**Faith in the Power of Connections**

In 2014, nearly half of North Carolina’s counties lost more jobs than were created. The hollowing out of communities in those counties, as people of working ages leave to seek jobs elsewhere, represents a growing crisis that calls out for immediate commercial and social innovations to stem the exodus.

Last week, IEI had the privilege of hosting a dedicated group of leaders who are heading important, responsive innovations by rural churches located in a number of these counties. These innovators are essential supporters of economic and physical assets and relationships and connections that are critical for innovation success in any locale. As key anchor institutions deeply rooted in communities, their rural churches are important centers for expanded social entrepreneurship and other civic-focused innovation.

The three dozen pastors and senior church staff leaders partnering with IEI through the Thriving Rural Communities (TRC) partnership are core allies in one of IEI’s five major programmatic responses to the priorities identified by 1,000 attendees of the 30th annual Emerging Issues Forum, “Innovation Reconstructed.” TRC is an extraordinary ten-year program launched in 2006 by Duke Divinity School, the NC Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC), and the Western NC Conference of the UMC, with financial and other support from The Duke Endowment. Recognizing the pressures of economic and population decline on rural churches and the places that sustain them, TRC is helping more than 70 pastors and their rural churches across North Carolina “take the lead in creating more viable [rural] communities.” TRC offers extensive leadership development to support clergy in their pastoral roles and works to strengthen churches as community development hubs. If innovation is the ticket to economic growth, these churches must become adept at stimulating innovation in their communities.

*Participants in the recent ‘Thriving Rural Communities’ three-day workshop at IEI.*
IEI is proud to join forces with the TRC effort, and we were delighted to welcome the TRC program participants to the IEI and the Emerging Issues Commons. The IEI staff coordinated three great days of intensive, hands-on training in community-based innovation planning. I can hardly wait to see the yield of our continued engagement with TRC across the coming year.

There is much more to be done across the state, and many of you are leading those efforts. In last month’s newsletter, I asked you to share what you were doing to widen the circle of faces and places engaged in the innovation economy. This map charts the innovation momentum across our state (click on the map to visit our Forum Next Steps page, where the map is fully interactive):

If you would like us to add your work to the map, please take a minute to complete this brief survey.

Warmly, Anita

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