Project Title: Visual Sociology on an Urban Farm

Project Abstract: This research is part of a larger project, “Picturing Faith, Strengthening Congregations” (IRB No. 14-041) that explores the potential of visual research strategies—the use of images to collect, analyze, and present data—for helping congregations and religious NGOs (1) tell their story, (2) identify needs, and (3) evaluate programs. Research participants use personal mobile devices (e.g., cell phones, iPod, tablet computer) or digital cameras to photograph ministry contexts and community concerns. These images, in turn, are used in one-on-one interviews, small group discussions, and public displays to engage communities of faith in the process of self-evaluation, dialogue, and change.

This McGregor project will focus on visual ethnographic, engagement, and evaluation work on an urban farm. The New City Neighbors (NCN) Urban Farm operates a CSA on two acres property adjacent to Fourth Reformed Church in the Creston neighborhood of Grand Rapids. The farm employs ten high school aged students from the surrounding neighborhood and beyond as interns each summer, teaching them “job and life skills within a Christian framework of discipleship” (www.newcityneighbors.org). In partnership with the Farm Director, Lance Kraai, we integrate photography into the curriculum. Students use their cell phones or provided digital cameras to photograph some aspect of the weekly lesson as it shows up on or beyond the farm. These photos are used in group conversations each week. The photos and conversations provide a stream of continual feedback grounded in participants’ everyday lives.

In order to situate the project in its larger context a focus of this summer’s research will include interviews with interns, shareholders, neighborhood residents, New City Neighbors staff, and members of Fourth Reformed Church. Research will also involve participant observation in church services, Urban Farm events, and in local businesses that purchase and use the farm’s produce.

Project Outcome:

1. The Principal Investigator (PI) will present findings at the annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion (October 2017 and 2018) and International Visual Sociology Association (June 2018). The research assistant may have the opportunity to co-author and co-present work at one of these annual meetings. Supplemental funding to support student travel will be applied for through the Department of Sociology and Social Work’s Deur Fund.

2. The PI will produce one or more blog posts related to the project for studyingcongregations.org. The research assistant may have the opportunity to co-author a 750-1000 word piece.

3. The PI plans to prepare a book-length manuscript for publication that showcases visual research techniques and the research findings. Contributing to a book project is beyond the scope of the research assistant’s direct involvement. Even so, their work will undergird a book and their contribution will be acknowledged.