

RHONDA MISKA – Lived Theology Interview

Rhonda Miska is the Social Justice Minister and Hispanic Minister at Church of the Incarnation Roman Catholic Church in Charlottesville, Virginia. PLT's Project Assistant, Bekah Menning, interviewed Rhonda on August 24th, 2005.

Bekah: Let's start by you talking a bit about what your day-to-day work involves at Church of the Incarnation.

Rhonda: Well, first of all my day-to-day work varies quite a bit, which is something I really enjoy about the job. My title is both Social Justice Minister and Hispanic Minister. So on the Social Justice Minister side of things a big part of my work is helping to coordinate the Just Faith program, which is a 30 week program for adult Catholics for them to learn about Catholic social teaching and build small group community and engage in prayer, discussion and reading. So I facilitate a group, and then I also help coordinate retreats, service experiences, hands-on opportunities, ordering the books and videos, making the photocopies – all the logistics of getting Just Faith together is a big part of my work.

And then something I started a couple months ago is a weekly social justice newsletter which I send out every Tuesday morning, and includes: local social justice news; national social justice news; international social justice news; a quote from catholic social teaching talking about some social issues, be it war or family life or respect for life, something like that; a website of the week, which is usually a link to some organization that's doing some sort of peace and justice work or something like that somewhere; and then an action step – call your senator about this, or volunteer here, or whatever the case may be. And I send that out to maybe 60 people, 50-60 people a week.

Bekah: People within your parish?

Rhonda: Within my parish, and also other people who've asked to be on it. So there are some people from around the state, other social ministers who've asked to receive it, the Diocesan office receives it.

Bekah: I can think of a lot of people who wouldn't mind receiving that actually.

Rhonda: Have them drop me a line! It's no more work for me to add an address to the list. And I have gotten some good responses about it from people.

And then just coordinating a lot of social justice events. We've got a food pantry, so keeping that stocked by organizing food drives. Just last week I organized a prayer service for the 60th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so planning for that. Sunday September 11th, there's going to be an interfaith event called Sulha, and I'm on the planning team for that, and will be leading an evening prayer service and facilitating a listening circle. So preparing for that.

Working with the diocese. Regionally, individual Catholic communities, called parishes, belong to a single diocese. All of Virginia with the exception of northern Virginia, which is the diocese of Arlington, makes up the diocese of Richmond. So working with the Diocesan Office of Justice and Peace in Richmond. I also help with our parish twinning program. The diocese of Richmond is twinned with Haiti, and we at Incarnation support the Little Brothers and Sisters of the Incarnation in rural Haiti. I'm hoping to visit them soon, after the November elections in Haiti. And just various and sundry things like that that come up. Supporting parishioners in their social ministry. And then of course all the nuts and bolts of being a part of a parish staff – you know, getting bulletin announcements in, putting up a bulletin board every month, going to staff meetings every other week, just working in the office.

And then on the Hispanic Ministries side of things. Currently we're preparing for a community resource day/help fair where we're inviting in a lot of local agencies that work with issues of health, employment, transportation, education etc. That event is open to all but we want to specifically make sure that the Hispanic community is invited and that resources are available in Spanish. Also, September is Hispanic heritage month so I'm helping to plan for a big fiesta on the 24th. Both of our secretaries can understand quite a bit of Spanish and maybe speak some – one of our secretaries grew up speaking Italian so that's pretty similar – but I'm the only person in the office that's really comfortable with Spanish, speaking and reading and writing. So if we ever have a phone call or a walk-in from someone who speaks Spanish I'll work with that person and answer their questions.

Bekah: How often does that happen? I imagine it's not infrequent...

Rhonda: Twice a day maybe, but it varies.

Bekah: The Hispanic population is growing so fast in this area...

Rhonda: Yeah, definitely. And our (Incarnation's) Hispanic community is very active. I only came on as Hispanic Minister in May or June; before that they were completely working on their own, so they're very motivated. I mean, these are all parishioners who have full-time jobs, but they've really stepped up and assumed a lot of responsibility and organized their community well. So I attend committee meetings and help with the Hispanic Outreach Program. I also work very closely with Laura Mathena Armstrong. She's the Outreach Minister, and she does things closer to social work – referring people to agencies, and helping people pay bills, and she works really closely with Social Services, with CARES, with MACCA, those agencies. So I work fairly closely with her.

That sums it up pretty much.

Bekah: Well it definitely sounds like a 40-plus hours a week job. So does this feel like the kind of work you really want to be doing? I mean, when you came out of college did you have a vision for the kind of work you wanted to do, and does this feel like where you're supposed to be right now?

Rhonda: That's a big question. It's definitely where I want to be right now. I don't know if I want to do parish ministry my whole life. I've been in the job for about a year, and in my mind I've committed to staying several more years. And I definitely feel that, when I look at how I perceive the needs of the community and the needs of the world and when I look at my skills and abilities and experiences, this seems to be a pretty good match ... I Occasionally I get to use French to translate documentations to and from French for Haiti stuff. And then of course I use Spanish almost every day. So I'm using my language skills, I'm using my writing skills, I'm using my leadership skills. I feel like in this job I'm responding to what Nicaraguans asked of me, to return to my country and work for peace and solidarity. So when I look at what my abilities are and what the world needs, I feel like it's a fairly good match.

Bekah: Yeah, sounds like it.

Rhonda: But I'm also very open to the idea of living overseas again, and I'm very comfortable with the idea of working in the developing world as opposed to working in America. There's needs both places, the needs are different. But I'm glad I came back. Previous to this I was in Nicaragua as a Jesuit Volunteer. And I thought about staying on in Nicaragua or in Latin America in some other capacity, and it just kind of felt like, no, now go do reverse mission work, now go back and speak about your experiences and you live out what you've learned while you lived overseas. So I felt like I had to come back and come to terms with myself as an American Christian.

Bekah: It's tough!

Rhonda: It's very difficult. It'd be much easier to stay in Latin America and throw myself into life there, because it's hard to come back to the States and say, wow, it's the policies and lifestyle of this country that is causing – directly or indirectly in some ways – the suffering of that country.

Bekah: Yeah. I was in South Africa for a while, and that's a fairly developed country, but it also felt almost easier to live a simple Christian lifestyle in a place where there wasn't as much of a culture of consumerism as there is here. It feels like a real balancing act living here...

Rhonda: Yeah, and I'm lucky that I've got a group of friends who...I know quite a few people in the area who have a lot of the same values as me, whether they be people from the church or friends from the activist community who are fairly anti-capitalist, into simple living, into community, into environmentalism. So I've got other people around who don't want to spend their spare time going to the mall, and don't want to raise their children watching five hours of TV a day...so I feel supported in that. And my parents, will we'll get to later I'm sure, definitely share a lot of my values and believe in what I'm doing.

Bekah: So let's go there then...What experiences in your life have led you to do this kind of work?

Rhonda: Well, I really think first of all I have to say the example of my parents. They've always been service-oriented people. We were raised going to church on Sunday. My dad is Catholic, all the Miskas are Catholic. My mom was raised I think Presbyterian for a while and then maybe Methodist, and then when she was in college she lived with her cousin and her cousin's dad was a minister so they went to the church where he was a minister, so she kind of had the Christian smorgasbord. But when she married my dad, Catholicism was pretty set for the family, so she converted to Catholicism – or I shouldn't say converted, she changed denominations I guess is the term. So we went to mass every Sunday, and my parents were really involved – my dad always served as a lector at mass and my parents both served as Eucharistic Ministers, and one or both of them have been on the parish council at one time or another. But it was not like we sat and prayed the rosary together every night, or we sat and read the Bible together. We didn't talk about our faith really openly, but they lived it.

My mom's got a real love for the elderly – she's worked in different nursing homes. For several years now she's been at Middleton Outreach Ministry (MOM) which is a group of I think 10 or 12 churches in the Middleton area (Middleton, Wisconsin), and one of the programs in MOM is POP, the Project for Older People, and she's the POP coordination. So she coordinates volunteers to [give elderly persons rides] or to rake someone's yard, or to visit a shut-in. Really maintaining quality of life for older people and trying to extend the amount of time they can live independently without having to go into assisted living or a nursing home or something like that.

And they're volunteer ushers, they've always been involved in supporting community arts. Even just organizing our neighborhood picnic, organizing the "good neighbor festival" one year, being the chairperson for that. Oh, and fairly politically active too – we always had political signs in our yard, and we would leaflet for different candidates...I kind of grew up where that was an expectation.

So I definitely think...I mean, they weren't zealots or anything, but that was definitely a priority for them. They sent my brother and I to public school and were concerned about public schooling. So I really think they were a model for service. I grew up going to sing Christmas carols in nursing homes and bagging groceries at the food pantry on Saturday...I never even thought about, oh this is volunteering or this is service work, it just was life. And my parents are that way to this day where, it's really quite funny, I'll talk to them on the phone and they'll say, oh so-and-so was getting rid of this chair and this other person needs it so we moved it for them and... So many stories of serendipity...

Bekah: So people know to call your parents.,,

Rhonda: Oh yeah. They live in a house with extra space, especially since my brother and I moved out and it's just the two of them, but they've got spare furniture in the garage, they've got all kinds of things just passing through. It's kind of this family joke

where my dad will come home and see whatever object it is and he'll say, well is it going or staying, is it coming or going?

Bekah: Can I go back to something you said earlier? You said you never really talked about it, it was just sort of the way things happened – I think you were talking about faith actually. And I was thinking about my own experience...my parents are both ministers and both very much social-justice minded, and I'm sure we did but I don't remember much talking about personal faith. So I was just wondering – and this may be too personal to actually have in the transcription – have you struggled with personal faith at all? Did that part of faith get lost at all in the emphasis on service and social justice?

Rhonda: Well, another thing about my parents – and I mean this in a very good way - is that they adopted this sort of laissez-fair parenting, and they were never really strict with me. And I had a lot of freedom to explore what I wanted to and go whatever direction I wanted to. So when I was 16 years old I really got into Jesus. And went to a Christian summer camp and made friends with a girl whose father had started going to a Pentecostal-style church, you know raising your hands when you sing and being slain in the Spirit and speaking in tongues and things that this little Catholic girl from Wisconsin had never seen before. So I think when I was 16 I really started exploring it on my own, and going to Bible studies and reading the Bible and learning about faith. And I don't know that my parents really knew what to make of it, but they just kind of let me explore as I wanted to. And because the parish where I was didn't have a whole lot for youth I went to a youth group at a Protestant church, and I didn't know enough theology to know about the ways this was similar or different from Catholicism. It was just like, here are people my age, they're into God, they want to talk about their faith and what it means in their life, and they sing good music.... And so I ended up spending some time going to a Protestant youth group. So I think that definitely shaped my religious faith in terms of always being focused on ecumenism and interdenominational dialogue and things because those were my influences.

So I would say for me really the personal faith element started to really be important to me when I was 16 – that's when I started reading everything I could get my hands on really, and trying to commit to disciplines of daily prayer and Scripture reading.

Bekah: So you really developed [your faith] on your own. That's interesting.

Rhonda: Yeah, I mean, my parents certainly set the stage for that. But they were never the kind of people who said you had to get confirmed, you had to be a certain way...they really led by example. People are always surprised when they find out I didn't go to Catholic school of any kind... I just turned out this way.

Bekah: Well it seems like a good way to have turned out! (laughter)

Rhonda: Yeah, I think so. And it's neat because now I feel like really we've come full circle, and I influence my parents and they influence me. They both came to visit me in Nicaragua, and that was extremely moving for me, and I think for them as well. They

sponsor a child in the village where I lived in Nicaragua, and they got to meet the child and her family, and I think that really influenced them. They're going to Kenya in September – I'm so proud of them. I never thought my parents would make it to Africa before I did! Never! [They're going with] the Christian Foundation for Children, because they sponsor a child in Kenya, so they're going to meet her. Mary. And my dad writes letters to the editors based on the suggestions in *Sojourners* magazine, and he's working with the school board about keeping military recruiters out of public schools. And they're buying a Prius (Toyota, hybrid).

Bekah: They must be really proud of you, and vice versa.

Rhonda: Yeah, I kind of feel like we spur each other on. I mean, pretty much their sense is, they don't want me to get arrested or refuse to pay taxes or anything too radical. But other than that, we're pretty much on the same page. When I talk to my dad about the Pentagon protest and other things I go to he says, well what does that really accomplish? I think they're less comfortable with the protest element. I'd love to get my dad and my mom to the SOA (School of the Americas annual protest) – I don't know if that'll ever happen. But yeah, generally we're on the same page, and it's great because it'd be very difficult to do this kind of work if I didn't have family support.

Bekah: So I'm wondering what brought you to Church of the Incarnation, but before that what brought you to Nicaragua?

Rhonda: Good questions. Well, I started studying French when I was 10, and I always loved foreign languages, and kind of through foreign language I got interested in travel in other countries. And I always thought I would volunteer in French-speaking Africa. When I was in college I was the RCIA sponsor – RCIA is the Right of Christian Initiation for Adults, for adults who want to become Catholic and receive sacraments in the church. And there was a young man from the Ivory Coast who showed up and barely spoke English and wanted to be baptized, so I was his sponsor because I could speak French with him. So I guess I always thought I would go to a French-speaking country.

I went to Haiti when I was 19, in January of 2000, with a student Catholic group at the Newman Center from my university, for 10 or 12 days, and that really changed everything. Really blew my mind open and totally changed my perspective. Except for Canada that was the first time I'd been out of the U.S., and Haiti is a very intense place. So I came from that experience very concerned about international issues. I ended up changing my major to international studies. I started reading Robert McAfee Brown and Jim Wallis and learning about Dorothy Day. So it changed my academic life, my spiritual life...it was an experience that just changed everything. All my priorities shifted and I know I couldn't just go back to a 'normal life' like I'd had before.

And so at first I thought, well, I saw all these agencies working in Haiti... We met with someone from, I think it was Catholic Relief Services down there, and I thought, NGO's are really the way to go, and let's look at policy and how these agencies work together. So to that end I spent a summer at the United Nations doing a United Nations summer

program, which was a great experience – that was the summer of '01. And I loved it, and learned a lot about how the U.N. works, how the different U.N. bodies work, and different countries and conflicts and their agendas. And plus, I got to live in Manhattan for a summer – you can't complain about that. But I walked away from the experience sort of feeling very disconnected, like my life didn't match what I said I was about. I was in this world where I would go to the U.N. building every morning and we would sit in these big air-conditioned rooms with our suits on and with our legal pads out and we'd talk about the fact that one in three Haitians is HIV-positive, and whatever percent of the world lives on less than two dollars a day, and then we would all stop at this nice little bar for a cocktail and we'd go back to our little apartment on East 53rd, and it just didn't match. And I felt like, huge decisions are made in this place, but there's a disconnect between the people that this affects and the people who are making the decisions. Gazillions of dollars...I don't know, lots and lots of dollars...

Bekah: Gazillions!

Rhonda: Ok, gazillions! Enormous, absurd amounts of money get poured into this and poured into that, and what does it actually mean on the ground? Are we in touch with the billions of people who are impoverished? Do we know what they're about? Do we know what they want? Do we know what their lives are like? Do we know what their needs are? And have these decision makers had any interaction with them? Have the decision makers actually ever hung out with a family in the slums of Calcutta? Or in Mexico City? I don't know. So after that I kind of thought, well, I really have to go overseas myself for longer. Because I came back from Haiti with all these questions – 10 days is really not long enough to get to know a place, and especially my Creole, I spoke French, but my Creole was very, very limited. And so I thought, I have to crack this egg, I have to figure out what life is like for these people. And so there are so many volunteer programs out there. I knew right off the bat I didn't want to do Peace Corps...

Bekah: Why was that?

Rhonda: They're government affiliated, and I'm not necessarily comfortable with that. I knew of some people who had had good experiences with it, but I wanted to go with something that was more faith-based. So I looked at all these different faith-based organizations, and my campus minister was real helpful with that. And I heard good things about Jesuit Volunteers, and they looked good on paper. I liked the four components of being a Jesuit Volunteer, which are living simply, living in community, practicing spirituality and working for social justice. So I applied. And when they get your application they send you a letter back that basically says: thanks for your application; we received 200 or whatever applications for 42 positions; have a nice day! So they basically let you know not to get your hopes up. And so I thought it was a long shot, so at the same time I was applying for the Sojourners (magazine) internship in Washington DC. And then I got a call the week after Easter, and they said Nicaragua, and I thought, Nicaragua? And they said, well, you're our first choice for this placement. So I thought about it, and I had 24 hours to make the decision...

Bekah: Did you have any Spanish at that point?

Rhonda: I had taken a few semesters in college...

Bekah: So that wasn't a requirement of the position?

Rhonda: I had basic Spanish – I was proficient, so I could have a very basic conversation. Of all the volunteers that went down to Nicaragua from our group I was the one with by far the least Spanish experience. I think almost everyone else in the group had done a semester abroad in high-school or college in a Spanish-speaking country...I did a semester abroad in Normandy, France! Imagine! So I got the offer and couldn't say no. So I went to Nicaragua, and was there for two years.

And in terms of how I came to Incarnation, it was like, now what do I do (after Nicaragua)? I knew that I wanted to be doing work that I believed in, work that reflected my beliefs and values and that was working toward building the kingdom of God. And so I got on Idealist.org, and...

Bekah: Was that while you were still serving in Nicaragua?

Rhonda: Yeah, this is while I was still in there. And it felt like everything I came across that I was qualified for I didn't want to do, and everything I wanted to do I wasn't qualified for. And I was thinking about graduate school, and I was thinking about all different kinds of things. And then finally I came across this one position for social justice ministry in Charlottesville, Virginia. And I read the job description, and I read the requirements and I thought, hmm, this doesn't sound so far off from something I'd be able to do and something I might like. So I emailed them my resume. I got back from the States June 29th of last year (2004). July 19th they flew me here for an interview, and offered me the job a week later, and I moved here last September, 11 months ago.

Bekah: So what have been some of the joys of the work (at Church of the Incarnation) and some of the struggles?

Rhonda: I'll start with the joys. Obviously it's building one-on-one relationships with parishioners, both in the Hispanic community and non-Hispanic community. Because it's really those relationships that change us. I mean, I can put an announcement into the bulletin, and I can post something on the bulletin board, and I can do all those kinds of things. But it's really getting to know people and figuring out what their passions are and being able to share some of my story with them...that has really inspired me. And just the freedom of the job, that I can do a non-violence study... The last parish I was at, the priest was a little more in control and I didn't have as much liberty, and Father Gregory very much trusts his staff and we have the freedom to sort of pursue what avenues we'd like, and so that's really nice. So those are some of the joys.

The challenges... Obviously, you know, I'm a very idealistic person, and working in the church is not always a good place for an idealistic person to be. There are certainly

places where what we strive for and what we are doesn't match, and there's politics in it and things going on with the hierarchy. So that can be disappointing at times, but I think you're going to find that in any institution. Also, I deal with injustice every day, the stuff of my job deals with wars and violence, poverty and oppression. That does weigh on me.

Bekah: It sounds like you feel fairly committed to staying in the church. I've come across a lot of people who've had major frustrations with the Church in general (the Christian Church in the United States), and some specifically with the Catholic Church, and who've left or thought of leaving. Has leaving ever occurred to you?

Rhonda: Of course it's something that's certainly a possibility, and I know people who've gone that route. You know, do you work for change inside the institution, or do you go outside of it to act prophetically? I think a lot of Catholic Workers would fall into that category [of working outside the Catholic Church]. You know, how much are they in good standing with the church, how much do they wish to identify with the institution and the hierarchy and all that. And for me, first of all it's my family – this is what I was raised, this is what connects me to my family and to my ancestors. So there's a sense of base level identity wrapped up in it. And also, well where else would I go? I guess I think of Peter, when Jesus asked Peter, are you going to leave me too? You know, after everyone had left when his teaching was too hard. But where am I going to go? Am I going to find another institution that's perfect? Am I going to find another church that's perfect? Nothing's perfect, so you make the best with what you've got. And I do believe that the Spirit is moving in the church, and there's a lot of good there. And I really believe in the Eucharist, it's really central for me. And if I truly believe what the church teaches about the sacrament of Eucharist, how could I ever leave?

Bekah: It sounds like you have a lot of hope for the Church.

Rhonda: I think so. I try to be a hopeful person. And there's so much wonderful stuff about the Catholic Church. We've got 2000 years of history and tradition – I mean it's just this massive mountain of legacy that we've got as a church. Of course there's a lot out there that you're not proud of... You look at how women and minorities have been treated. You look at scandals and corruption. But you can also look at... There are so many amazing saints, so many inspiring writers and mystics and artists and reformers and prophets and activists. So I guess I choose to focus on those things.

Bekah: I have a broad question, and I'm working on how to make it narrower (laughs), but I'm just going to throw it out there. I'm wondering what your hope or vision for the Charlottesville community is, or if you could talk about sort of a snapshot of your vision with regard to your experience of the work you're involved in right now.

Rhonda: Ah, vision! The "v" word! Without vision the people perish, right? (laughs)

Bekah: Yeah... Are there things about this community that are troubling to you, and do you have an idea of how those things can be overcome?

Rhonda: Well, to give a broad answer to the broad question, the vision is really the Kingdom of God. The vision is the brotherhood of man – it's a sexist term but oh well. The vision is sharing as a family. You know, Acts chapter 4: All lived together and had all in common, and no one had any need. Dorothy Day said, "The vision is this. We are working for a new heaven and a new earth, wherein justice dwelleth. We are trying to say with action 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' We are working for a Christian social order." To me that pretty much sums it up. Call it justice, call it community, call it koinonia, it all comes down to being in right relationship, to loving God and loving neighbor.

In terms of practically in Charlottesville... I've only been here 11 months, but from what I can see, the community's very focused on the University. And I think a lot of decisions are made and things are done in such a way that the focus is on the University, keeping the students in mind and keeping the faculty in mind. And that's all quite good, but there's people here who have nothing to do with the University. You know, what about working class folks, what about Hispanics who've only been here a year. So kind of expanding the focus. I mean obviously you can talk about specific problems. The old standard is that there's no affordable housing in Charlottesville, and there certainly isn't.

Bekah: That seems to be the topic of conversation across the country these days.

Rhonda: Yeah. Well, and it came up in our last Clergy Caucus meeting: How do we frame it? Do we talk about increasing wages so that there's a living wage? Do we talk about more affordable housing? I mean, how do we approach it? Basically the idea of creating a system where there is support for low-income folks. And I'm not saying I know how to make that come about. And I'm not saying that has to be done through the State or through agencies. In one way or another there are needs that aren't being met because I think a lot of the focus is on students and the University.

Racism is definitely a problem here. I've had a couple experiences in the past year where my jaw has literally dropped. Things people have said or done where I think, did that just happen? We are definitely in the South. I mean, I grew up in Wisconsin and I spent the last years of my life living with brown people, so when I hear comments made about other races – sometimes overt, sometimes covert – but when I hear those comments.... I mean, sometimes I think, not only do people think that way but it's even verbalized. So I think we have a long way to go in terms of race. And those are very hard issues to address. I mean, you can legalize things, you can integrate schools, you can have affirmative action and things like that. But in terms of really creating equality it is a very long and bumpy road.

Bekah: It feels to me sometimes in Charlottesville like people are very segregated not only along racial/ethnic lines, but also class or socio-economic lines, so it's like a double-whammy.

Rhonda: Yeah, and I guess that goes for the Hispanic community too. Just last night we had a big meeting – we had a round-table discussion in Spanish with members of the

Hispanic community – and everyone at the table was in agreement that in a given job, a Mexican and a North American guy working side by side, the Virginia native is making \$12 an hour and the Mexican is working \$9. And everyone at the table just kind of nodded and said, yeah I know how that is. So that’s definitely a concern.

Bekah: You’re working with CAISC (Charlottesville Area Interfaith Sponsoring Committee)...Do you think church disunity or fragmentation among the local churches is a problem in this community?

Rhonda: Again, I’ve only been in town 11 months so I don’t have a broad historical perspective on things that have happened in the past, but it certainly seems like with PACEM (People and Congregations Engaged in Ministry) happening this past year for the first time, and CAISC developing, there’s a lot of initiatives in place for congregations to be dialoguing with each other and collaborating. I think that’s a very good sign. And specifically with the Just Faith program, it’s tri-parish. We’re also trying to open it to Christians of other denominations. This non-violence study I’m doing is half Catholic and half everything else you could imagine...

Bekah: This is a program that you’re facilitating?

Rhonda: I am. Every Thursday for 10 weeks. It’s a program by a Franciscan peace group called Pace E Bene and it’s a curriculum called “Violence to Wholeness”. And that’s open to all local congregations. So it does seem like there are some good initiatives.

Bekah: I’ve been thinking a lot about community building work as crucial to social change. What does building community mean to you? What does it look like to you?

Rhonda: Hmm. Community. That’s something I think a lot about.

Bekah: Some of this you’ve already talked about in terms of your vision for the community, Kingdom of God vision.

Rhonda: Community. Well, one of our tenets as Jesuit Volunteers was community. Most religious orders have communities at their core...Catholic Workers for instance. Community is definitely something I think a lot about. After living in rural Nicaragua, community is a way of life there. You don’t have to think about building community – everyone is in everyone else’s stuff all the time anyway. I think it’s extremely counter-cultural. I mean, we live alone or we live in small nuclear families, and we’re very upwardly mobile, away from extended family. It’s very easy to not know your neighbors, or not be involved in your neighborhood. So community is something that doesn’t come naturally. It’s something you have to be very intentional about building. For me I guess I’ve tried to build relationships with like-minded folks, and I’m involved with Food Not Bombs – we serve a meal in Tonsler Park every Sunday at 1 pm. And I think that’s one step in the right direction of building community. And I attend daily

Mass pretty much every day which is a way of building community. Still, it's a tough one – if you figure anything out let me know! (laughter)

Well, because who has time for community? I mean, you get up, you go to work, you come home, you're tired, you have dinner, you run your errands and you clean your house, and you've got kids to get here and there, and things to do. Who has time to visit their neighbors, or to be intentional about trying to create community?

Bekah: I think it is about taking small steps, though. It's sort of about the way we live. For instance, do we even know our neighbors? There are different levels of building community.

Rhonda: Yeah, and it doesn't have to be geographical. This is something we talked about with DART (Direct Action and Research Training Center) affiliates. You know, the congregation is the new community. People don't know their neighbors but they know the people they worship with on Sunday. So using the congregation as the building block for community.

Bekah: I think I'm going to wind up soon – this has been great. But I was wondering, as far as what may be next for you, and I know this is a couple years out still, but do you imagine you're going to continue to do faith-based kind of work? Do you always imagine having that very direct link between your faith and your work?

Rhonda: There will always be a link. I really embrace sort of a Theresian view of spirituality. St. Therese of Lisieux is a French saint who talks about spiritual childhood and the "little way", and very much a focus on little things, you know, whatever you do. And many saints have talked about this – St. Teresa of Avila talked about finding God in the pots and pans. So no matter what you're doing you're doing it for the glory of God. It doesn't matter if you're organizing a meeting or you're sweeping up the floor, or you're scrubbing the toilet. Whatever you're doing you're doing it for God. So will my faith impact my work? Of course it always will. Because whatever I do I strive to do with the intention of service and worship. Mother Teresa's great line is that God doesn't expect us to do great things, but to do small things with great love for him.

I mean, I think practically you're asking, will I always work with the Church, or will I always work for a faith-based organization? Who knows, maybe I'll drop out and go corporate, right? Just kidding. (laughter) I don't know. Anything's possible. At this point I'd say it's likely. I've considered doing graduate work in something like theology or divinity. Or I've thought about going back overseas. I'm open to anything, and I trust that doors will be opened. In Nicaragua we say, 'uno propone pero Dios dispone,' which means that a person can come up with their plans but ultimately God is the one in control. I guess I'll just take it one step at a time.

Bekah: Well, this has been wonderful, Rhonda. Thanks so much.