

Hinton Rural Life Center
Celebrating 60: Embracing Our Roots & Sharing the Fruits

Reflections . . .

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Jesus later appeared to his disciples along the shore of Lake Tiberias. Simon Peter, Thomas the Twin, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, and the brothers James and John,^[a] were there, together with two other disciples. Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing!" The others said, "We will go with you." They went out in their boat. But they didn't catch a thing that night.

Early the next morning Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize who he was. Jesus shouted, "Friends, have you caught anything?"

"No!" they answered.

So he told them, "Let your net down on the right side of your boat, and you will catch some fish." They did, and the net was so full of fish that they could not drag it up into the boat. -- John 21:1-6, CEV

Hello everyone! My name is Julia Trantham Heckert, and I'm an ordained Deacon in the Western North Carolina Conference. I'm currently appointed beyond the local church to HIGHTS, a non-profit that serves vulnerable youth and families across the seven most western counties of North Carolina. I serve as their Community Engagement Coordinator.

My connection with Hinton Rural Life Center aligns pretty perfectly with their 60th Anniversary theme, *Embracing Our Roots and Sharing the Fruits*. I grew up in Haywood County, only a couple of hours from Hinton. The summer after my senior year of high school our United Methodist Church offered a local mission trip experience at Hinton. As someone who has always felt closest to God when serving others, I had to go! The thing that sticks out the most for me about that week, alongside the important work we did, are the moments of worship.

I remember standing in the gorgeous chapel, overlooking the lake, singing "This Is the Air I Breathe" (yes it was the early 2000s!) and feeling the Holy Spirit not only moving in my heart but filling up the mountains and valleys surrounding me. I realized, this mountain air is the air I breathe. Western North Carolina is my home, and that experience at Hinton deepened my desire and call to love and serve and be neighbors with the people in these rural communities.

After spending some time downstate attending college and seminary, God opened the door for me to return to the mountains to begin my ministry as an ordained deacon in The United Methodist. This homecoming reminds me of a story in the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John. After the disciples spend years following Jesus, learning and proclaiming the Good News, and traveling all over to heal and serve others, their lives shift with the crucifixion. Wondering what will come next, they return home and take up fishing again. They spend all night out on the lake, hitting up their old favorite fishing spots, but catch nothing. The next morning a man is standing on the shore. He calls out to them and asks if they've caught any fish. They grumble "no" in response, so he instructs them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. Suddenly, the net is so full the disciples can't even haul it in!

For the past 60 years, Hinton has been casting its net into the surrounding areas. As the realities of rural communities have shifted and changed over the decades, Hinton has remained true to its mission to "walk alongside" their neighbors through a variety of ministries, while also continuing to dream and design new ways to implement missions that address systemic injustices and utilize asset-based community development. Hinton recognizes the abundance of gifts that exist alongside the barriers in rural communities. Their commitment to make deep roots that bear good fruit of lasting, transformational change inspires me as I live into my ministry of serving youth in the mountains. I also admire their desire to share the gifts of our local communities with others who travel there on mission from all across the Southeastern Jurisdiction and beyond.

Like Jesus in the Gospel of John, who calls the disciples to shore for a fish and bread breakfast after their long night of work, Hinton also calls in clergy and other groups for a time of rest and renewal. I had the privilege of partaking in a retreat at Hinton with other clergy who were journeying together on the path to ordination. We spent the day splitting wood as part of their firewood ministry, and then we spent the evening in one of their retreat houses, grilling by the lake, sharing stories, and laughing together. That overnight retreat drew us closer. Every time our group reconnects, we recount the joyful, sacred moments we experienced by the lake. I'm grateful Hinton invites clergy and others in for soul-renewing times of rest, fellowship, and good food.

Hinton made a lasting impact on me as a youth and continues to support me as a clergy person, inspiring in me a desire to live into transformational ministry that helps our rural communities thrive. On their 60th Anniversary, I give thanks for Hinton Rural Life Center, for all the ways it has helped myself and others embrace the deep roots and share the fruits of God's goodness here in these mountains.



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