study Context

The quiet country road linking St. Andrews United Methodist Church (UMC) in Sylvania, Georgia, and nearby Horse Creek UMC in Rocky Ford, is punctuated by fields of

cotton, acres of peanuts, stands of grizzled yet leafy old trees and sporadic architecturally nondescript government buildings. Sunday mornings the Reverend B. Iglehart-Thomas travels this road so that she may pastor these two small congregations which the South Georgia UMC Conference has assigned her.¹ The idyllic pastoral scene is marred only by stark reminders of historic race relations. Pastor Thomas, an African-American civic leader in the region, drives by the South Georgia State Corrections Facility every time she travels from the "town" congregation of St. Andrew's to the "country" congregation, Horse Creek. Most of the Horse Creek members on their way to church, pass three run-down hovels that were slave quarters several generations ago. The two churches in her charge are geographically flanked by slave quarters at one end and at the other end, a modern prison disproportionately housing young African-American men. Black church life in Sylvania County thrives in this environment of imprisonment.

When asked to discuss issues of poverty and attitudes towards the new welfare law, the religious leaders' tell striking stories of suffering and triumph.

"I've been here [at St Andrews] all my life. From a little girl up. All my life. We were in the projects and we started from there. My grandfather was a Methodist all his life. . . . Right behind the church. We were living right over there and we would walk to Sunday School. We would be there. Whenever the doors were open, we were here." (GA 118)

The "projects" are ramshackle public housing units adjacent to St Andrews' grassy backyard expanse. Only some of the units are still inhabited; most are in such disrepair they can not protect from rain or mosquitoes. The church member recalled times when her family was far more impoverished than now. Hard work and strokes of grace "lifted her up." As chairperson of the Nurture Committee, this woman now gives groceries to others who need them and is helping to launch a prison ministry. "We want to go out and visit some of the ones that are in lock down or whatever. And maybe we can read or do something together as a group." Another member of the committee brought the issue home.

We are going to have to get a list of everybody that is there. We are going to need help from the congregation because we don't know who is where and that's where we need the congregations help. ... And what we are trying to do is to get everybody to volunteer. Like the prayer card. To let us know if you got somebody incarcerated, and [we'll] send them a card on holidays and let them know that they are not forgotten. (GA 117)

These folks, once on the receiving end of assistance, are now "giving back." The question of poverty evokes myriad simple stories of triumph over suffering. The current Chamber of Commerce is eagerly awaiting a new state highway that will link Sylvania to two major cities, Savannah and Augusta. Economic prospects, from their perspective, are increasingly

¹ The names of the two pastors are actual. All other respondents' identities are referenced by the code numbers given their interview transcripts. All interview participants signed Consent Forms approved by the University of Kentucky institutional research review board, (I. R. B.).

encouraging. Church life and lives of need fuel the integrity expressed by these southern church leaders.

More than 1200 miles west, across three time zones, the Reverend K. Marsh makes similar Sunday morning journeys as she travels between Eads UMC and Haswell UMC in Kiowa County, Colorado. A minister in the UMC Rocky Mountain Conference, Pastor Marsh travels on barren freeways in this southeastern corner of Colorado past meandering miles of prairie and cattle, fields of milo, and an occasional silo towering about the horizon line. The empty railroad tracks that parallel her path and the utility wires strung from pole to pole at roadside are constant yet mute reminders that there are people here.

Kiowa County is 80 miles wide and encompasses almost 1,800 square miles (making it larger than the state of Rhode Island and just smaller than the state of Delaware) yet is populated by fewer than 1,700 people. The town of Eads serves as the county seat and has the largest concentration of population. It qualifies as a "frontier" county because it has fewer than two citizens per square mile.² The entire population describes itself to the U.S. Census Bureau as Caucasian, even though many families identify strongly with their Native American heritage. "We're Potawatomee Indian" said one, "and our tribe initially is from the Chicago area. . . . They moved [to Colorado] from up there and some of our people were actually removed, during the Trail of Tears" (CO 108). The Trail of Tears refers to the forced march of the Cherokee out of the state of Georgia in the 1830s. Federal government troops forcibly relocated thousands of Native Americans in this period. Many died.

An October 1997 snow storm killed more than 2,000 head of cattle and endangered hundreds of acres of milo, a primary cash crop. Families stood by as cattle carcasses were destroyed and held their breath as the snow melted off, hoping that their crops were salvageable. Economic sustenance often hangs in the balance as weather and shifting government agricultural policy dictates success and failure of daily enterprise. Opportunity to accumulate assets and to get ahead is limited in an agricultural economy.

It's so different...Kentucky . . . Virginia and Tennessee, the farms are so much smaller [there]. I mean, out here 20,000 acres is nothing....So, I mean, that's why we have to have such large machinery. I mean, that's a major purchase is your tractor and combine. You buy this so you can go out and work the land. ... You've got just a few large farmers. Few people own that much land and maybe the rest of it they lease from other people. But, um, unless you're given it, it's like the mortician business, unless you're given the business, it's hard to get in to because of the money factor. (CO108)

² Pastor Marsh uses this demographic term in her correspondence with her superiors at the Rocky Mountain Conference headquarters. She learned it upon arriving in Kiowa County. She was disappointed that she was unable to show me any of the surrounding "ghost towns" that fuel the anxiety of her parishioners. Her description of the congregations as simultaneously "filled with loss" and "just hanging on economically" is seemingly measured against her understanding of frontier life and expectation of more intense struggle for survival.

Cash tied up in machinery and land coupled with increasing debt and the threat of foreclosures caused farmers to live on the edge throughout most of this century. Ten thousand dollars would pay for a reasonable tractor in the early 1960s, by the 1970s, costs had risen to \$80,000. Nationally, farm debt skyrocketed from \$54 billion in 1971 to \$212 billion in 1985 (Davidson, 1996, p. 16). Methodist church leaders in Kiowa County, however, are proud of the gritty independence required to live in what outsiders may view as a desolate, vulnerable stretch of country. The wife of a cowboy who has lived on ranches in Oklahoma, Nevada, and throughout Colorado now lives just outside Eads. She treasures the "quiet" offered by a community of fewer than 60 people, and two other benefits in particular.

I have some rules, of where I want to live. And I said it had to have good tasting water, which it does, and also a Methodist church. And that's why I'm here ... in about three weeks from now we'll be 43 years married and we have moved about 30 times. And this is the first house we've bought. (CO 202)

Although keenly aware of the pervasive poverty in their area these church leaders feel that rural living offers intangible benefits that override any conceivable lure of economic opportunity that bigger city life promises. As one who lives in town put it, "in bigger cities, they don't even know their neighbors there" (CO 112). Methodist church life in Kiowa County exists in this environment of independent integrity.

The slave history of the South is far away and long ago for the Methodists of Kiowa County. They too, however, live amid vivid reminders of an imprisonment legacy. The remnants of the Granada Relocation Center, "Amache," a World War II Japanese-American internment camp, stand in the neighboring county. Amache housed 7,600 people at the peak of its existence in October 1942. This rendered it the tenth largest population center in the state of Colorado (Johnson, 1989, 5). The exposed foundations of the barracks-like buildings that expand across more than 10,000 acres are now enclosed by barbed-wire fencing. Even rows of trees planted by the internees along the former streets now form an eerie map of the former community. Although commerce with Amache internees economically sustained residents of the vast surrounding counties through the tenuous times of World War II, the land is now abandoned. It is flanked only by a county waste dump and a collection of temporary housing used by itinerant Hispanic farm workers. Scruffy overgrown weeds and grasses are kept short by either a few grazing cows, or on occasion, a single bull. A Buddhist grave site of about 300 souls who died while living in Amache now hosts small annual memorial events held by interfaith groups that gather from around Colorado. Pastor Marsh recently participated in one of these memorial services. Images of past and present racial imprisonment are, surprisingly, found in this seemingly homogenous western area.

Evocative themes arise when people engage the question of poverty and government responses to it. The new welfare legislation, characterized by its emphasis on "moving people from welfare to work," sparks questions about the nature and essence of work. Talking about work inevitably raises questions about the family—who should care for children? Why are children neglected: because parents work for income or because they don't? When cash assistance is time limited, what happens? Family disintegration? Social disruption? Will

violence and crime increase? Why does the theme of imprisonment emerge alongside the discourse of independence in these Methodist leaders' responses to the question of poverty? The physical and social geography within which the congregations resides offers striking clues to these issues.

Relations Between Religion and Poverty -- Literature Review

A polling study of more than 9,600 interviews from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press recently concluded

[R]eligion is a strong and growing force in the way Americans think about politics. It has a bearing on political affiliation, political values, policy attitudes and candidate choice. . . . More specifically, religion has a strong impact on the political views of Christian Americans who represent 84 percent of the voting-age population (Kohut, 1996, p. 1).

Policymakers tend to care about such large groups of voters. Religious values have long been a part of American public life (Yankelovich, 1994). The reason it is necessary to focus attention on Christian attitudes now is because they are increasingly driving policy attitudes. Indeed, it has been found that religion's "increasing influence on political opinion and behavior *rivals factors such as race, region, age, social class and gender*" (Kohut, 1996, p. 1, emphasis added).

Media attention to the 1996 welfare law has tended to focus on its urban poverty implications (DeParle, 1998; DeParle, 1999; Goldberg, 1999; Newman, 1999; Swarns, 1998). Rural poverty received attention during the 1960s War on Poverty with President Johnson's April 24, 1964, visit to Appalachia, and in the 1990s when Rev. Jesse Jackson attempted to re-stoke the nation's image of white poor people through his visits, videos, and lectures in Kentucky and other parts of Appalachia. Rural poverty again made headlines when President Clinton became only the second president in 35 years to visit and publicize poverty in rural areas during July 1999 (Alter, 1999; Applebome, 1999; Eller, 1999; Mueller & Estep, 1999).

Scholarly analyses of rural poverty has quietly continued apace throughout most of the century. Rural sociologists have documented poverty conditions in states throughout the nation in such seminal works as Davidson (1996), Duncan (1999), Eller (1995), Grant (1993), Hogan (1990), Stack (1996), Tickamyer and Duncan (1990), and Vidich and Bensman (1968). All have inevitably raised questions about the nature and function of family life, individual action, and public and private institutional supports and strains (Duncan, 1994; Duncan, 1996). This investigation looks closely at the institution that stands at the crossroads of public and private life—the church.

Anthropologists traditionally paid close attention to cultural issues embedded in religious belief systems and patterns. Durkheim, Weber, Malinowski, and Geertz head any list of most significant insights into religion's structural, ideological, and cultural effects (Geertz, 1973). Although little attention was paid during the middle years of this century, renewed interest is now evidenced by anthropology's examination of the place of religion and religious belief in this

country and elsewhere (Chaves & Higgins, 1992; Glazier, 1999; Gronbjerg & Nelson, 1998; Liu, Ryan, Aurbach & Besser, 1998; Salamone & Adams, 1997; Schneider, 1998).

The seminal anthology, *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader*, edited by Becker and Eiesland (1997) includes research of Jewish and Christian congregations across the United States. Issues of family life, race, class, sexuality, and political diversity are investigated. Congregation studies is a relatively recent area of research within the sociology and history of religion fields. Many discoveries of how congregations operate have been made (Ammerman, 1997; Browning, 1991; Hopewell, 1987). Wuthnow, Davidson, and Hall have explicitly studied religious group attitudes toward poverty and poverty policy, but this research predates the 1996 welfare reorganization (Davidson & Knudsen, 1977; Hall, 1990; Wuthnow, 1994; Wuthnow, 1995; Wuthnow & Hodgkinson, 1990). Most research in the area examines religious individuals, not congregations. Cnaan and his colleagues (Cnaan, Kasternakis & Wineburg, 1993; Cnaan & Wineburg, 1997) have examined intersections between churches and social service delivery but have been primarily interested in issues of volunteerism, while Wineburg (Wineburg, 1984; Wineburg, 1990-91; Wineburg, Spakes & Finn, 1983) has empirically described a South Carolinian community and its congregations.

What has not been extensively examined in scholarly literature is congregations' antipoverty policies and programs in the new welfare environment. The outstanding exception is Billingsley's examination of African-American churches (Billingsley, 1999). Of the numerous social issues researched, the Pew Center found the issue of "the plight of the poor is a common theme in most religious traditions, and was the issue most commonly mentioned by church-going respondents as being discussed by clergy (87%)" (Kohut, 1996, p. 29). This area at the intersection of religion and politics is fertile ground for poverty researchers and ethnographers.

Method

This study examines rural congregations that are socioculturally similar yet varied by race and region so that findings can be compared and contrasted. Two congregations participated in this study: St. Andrews United Methodist Church in Sylvania, Georgia, and Eads UMC in Eads, Colorado. St. Andrews is located in Screven County and Eads UMC is in Kiowa County. Four factors guided selection of the participating congregations: region, religion, income, and race, as discussed below.

Sample

Realities of rural poverty pervade communities such as Screven County, Georgia, and Kiowa County, Colorado, throughout the southern and western regions of the country. Both regions contribute disproportionately large shares to the nation's total poverty population; thus, this study focuses on churches in poor areas in Georgia and Colorado. Prior to 1994, the South had the highest regional poverty rate. The West has since surpassed the South. The tide changed in 1996, when 15.4 percent of residents in the West and 15.1 percent of residents in South were poor. Both regions continue to contribute more to the national poverty rate than their population percentage (Koop, 1997). Consequently, one must study the South and the West if one is to learn about poverty.

Both subject churches include members from a narrow range of occupational groups. The churches belong to the United Methodist denomination and are both pastored by middle-aged ministers who are highly educated, married, and mothers.³ The churches are composed of single-race congregants and clergy. The congregants in the Georgia church are black, and the congregants in the Colorado church are white.

Both counties selected for this study share characteristics of economic and social features of their respective states. What renders an area "rural" varies by region (Duncan, 1999; Stewart & Allen-Smith, 1995). In these cases, agricultural economies dominate the histories of the South and West, which is true for both Screven and Kiowa counties. Although the congregations reside in small communities, Sylvania and Eads serve as the county seats in their respective counties. This indicates that both communities are recognized as political and economic centers. Table 1 compares the demographic profiles of the communities in which the churches reside. Median household income ranges from \$15,729 to \$27,788, and the percent of the town's population composed of adults who are not employed ranges from 22 percent to 38 percent. Median household income in both towns is below the national median annual income of \$30,056. Both towns have higher percentages of unemployed adults than the national average of 29.9 percent. These communities struggle economically. Research participants consistently reported that jobs are scarce and pay is low. The Colorado communities are predominantly Caucasian. The Georgia communities, similar to much of the "Black Belt" region in the Southeast, have an African American:Caucasian ratio of about 45:55.

[INSERT TABLE I. ABOUT HERE]

The United Methodist denomination is well known for its tradition of community activism, so we narrowed our selection to UMC churches in order to maintain consistency in theological orientation (Huff, 1997; Mead & Hill, 1995). Methodist seminaries located within each state—Denver's Illif Theological Seminary and Atlanta's Candler School of Theology at Emory University—are both well known for their commitment to training community-minded ministers. The specific congregations were found by contacting Methodist leaders in each region and requesting recommendations. Table 2 summarizes the congregation total size, size of lay leadership, and budgets of the churches. The churches are considered "small churches," or small, "medium churches," which are those with fewer than 200 members (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1992).

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The congregations are similarly structured and financed. Clergy and lay leaders in both churches participated in the study. The total membership in each church reported in the

³ Both pastors have two graduate degrees and are attuned to their minority status in the UMC as women. The congregations were, in part, selected because they are pastored by women so that findings could not be attributed to differing gendered clergy leadership. Further research on the significance of gender in the community roles played by these pastors is in progress. The complexity of the issues in this area lies outside the scope of this particular article and requires the expanded analysis which is in progress.

respective 1997 Charge Conference Annual Report, submitted to the North Georgia Conference, and the Rocky Mountain Conference includes adult, youth, and child members (Marsh, 1997; Thomas, 1997). St Andrews UMC reported a membership of 180, and Eads UMC reported 116 members. Forty-one St Andrews members hold leadership positions, and the Eads church is also led by 41 members. Significant proportions of the lay leaders in each congregation participated in the study. Sixty-five percent of the St Andrews leadership participated and 46 percent of the Eads leadership participated. In sum, we were able to engage significant participation among clergy and laity, and we are confident that the attitudes and stories they contributed are representative of the congregations in which they are involved.

The congregation budgets are comparable. The primary source of income is the collection plate. Additional minor support is also contributed to each of the churches by their conferences. The congregations in each region operated on FY96-97 annual budgets of \$50,000 (St Andrews, GA) and \$57,000 (Eads, CO).

Fieldwork

The goal of fieldwork was to collect stories and information in both formal and informal settings. Formal interviews between a fieldworker and a single participant (and in some cases 2-4 participants) lasted 30-90 minutes and were tape-recorded. These took place in the respondents' homes, in the church, or at church events. Respondents were asked to discuss particular topics, to answer questions, and to complete a written survey of forced-choice items. Local fieldworkers were hired to do most of the interviewing so that the race and religious affiliation between interviewer and respondent would be the same.⁴ Informal fieldwork included participant observation of worship services and church activities such as adult Sunday School, a funeral, and Sunday morning breakfasts. I also attended community events, such as public school meetings and potluck fundraisers. I amassed field notes from field visits that spanned two to ten days in each area throughout 1997-1998. The fieldworkers and I also compiled archival documents from every church, which included annual reports, weekly church bulletins, hymnals, written (and some recorded) sermons, organization meeting reports, and local newspaper articles. Monthly (and during some periods, weekly) communication between the fieldworkers and I took place September 1997 through September 1998. The clergy in the churches have continued their contact with the project throughout 1999. They have reviewed and critiqued drafts of preliminary reports and provided additional information. They have given updates to their congregations about the outcomes of the project and public presentations of the findings.

Formal interviews used an interview guide that raised questions in three areas: church program, the new welfare law, and theology. Questions were used to collect data and to provoke conversation and revelation of personal experience stories. Some were open-ended questions and some were forced-choice questions. The latter were followed up with probes such as, "What do you think will happen when this part of the law takes effect?" Participants

⁴ All participants in recorded discussions signed Informed Consent forms approved by the University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board.

were asked, for example, "What do you think is the biggest challenge facing families you serve now?" Forced-choice questions included such items as, "Do you think the plan to 'move people from welfare to work' is a good idea?" and "Do you think the law to limit the number of years a person can receive cash assistance is a good idea?" and "Who do you think should take primary responsibility for serving the needs of poor people, churches or government?"

Reports of preliminary findings were returned to the churches for participant responses. In the case of the Georgia churches, a formal presentation of findings was made to members of the St. Andrews congregation and discussion was generated. The aim of this stage of the research was to elicit further comments and critiques of the researchers' analyses. Drafts of this article have also been critiqued by the clergy participants.

Data analysis

Three forms of data have been analyzed for this report: tape-recorded interviews, written survey forms, and fieldwork notes. All tape-recorded formal interviews were transcribed by professional transcribers and graduate research assistants. Material selected for publication was retranscribed by different transcribers to eliminate possible individual transcriber bias.

Transcribers were trained and provided specific protocols to follow. Interview texts were loaded into a qualitative software package (NUD*IST) to facilitate coding and creation of analytic categories. Written survey forms have been coded and analyzed. Fieldwork notes have been treated as interview texts. Analysis of all the material aimed to identify the meanings implicit and explicit in the participants' stories and question responses. Textual analysis applied Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic method (Amato-von Hemert, 1995; Ricoeur, 1981a; Ricoeur, 1981b; Ricoeur, 1991a; Ricoeur, 1991b). The findings and discussion sections below follow Ricoeur's three-step model of first analyzing "objective" data, then observing the "subjective" components of narratives, and, finally, interpreting both in relation to one another.

This analysis begins by describing the subject churches using information supplied by sources such as U.S. Census Bureau data, church documents and comparisons of the church leaders' responses to specific forced-choice survey questions regarding PRWORA. This part constitutes Ricoeur's "sense-level" or descriptive level of analysis. I then explore subjective content of stories that emerged in my participation observation in the communities and that church leaders related during formal interviews. Moves in this section are Ricoeurian "reference-level" analysis. The conclusion recasts the survey response data in light of the thematic structures lifted up from the story analyses and suggest implications for social welfare policy makers.

Findings I: Rural Poverty Case Studies: Georgia and Colorado

The following case studies detail community context, church structure, and programming for St. Andrews UMC and Eads UMC. This section describes each of these southern and western communities. These churches are good examples of Protestant rural ministry. They use their limited funds for emergency material support and view congregational life as opportunity for worship and general civic support (Jung & Agrida, 1997; Jung & al, 1998).

St. Andrews UMC, Screven County, Georgia

On entering the field in Screven County, Georgia, Pastor Iglehart-Thomas drove me around Sylvania and its surrounding communities. Sylvania, is the county seat and the largest community in the county.⁵ Community size, however, is always relative. Sylvania is so sizable that its third stoplight was recently erected. The first two buildings the pastor pointed out were funeral homes owned by the most prosperous African Americans in town. The first funeral home sits amid small houses and had several large cars parked outside. This supplies "poor man's burials." It looks like a larger version of its neighboring homes. The family has also done cabinet-making and furniture building and repair in the past. The deluxe funeral home is on the edge of town on the main street. Its red-brick building used to house a Coca-Cola bottling plant. It took a great deal of commercial savvy to purchase the building. The granddaughter who inherited this business moved operations from a wood-frame building situated under the railroad track bypass in a poor residential area a few blocks off the main street. This was a significant event in Sylvania for the black community, given that there are only five African-American owned businesses in town. The black churches in town have strong economic and social relationships with the black funeral homes. St Andrews' membership of 180 souls makes it the largest African-American congregation in Sylvania.

Public assistance is a reality for a significant part of this community. Jobs are scarce and pay low wages. Pastor Iglehart-Thomas contends that the poverty in the area is disproportionately found in the black communities. Demographic data and economic reports agree.

St Andrew's was founded in 1865 amid the Civil War. It has always served the African-American population in its community. It has never been a wealthy congregation; in 1996-1997, it operated on annual budgets of \$50,000, which includes contributions to the pastor's salary and housing. Sunday service plate offerings provide the bulk of the congregation's income and, therefore, fluctuate with the economic vagaries of its members. The small size of the congregation dictates primarily informal organizational processes that sometimes conflict with the highly structured expectations of the denomination. This is a small group that is very active in community programs.

St. Andrews community programs

St Andrews' leaders are acutely aware of the economic struggles of their members and community. In response the church offers programs of four types: material support, family support, educational, and spiritual. Holiday care package distribution to the sick, shut-in and elderly members and neighbors, periodic "Benevolence" collections and distribution and annual Thanksgiving Day community suppers are examples of material support programs. In addition, the church sends modest annual donations to three national programs, the Black College Fund, the United Methodist Christian Higher Education program, and the United Methodist Mission program.

⁵ All population, income and employment data is from the 1990 U.S. Census Bureau web site, Data base C90STF3A, unless otherwise noted.

Family support programs are of particular importance to this congregation. It has hosted an afterschool program for children of working parents, annual summer recreation and bible study youth program, annual United Methodist Women conferences and a Men's Spiritual Growth Retreat. The "Pathfinders" program is the organizational umbrella for all youth activities. St Andrews learned that the Family Preservation Services Department of the Georgia State Department of Family and Children's Services had funding available for low-income youth support programs. The church has since launched several projects with state funding from this source and from the Georgia Children and Youth Coordinating Council. The "Parents Plus" program is a partnership with the local public school district and supports church members teaching parenting skills to parents of pre-kindergarten children. A few church leaders have also become certified as "Parent Aides." Sponsored by the Family Preservation Department, aides are assigned at-risk families in their areas to befriend and support. In addition, the church applied for and obtained funding for an abstinence and arts program. The Pastor emphasized the program's spiritual and recreational approach to sexuality education. The Statesboro Herald, a local newspaper reported the Pastor's goal.

Part of the grant application was showing how we would be enhancing the whole child and see, we're not just teaching, 'thou shalt not have sex,' we're giving youth the tools to cope with peer pressure, trying to enhance their self-esteem and giving them some positive alternatives to negative behaviors (Hackle, 1998).

Given the funding source and the timing, these are likely TANF funds which have been allocated a church under authorization from Title I, Section 104 noted above.

Educational programs offered at St Andrews use culturally sensitive curriculum materials. These have become increasingly popular among African-American Christians and continue to increase the attendance of adult education programs and weekly bible study workshops at the church. The Nurturing Committee does personal outreach visiting members who are ill and disabled. This group is also responsible for launching the new prison ministry outreach program. The congregation does traditional Methodist baptismal, burial, and communion services. The annual autumn revival events focus much of the churches' spiritual and administrative energies.

In November 1997, the week of revival began with the first inter-racial church service in this county in 132 years. More than 100 people from nine churches participated in the rousing singing of prayer and praise. The white UMC church in Sylvania, the First United Methodist Church, is located approximately four blocks from St Andrews. During the 1970s, they were invited to an inter-racial event that never materialized. The pastor's husband, Brother Thomas, recalled this invitation because his mother and aunt were instrumental in attempting to organize the gathering. Revivals are times of celebration and calls to service. Fundraising always plays some role and at the 1997 revival, more than \$2,000 was collected. Equal portions were shared by the visiting evangelist and the church hosts. I participated in the revival week and was moved by the thrills expressed by St Andrews members, who marveled at the presence of their white neighbors. Most of the people recognized one another from around town and many of

the children are classmates. The enthusiasm was only tempered by the knowledge that the Methodist church, which currently supplies the chairperson of the area Ministerial Alliance, refused to participate because the event was hosted by a black church. This group was on the program to lead a prayer or song but pulled out shortly before the event. Most of the participating churches brought choirs, and clergy from each church addressed the gathering.

Eads UMC, Kiowa County, Colorado

Reverend Kay Marsh serves Eads UMC, a rural "town" pastorate. Southeastern Colorado communities have continued to experience fallout from the farm crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. During this period in Eads, the local bank changed hands twice and finally sold out to a bank in a neighboring county; family farms were purchased by large agribusiness concerns, and the population decreased precipitously.

During the 1990s, sophisticated technology and equipment has continued to reduce job opportunity. The current economic bad news is that the railroad is pulling out. Passenger service is a dim memory for most county residents yet farmers have been able to rely on freight service to pick up their produce at the grain elevator—until now. The intended cessation of rail service, though, will affect every member of the county. During past service reductions, the railroad companies continued to pay county taxes. A new negotiated settlement between the governor and key corporate officials has changed this policy. This change will have an enormous economic effect because it will eliminate a key source of public income. The primary railroad has contributed about 20 percent of the county's public funds. This revenue ended in 1998. The anticipated economic upheaval was mentioned in most of the formal interviews we conducted with leaders from these churches. As an Eads UMC member who is a major landowner put it,

...and the railroads pulling out, or going to pull out and I think people are gonna be more cautious. Because our tax base is gonna have to go up to make up for the loss of the railroad money. . . . They pay a large percentage of the taxes, and they help keep the nursing home open, the hospital open, the schools operating and, you know, there's a lot of issues there to look at. They're wanting to pull it out and that would take that tax base. (CO108)

Though most local residents expressed anxiety about the changes that are afoot, Pastor Marsh was frustrated at the general unwillingness of the community to organize a political response. A meeting arranged with federal government officials was attended by only a few citizens. The pastor reported finding overwhelming feelings of alienation, loss, and abandonment among her congregations when she arrived in the communities in the early 1990s. The disappearance of the railroad is a culminating blow for communities that thought they had withstood all that they could

Eads still has some active businesses, farms, and schools. A small motel and a diner sit opposite a brand new brick public restroom facility on the main highway that goes through town. Fundraising for the restroom, similar to those at interstate freeway rest stops, was a recent civic project led by a few Eads UMC members. An Eads UMC member revealed with

some embarrassment that when he began renting office space in the laundromat building he was told to beware of people requesting bathroom use. Word had somehow traveled that there were only two restrooms available and the diner would not allow noncustomers to use theirs. This attorney felt badly about turning people away at his door, but he also discovered that he could not conduct his small business with interruptions from others who had private business to attend (CO 102). Eads residents tired of summer vacationing transient traffic that stopped to request hospitality that was unavailable. Travelers pass through Eads. They do not stop and spend money.

Eads is home to a medical doctor who is on the county payroll and a small nursing home where many church members live. Pastor Marsh's primary public relations can be accomplished by telling news to nursing home residents. They pass the word over seemingly interminable card games, and word travels quickly. Relatives and public officials frequent the nursing home for visits and they carry the news to others.

The Eads economy is fueled by agriculture-related industry, but farming and ranching require far fewer hands than in the past. Pastor Marsh says "one pick up truck can do the work of five cowboys." The median annual household incomes of \$15,729 is disproportionately composed of retirees on Social Security and public assistance recipients. Several families hold most of the land. A small farm, one participant reports, is one with about 20,000 acres. The large farms cover more than 100,000 acres. But investment in land only produces income when farm markets are strong and banks are not foreclosing on loans. The area, although in a dismal economic moment, is not without a sense of humor. The large truck stop on the outskirts of town offers its elaborate salad bar in a shiny, refurbished antique manure spreader. Roughage is big business.

Living at the whim of the weather creates anxieties. One church leader, who is among the largest landowners in the county, described numerous ways to live frugally. The SHARE program that Eads UMC sponsors provides groceries in exchange for community volunteer hours and a fee of about \$15. About thirty dollars worth of groceries are provided, although the volunteer can not make personal selections. This mother is active in the church, is raising three children along with her husband and also works part-time.

I drive a school bus.... [In bad snow storms,] I am so glad when they get out of school.... There was a bus tragedy about, what, fifteen years ago, and that was east of here. There were a number of children killed. The bus driver died. It was a March storm but it can be just as treacherous as the storms that we just had. But they didn't foresee the extent of it and they sent these kids home when it had just started to snow and they got off the road. Of course the driver got out to go see if he could get help and he froze to death and his child, I think, froze to death on the bus. There was a number of children who died ... And it's also still fresh on peoples' hearts because they were related to the people who died. (CO 108)

According to Kiowa County Historical Society accounts of the tragedy, five children and the bus driver who died are buried in graves memorialized by a monument that bears the names of

the survivors and the fallen (Jacobs, 1989; Teal & Jacobs, 1976). This happened more than 60 years ago, March 26, 1931, yet is clearly, "still fresh on peoples' hearts."

The Eads UMC has survived since its founding on May 2, 1909, in part, due to its historic mergers with several other Protestant congregations. The congregation includes many of the oldest, established families in the county. Many members have college educations, large land holdings, and have held public office. The annual operating budget reaches almost \$60,000 and supports the pastor's salary, benefits, and parsonage. The congregation aggressively raised funds recently to install an elevator between the basement and first floor of the building so that restrooms will become handicapped accessible.

Eads UMC community programs

This Colorado congregation has been more actively involved in community outreach in the past than it is now, primarily because of its current financial distress. Many members have held public office, such as County Commissioner and Mayor, and continue to play leadership roles, and so they contribute to civic programs rather than develop a lot of church sponsored programs. They strongly support the new welfare legislation and hope that state and local governments will do a better job of serving the needs of poor people than the federal AFDC program did. Similar to the Georgia church, Eads offers outreach programs of four types: material support, family support, educational, and spiritual.

Providing holiday food and gift baskets at Thanksgiving and Christmas is an activity that is quite complicated. There is a great concern to honor the confidentiality of the recipients. Gifts that are identifiable, such as clothing and children's backpacks, can be recognized when used because the community is so small. The desire to give meaningful gifts that maintain the anonymity of the giver and shield the recipient from potential embarrassment results in giving the Pastor a great deal of discretion, and work. The pastor is expected to coordinate volunteers who will compile packages of gifts that seemingly have a personal, yet anonymous touch. She alone delivers the gifts to families and strives to be the only one in the community who knows both givers and receivers. Potentially tense situations are sometimes avoided by including both receivers and givers in the activity of preparing the gift baskets. This practice expresses the spiritual position that all people are to both give and receive. It attempts to soften the often stark divide between giving and receiving.

Meals on Wheels provides meals to ill, elderly or infirm community members and the church participates in this civic program. It also contributes to a local food pantry and provides the pastor with a small discretionary fund for emergency assistance to transients. Eads has an active United Methodist Women and United Methodist Men groups, both of which do service programs on an ad hoc basis. The largest program the church offers is a SHARE project that gives discounted food parcels to people who pay a minimal amount of money and volunteer a specific number of hours in any community organization. This program slides in to and out of existence as the volunteer labor force fluctuates. As in Georgia, as more mothers work outside of their homes to support their families, they have less time to volunteer.

Family support is given a great deal of emphasis in conversation, but the churches offer few formalized programs. Many church leaders explained that programs were difficult to manage because doing self-help groups sparked the rumor mills. Recently, a single-mother

support group called New Hope was begun and has been successful because even though individuals' cars are parked at the church, the members of the group have honored a strict code of silence. Participants do not reveal contents of conversation. The fact that they are single parents is already known in town so they do not feel that the news of their presence at gatherings reveals anything particularly personal.

Sunday School and Sunday morning child care are additional programs the church operates to strengthen family life. The church also serves as a clearinghouse for information about groups such as the Promise Keepers, which encourages men to participate in the lives of their families. The pastor expressed frustration at the deep-seated concerns about confidentiality. She indicated several times that a boundary between privacy and secrecy was often rigidly observed by congregation members, which put some at risk. She illustrated this concern by suggesting that domestic violence was likely more severe a problem than was acknowledged. "The farms and houses are so far apart out here, it's hard to hear the screaming. There's a feeling that 'I can do anything and get away with it' that concerns me."

Educational programs receive a great deal of energy and enthusiasm at this church. Sunday School programs are well attended by children and adults, and the summer Vacation Bible School program is carefully planned and orchestrated. Occasional "youth lock-in" programs give adolescents a chance to participate in supervised games and activities for an overnight or weekend, which also gives parents some respite.

Programs designed to encourage spiritual support and exploration are the ones about which these church leaders spoke with greatest energy. The congregation operates a Witness Committee and a Prayer Chain phone network that keeps church members apprised of members' situations for which prayer can be offered. Many church leaders voiced unwillingness to participate in the aggressive type of evangelism they observe in other groups. Several leaders maintained that they seek to express their faith by example. The goal of organized church activities in the community was, "to show people the way of Christians. To be an example. . . ." "that's the most important as far as I'm concerned" (CO 112, CO 113).

Findings II: Welfare Policy Attitudes

The most striking discovery of this study has been the level of agreement between the African-American church leaders in Georgia and the Caucasian Colorado church leaders. The communities are culturally distinct, so one might expect the groups' attitudes toward welfare to differ. Responses to forced-choice questions elicited similar responses more often than not. More significantly, thematic continuity appears in the seemingly idiosyncratic stories participants told. Summary of the survey responses precedes discussion of narrative themes.

Work and family

Eighty-one percent of the Georgia group strongly supported PRWORA's aim to "move people from welfare to work," which compares with 91 percent of the Colorado group. The issue of work sparked strong opinions. Employment was viewed as offering great economic and emotional benefits. A St. Andrews member who had received AFDC and food stamps when her child was young said,

If they go to work, they will not have to worry about the welfare! They can have their money and enjoy themselves and not have to worry, 'I got to stretch this dollar from this month to that month.' They can get a check once a week. . .so they will be more independent." (GA 110)

The realities of low-wages and high local unemployment, however, caused participants to speculate that the law was unrealistic particularly in rural areas. A Sunday School teacher in Colorado who has participated in various public assistance programs cautioned, "I think it is a good idea to go to work *provided you can find a job*. Or you can be self-employed. Like around here, you might find a job or you might not!" (CO 203). Enthusiasm for work, was tempered with stories of how difficult rearing children is for parents, especially single parents. The situation of children spending time without parental supervision is a community problem that the study participants were acutely aware of. As a southerner said, which could also have been said by a westerner,

There is not enough care. When you got the mothers out there and the children out there in the streets together. I mean what can you do? Who is to tell who - - and to me when it comes to children, and I love kids, it hurts. Its' making' me feel so bad, when I ride up town and see these little girls hanging out on the streets. There are so many of them pregnant and when you try to talk to them, [they say:] "you not my...." You can't just walk up to someone child and say 'go home.' [They say,] "You not my mama!". And the mother is not there. By the help of the Lord I don't want that for my children. If there's any thing I can do to prevent it, I will. (GA 117)

Many participants described how complicated their work and families lives were. A mother who lives near St Andrews church reported, "I own my own business, I just finished cosmetology school. I have gone to the state board. I work part-time at a pharmacy and I also substitute teach. I'm a member of the United Way, the Chamber of Commerce and the Crisis Center" (GA 120). All these activities supplement her responsibilities as an Administrative Council member and usher at church. Another Georgian who receives SSI due to a disability travels 150 miles daily to a university nursing program hoping that she will be able to get new work. She was concerned that former welfare recipients have particular burdens, "I think they're trained for what I consider poverty jobs. Those jobs that pay the least, get the least benefits, the longest hours, the hardest work. I think there's a certain amount of people that is just set up for those jobs" (GA123).

Teen pregnancy

Although the intent of PRWORA was to reduce the incidence of teen pregnancy, and parenting is also strongly supported, (Georgia: 70% support, Colorado: 73%), most participants believed that legislating responses to this situation would be ineffective. "How do you do that? Education doesn't work, free condoms doesn't work. Sterilization works. But that is against

their rights" (CO 104). Youth sexuality seems an overwhelming problem that government policy can not solve.

How can you make a law that can change whether young teens get pregnant or not? That won't work. You are going to have to instill in the teens the abstinence as the only way. Otherwise they are still going to get pregnant whether its a law or not. And whether they can be under welfare. Some get pregnant for that, but others don't and just need the assistance. (CO 103)

A church-sponsored human sexuality program that a few Kiowa County families enrolled their adolescents in received high marks because it was "not dogmatic" and "reality based." Although the pastor was upset at the minimal participation, one father believed the program

challenged [my daughters] to think about where they're at today and to think about how they will make choices governed by facts [as they approach high school]. You could sense in these kids the feeling, 'yeah. I'm being trusted with this information.' I'd much rather have my girls get this sense rather than sit them in the front pew while some preacher rails on about 'you can't get to heaven in a miniskirt.' (CO102)

Several of the church members have personal experience with the dilemma. They had children when they were teenagers. Some of them are among the most hopeful that rigid public policy will be successful. A St Andrews member chastised those who she knows are just "layin' up in the bed, waitin' on the mailman" (GA 117). Another southerner, who detailed numerous sacrifices she and her children were making for her return to schooling, was cautiously hopeful.

That is one thing that I would like to reach out and get. If you can get to one child. If you can save one. If you could get one to realize that's not the way to go and you got so many, teenage pregnancies. You can't save everybody but if you can save one....Yeah, if you could just get one child to listen. (GA 117)

Most of the study participants believed that churches can play unique roles in this area although many were unconvinced that programs or policy could effectively change adolescent behavior. Even so, as discussed above, St. Andrews has recently launched an abstinence and arts program with social service funds.

Cash assistance time limits

Seventy percent of the Georgia group believed that time-limited cash assistance is a good idea and 73 percent of the Colorado participants agreed.

I have been involved in this program. A couple of months ago, the welfare sent me two young ladies that were cosmetology students to my shop to work. They had no interest in working. They knew whether they were there or not,

they were going to still get their check come the first of the month. They did not try to build up their clientele so that in the future I could hire them on and they could earn they own money. They had no care about that. They didn't care whether they had one client or no clients because they knew they were going to get their check.... even though the check is going to stop! But to go on further with that is that the welfare would fix these girls' car. One girl's car was torn up, they were going to give her five hundred dollars to fix her car so she'd have transportation to come to and from work! [The welfare] would buy any supplies that these girls would need to keep this job. But they didn't care. (GA 120)

This southern church leader reveals the kind of frustration that people classified as members of the "working-poor" have with public assistance programs. Their own effort and value of work itself seems diminished when others in similar straits take advantage of government support. Some of the most vehement chastising of public assistance recipients was voiced by people in this study who were living on the economic edge.

I had a child out of wedlock, I never got on any of the programs. Welfare or anything. My son was on WIC and that was only because he was premature by birth and they put him on WIC. But as far as any of the welfare system or Medicaid or any of that, I never got on any of that because I wanted to keep my—I feel like, you know, that's my *independence*. And I'm a get out there and I'm a earn what I need to take care of me and my child! (GA 120)

Time-limited cash assistance coupled with employment assistance and support for family life is welcomed as appropriate policy.

It needs to be temporary.... Say a couple has got 2 or 3 kids and actually need help and they don't want it all the time. Just to get over a hump or something. To get that help, they have to separate. Either the man moves out or the woman does to get any help. Now that I don't believe is right. Then they are hollering about keeping families together all the time. (CO 116)

Virtually every person who participated in this study has first-hand knowledge or experience with public assistance programs. These are the people many observers would expect to criticize PRWORA's time limits. They do not. "It'll hopefully weed out the loafers," they say, "and the ones that just don't want to work" (CO 103). They cautiously hope that more punitive measures will help because seemingly loose former approaches have caused problems in their communities.

If you have a rigid rule in the cash assistance that they receive, I think people will gear up and say, 'hey, they not allowing this anymore we have got to get up off our butts go to work, learn the skill and be prepared to enter the work force and

be self-sufficient.' ...Even if you don't exactly learn a skill or gain a skill, learn how to read so you can at least be employable. (GA 126).

This impassioned plea came from a church leader who is employed as a literacy counselor and is representative of the hopefulness that we found widespread among these groups.

Church and state

PRWORA's endorsement of public funds for churches to provide social services sparked strong feelings. Leaders in Georgia and Colorado believed that the government must continue to lead antipoverty efforts. As these realists acknowledge, "there is only so much a church can do when it comes to giving hand outs and donations. Because a lot of the poor people are a member of the church" (GA 114). When asked whether government or churches should take primary responsibility for serving the needs of poor people, the southern leaders expressed stronger enthusiasm for government responsibility while the western leaders only hesitantly claim faith in government programs. What is most interesting is that 21 percent of the Georgia leaders and 23 percent of the Colorado leaders believed that churches should take primary responsibility for serving needy people.

In most cases, leaders were reluctant to assign sole responsibility to either government or church based leadership. "I believe it goes with the government and the churches. I can't really separate [the two] and say the church because the church can only do so much, but the government make more money than the church so they should be able to do more than the church" said a southerner (GA 121). Others agreed; however, one westerner struck a strong cautionary note, "This is a question of trust for me. I have more trust in the government than in the churches. I'm real concerned about the voices on the [Religious] Right. They scare the hell out of me, or . . .the heaven in to me" (CO102).

Many leaders were concerned with the access they had to decision-making. Those who were actively involved in local governance seemed more confident that policy-making could be influenced to achieve goals they supported. One of the large landowners in Kiowa County believed that small communities would be disproportionately hit hard by the employment requirements of PRWORA. At the same time, she voiced faith that government tends to extend programs that have a long history, likening welfare cash assistance programs to the federal Crop Rotation Program.

[With PRWORA] at the end of five years, the way I understand it, then you're not getting any more help, so 'prepare yourself in the next five years.'...I'm just thinking ...probably the government will make some provision, knowing them. Like you know, CRP. I mean I'm a farmer. [The government tells us] we're not going to have any more farm programs. 'No more CRP,' you know. Guess what, we [still have] CRPs! ... It's really a welfare program for farmers...Some welfare is generational and those people, I think, are going to think 'oh well, at the end of five years they're going to come up with another program.' (CO 107)

A lively discussion among southern church leaders used a western analogy to describe the new welfare environment.

For years we depended on the government. I like to think of the analogy of the old cowboy pictures when the settlers would have the wagon train going across the west and the Indians would be attacking. They put the wagons in a circle and they just knew the Cavalry was coming, and when the Cavalry came charging, the Indians would run off. Well I don't think the Cavalry is coming. Us settlers are going to have to do it for ourselves! (GA 129)

When this idea emerged the group participants imagined themselves as the settlers. They agreed that the federal government could no longer be viewed as a rescuing cavalry. As discussion progressed, however, they took on each of the alternative perspectives of settlers, cavalry, and Indians. Some believed that churches need to play the role of a cavalry. Yet they maintained the position of "us settlers." This suggestion illustrated the dilemma of being both in the position of need and in the position of service. Are we, they speculated, both settlers and cavalry? In which case, might we also be settlers, cavalry and Indians? Indians were initially perceived as threat. Many of the discussants decried the strong drug trade in their community and anticipated that crime would increase as a result of PRWORA (GA 129, GA 102, GA 107, GA 126). These threats are not outside of their community. They are clearly inside. Internal threats to social well-being is acutely experienced by these people, most of whom are related to someone caught up in drugs or incarcerated. On the other hand, the historic treatment of Native Americans by the U.S. government resonates with their personal histories of African-American slavery. Complex relationships of identity and obligation among government poverty policy, church service and impoverishment were illuminated by the use of this metaphor. Discussion of welfare policy sparked consideration of fundamental issues: Who are we? and How shall we relate to one another within our community?

Discussion: Between Imprisonment and Integrity

The stories that emerged during conversation about poverty, welfare, and churches' roles seem too idiosyncratic to interpret. Why do stories arise about slave quarters and cemeteries; farms and funeral homes, a school bus tragedy, dying children, buffaloes, cow skulls and the old west; prisons, public lavatory needs, railroads and highways? These disparate stories share common themes regarding the fragility of life and the opportunity for social connection. But they are also more. The stories told by participants in this study virtually cry out with claims to particular identities that once told, resonate with universal human experience. Definitions of self and family, work, industry and creativity all fuel responses to the question of social welfare and church service. These stories speak of inter-racial encounter, both conflictual and celebratory. Poverty and need is defined in relational terms and the immediacy of racial relations often offers a crucible within which to express the difficulties of successful response to material need. The lessons that emerge suggest that defining poverty demands reference to historical encounters with otherness. Responding to the need of others provokes a challenge to remember and memorialize the struggles of the community which has grown to guide contemporary experience.

Slave quarters, cemeteries, farms and funeral homes

Slave quarters, cemeteries, farms, and funeral homes all figure in stories told by participants. They all speak to several common themes. All are connected with the land and all imply particular relationships of power. The Georgian slave quarters memorialize those brought to this country in chains to work the land. The pastor commented that the only people doing "slave work" now, such as working in the fields, are Hispanic migrant farm laborers. "We won't do it anymore" she claimed simply. One of her churches' cemetery contains the remains of slaves and free persons. All of whom were buried with Christian rituals that express belief in a salvific life with an omnipotent, merciful God. The Buddhist grave site at Amache in Colorado is the location of contemporary inter-faith gatherings. Similar to Horse Creek's sacred ground, it is a place for memorializing enslavement and celebrating triumph. Interestingly, it too is adjacent to land where Hispanic migrant farm laborers reside.

Farms and funeral homes are prominent in both the southern and western church discussions of poverty. The small family farms in the south no longer provide enough income to support families. The vast family farms in the west are constantly battling the whims of weather and the railroads. The UMC churches in both areas have strong connections to the local farms and to the funeral homes. A Colorado church leader declared that "farming is like the mortician business," because one has to inherit the land and practices of the trade. The most prosperous African-Americans in the Georgian community are the families who maintain their familial funeral homes. The church, by definition, works closely with those in the funeral business because both play parts when burying community members.

A school bus tragedy and the Old West

The story of the Colorado school bus accident that killed several children and the bus driver was told by the Eads UMC church leader as if it had happened in the past several months. A civic booster brochure, which also retells the story, was displayed in the church lobby on a bulletin board. The actual event occurred more than 60 years ago and yet it arose in a conversation about welfare policy. Why? One interpretation is that such an event memorializes the reality that life is fragile. Prairie life is risky. Welfare policy is one tool used to combat its economic insecurity. The woman who told the story also raised the fact of her Potawatomee tribal heritage. She mentioned the "Trail of Tears" forced removal of Indians from Georgia to the West. Why? Clearly, the topic of poverty policy evoked this reference to a time of enslavement and resettlement.

The Trail of Tears took place in the late 1830s as Cherokee and other tribal peoples were herded from north Georgia. Screven County is southeast of the area and the churches in this study were established in the 1860s. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine that ancestors from both the Georgian and Coloradan churches may have at one time found themselves within miles of each other, both imprisoned or under siege. An undercurrent of cultural repression flows through most of these poverty conversations. The communities appear disparate but closer examination reveals unexpected historical intersections. In light of this, the "old cowboy pictures" metaphor the St Andrews leaders explored is even more arresting.

Incarceration, exclusion and isolation are defining features of imprisonment. The "old cowboy pictures" metaphor has all three. The southern African-Americans described how their church could increase its responsiveness to community needs by imagining how it might function as settlers, cavalry, and Indians. The settlers begin by circling their wagons and becoming in a sense, prisoners of the Indians. Each group is excluded from the other. Both are isolated on the expansive prairie until the cavalry arrives to join them. "Us settlers are going to have to do it for ourselves" now that the PRWORA is creating a new welfare environment. Except the outcome of the discussion is that no one can do it for him- or herself and the boundaries among the three groups vacillate. The "we" of each group has to claim its identity at the same time that it acknowledges its part in performing the roles of the other. "We" are both threat and hope. "We" are both the settled and the other. "We" make claims on the duty of the other to serve us. "We" acknowledge obligation to serve the other. Exploration of the features of imprisonment begins to illuminate issues of identity and responsibility that surface in the context of poverty policy.

Prisons, public lavatories, railroads and highways

The South Georgia State Corrections Facility stands almost midway between the two churches Pastor Thomas serves. According to the Screven County Chamber of Commerce, many of the prisoners do work-release jobs in the community. A St Andrews church leader mentioned a local Christian school that opened in 1989 which benefited from inexpensive prison labor. In May 1999, the Screven County sheriff announced authorization had been received to begin planning and building another prison. The pastor underscored that this is another prison, not a jail. St Andrews has launched a prison ministry and it is clear that the call for their labors will only increase.

A public lavatory seems to have nothing in common with this story of prisons, and yet the Colorado stories about raising funds for a public restroom and the problems the Eads member had with turning people away from his office door all intersect with a religious interpretation of the theme of imprisonment. The Colorado pastor pointed out the antique manure spreader that contains a salad bar at the local truck stop. The Cherokee Sunday School teacher embeds battery-operated clocks in to dried, highly varnished cow dung, and sells them. Why did these stories arise during discussion of poverty policy? There is an earthy quality about them all. They point to the animal part of human nature. Bodily functions are occasionally viewed as "imprisoning." We are prisoners of our bodies, Christian theologians have argued, until the soul is released through death and saved by the sacrifice of Jesus at Calvary. This theology has a long history of grappling with how the soul or spirit and the body ought to be viewed. The construction of a public restroom was viewed by Eads church leaders as a form of hospitality to the stranger. Yet there may be additional interpretations possible.

The plight of the prisoner and the necessities of responding to bodily needs both point to dimensions of poverty that are often overlooked. Impoverishment connotes the inability to meet human needs. These needs are social and spiritual as well as natural. When poverty policy addresses basic human need for food, shelter and clothing (the natural), it ignores additional human needs for interpersonal relationships (the social) and the kind of hope envisioned in future-oriented religions (the spiritual). Questions to church leaders about poverty programs

and policy elicited many stories about death, dying, and decay. These stories, however, were not maudlin or morbid. They were more often humorous or hopeful. Individual human suffering, from cultural repression and imprisonment or otherwise, was contextualized within religious beliefs of salvation and hope. There is a future of eternal communion with a loving creator, these leaders believe. Congregational life expresses the hopefulness of their faith. The strife presented in human community is viewed as prelude and challenge. As a Georgian leader said, "He may not be there when you want Him, but He will always be on time! You get scared sometimes and say, 'Lord, I thought you would never make it!'" (GA 117). As several Coloradans said, "small towns won't let people suffer" no matter how difficult the challenges the new welfare legislation presents. This is in part because the threat of despair that is part of geographical isolation is ever present in rural, small communities. Everyone knows this threat. The members of these communities identify themselves through reference to it.

Railroads and highways

The news that Union Pacific had reached an agreement with the Governor of Colorado that enabled them to abandon the rails that pass through Kiowa County sparked economic fears. The news that the State of Georgia is planning a highway to link Savannah and Augusta that will pass through Screven County sparked economic hopes. In both cases, the communities responded to the issue of isolation in addition to the economic effects of these prospects.

The ability of Kiowa County farmers to transport their harvest to market is severely curtailed by the railroad policy change. This change strikes at the essential center of the county's livelihood. Community members define themselves as cowboys, ranchers, and farmers. Without railroad service, they become cut-off from their ability to continue these lives. They become increasingly geographically isolated from markets located beyond their county. Government support may become a life-line rather than a supplement to their individual and communal effort. Discussion about poverty policy triggered barely concealed anxiety. "Do you think it will help?" asked one participant as she left the formal interview at Eads UMC (CO 108). She confessed she had participated because she hoped that policymakers may respond to the plight of rural life. The very integrity of this community is at stake.

Across the country in Screven County Georgia, there was celebration at the prospect of a new highway. Such a road would physically connect this community to two urban centers. But there is more to it than economics. Residents imagine that they can maintain their rural life and yet they could become less isolated. They anticipate greater communication and commerce with travelers and the urban centers.

These rural communities responded in a variety of ways to the dilemmas of welfare policy. Survey responses, stories, and each church's cultural condition illuminate how issues of imprisonment and integrity are central to understanding the concrete realities of life in areas of pervasive poverty. Policymakers may learn from this study that poverty should be viewed within particular sets of social relationships. If the problem of poverty includes understanding of the complex interactions of personal, social, and spiritual lives, then the solutions to it must respond to them. If poverty were merely an absence of money, these community leaders indicated, it could have been solved long before now. The PRWORA emphasis on employment, time limits, and teen pregnancy implies that far more than cash assistance is at

stake. Church leaders who participated in this study contribute to understanding some of what that "more" is.

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Table 1. Community Population, Race, Employment & Income
Georgia and Colorado

	Total Pop.	Racial Distribution	Adults Not Employed in 1989*	Median HH Income	HH With No Wage or Salary Income
Sylvania, GA	2,871	44% Black 1% Asian	38% [^]	\$27,788	39%
Eads, CO	787	100% White	35%	\$15,729	35%

Source: 1990 U.S. Census Bureau, Database: C90STF3A

* Adults = over age 16; Not Employed also includes retirees, full-time parents

[^] Figures for Sylvania County Subdivision, not Sylvania City.

NB: SYLVANIA Of all Female Adults: 45% Not employed; Of all Male Adults 29% Not employed in 1989.

NB: EADS: Of all Female Adults, 39% Did not work in 1989; Of all Male Adults: 30% Not employed in 1989.

Table 2. Church Structure 1997-1999
 Membership, Lay Leadership,
 Operating Budget, Lay Leadership Research Participation

	Total Full Members*	FY96-97 Budget**	Lay Leadership* *	Leadership % N=Total Congregation Membership	Number of Lay Leader Participants in Formal Interviews	Research Participants % N=Total Leadership
St Andrews UMC GA	180	\$50,000	41 (103 leadership positions)	23%	26	65%
Eads UMC CO	116	\$57,000	41 (91 leadership positions)	35%	19	46%

Sources: 1997 Charge Conference Annual Report St. Andrews & Horse Creek UMC, B. Iglehart-Thomas, Pastor, Nov. 16 and 1996 Charge Conference Annual Report The United Methodist Churches of Eads and Haswell, Rev. Kay Palmer Marsh, Jan. 26, 1997.

* 1997 Total Full Members including adults, youth, children

** All churches have individuals who hold multiple leadership positions. Cells indicate the number of individuals who hold leadership positions *and* the total number of positions that are held.

*** Includes Pastor Salary & Benefits, Church & Parsonage Building Upkeep, Program, Outreach