Community Voices:  
Postville Oral History Project

Interview with  
Steve Brackett

August 9th, 2014,  
Postville, Iowa

Interview Conducted by RaeAnn Swanson-Evans  
Interview Transcribed by RaeAnn Swanson-Evans

Interviews conducted as a joint project with The Postville Project

Brackett_S_08092014
Interview Description

Stephen Brackett came to Postville in 2005 to serve as the Pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church. In the interview Pastor Brackett discusses his experiences living and working in Postville as the community adapted to demographic changes and dealt with the aftermath of the May 2008 ICE immigration raid at Agriprocessors. In Postville, churches are centers for social and spiritual interaction, so when the raid threw the town into turmoil, community and church leaders led the way in relief efforts. Pastor Brackett recounts how many community members, himself included, responded to the immigration raid by marching in Postville as well as Waterloo. Also discussed in the interview are the challenges and joys of serving a rural congregation, the evolution of the food pantry in town, and more recent developments in Postville, namely the influx of Somali refugees.

Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics Discussed in the Interview</th>
<th>Page #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College, Early Career, Seminary, and moving to Postville</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What it is like to work in Postville, a typical week at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postville’s demographic diversity, the Diversity Council</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 8th, 2008 the day of the raid, community response, St. Bridget’s Catholic Church</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marches after the raid, march in Waterloo, Iowa, march in Postville</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal proceedings, lack of support after the raid</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigoberta Menchú visit to Postville</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media representation of Postville</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food pantry, 2003 fire at the Turkey Products, effects of the raid</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriprocessors bankruptcy, workers from Palau</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection on how the raid personally influenced him and the Postville community</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pastor Brackett’s call to embrace diversity</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Community Voices: Postville Oral History Project

Interview with Steve Brackett

August 9th, 2014, Postville, Iowa

_RaeAnn Swanson-Evans: Pastor Brackett, could you tell me a little about yourself?_

Steve Brackett: Sure, I grew up in Rockford, Illinois and was the third child out of five. I grew up Roman Catholic so I definitely had a different denominational background than I currently have. I went to college at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa where I met my wife Susan. She was Lutheran, at that time the ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] had not been formed yet, but she had been a member here at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Postville. After we were married, actually a little bit before we were married, I became Lutheran, because I felt that I really was Lutheran in the way I thought and believed. It was a pretty easy transition for me. I worked for a number of years in mental health. I had majored in psychology at Coe and then received a master’s degree in Rehabilitation Counseling from Boston University while working in mental health. I worked my way up in administration and eventually left that. I worked in the financial services industry for a while, and then I decided to finally go to seminary, something I had thought about for a long time. I graduated from Wartburg Seminary in 2005 and then came here to Postville for my first call, which was something interesting since my wife grew up here and my mother-in-law and a brother-in-law are members of the congregation here. It’s pretty unusual to have a close tie like that, but it’s something that has worked out very well. I have three children, Patrick, Will, and Molly. Patrick is in the Navy. He works on a ballistic missile submarine. He has about two and a half years left. Our son Will has a job in Cedar Falls. Then
our daughter Molly is going to be a junior this year in Postville Schools. So all three of them went through the Postville School system, and spent quite a bit of time here.

*You basically already answered my next question which was ‘what brought you to Postville,’ so we’ll move right on. What is it like being a Pastor here in Postville?*

It’s certainly challenging being a pastor here in Postville. I have to say I can’t think of a time when I’ve been bored, or had nothing to do, or wondered what will tomorrow hold, or what can I do to move things around or maybe stir things up a bit because it seems like the one thing that is constant in Postville is change, as strange as that sounds. It was unique when I came here because I was already familiar with the community and with this congregation and had seen the changes that came with the plant coming to town, with Agriprocessors opening up and doing business. Then as immigrant populations came in to work in the town, how that really changed the face of things. Being in Postville as an outsider, it’s kind of exciting. It’s not your typical small town experience. It has its challenges and it has its problems. At the same time I find it to be pretty rewarding just in terms of the number of people I have met and interacted with and the different challenges that have been here. The opportunity to try to help people through those as being part of a faith-based organization and being a pastor, I guess it’s rewarding to be able to bring the word of God into conversations and have that be an expectation. Where as in mental health, I think spirituality is a helpful thing for anybody, it certainly can be in mental health, certainly can be in conversations with people about their finances, but being a pastor in Postville I am able to bring faith into the discussion and its expected that I can do that. I find it to be very rewarding and very challenging.

*Could you take me through a typical week here?*
Is there a typical week here? [Laughs] Our congregation is aging, like [5:00] many mainstream congregations throughout the country and especially in rural America. A fair amount of time is doing hospital visits, nursing home visits, and funerals, those sorts of things. There is also quite a bit of time that is devoted to working in the community and with the community trying to help to deal with the various problems that are out there. We might have one, two, or three people come in looking for assistance. Often they are current or former, or hoping to be, workers at the plant in town and just needing some assistance with whatever transition, whether it’s coming in to the community, trying to remain in the community, or leaving the community. There are also plenty of meetings. Meeting within the congregations, meetings outside the congregation for various things with which I am involved. Really a lot of focus on the ministries of the congregation, so I would say that the staff and I are pretty busy throughout the week just trying to manage all of those things. Then also doing what’s expected, having a service on Saturday night at 5:30 and having a service Sunday morning at 9:00 o’clock. People joke a lot that oh yeah you only work part time you only work on Sunday. I remind them that well I work on Saturday night too! I think people really do realize that there is a lot more that goes on in the life of a church and the life of a pastor then just the weekend services. There is quite a bit that happens. In a community like this there can be a lot of tension, turmoil, and stress too. Even with the farming economy not suffering too greatly with the downturn that has happened in the economy and job issues, we still feel it here. I do also talk to people a lot during the week who are in crisis, either emotional crisis or financial crisis or whatever else they might be experiencing. A typical week would include a lot of conversations with individuals and with possibly couples and families. There are some fun things that happen
too. I have had several weddings this summer, so just continuing pre-marital counseling with couples and then actually performing weddings. So [there is] plenty to do.

_in your experience, what makes the community of Postville unique?_

I think we really have been the pathfinders when it comes to embracing and experiencing diversity in rural America. I think far before a lot of other communities saw this happening, Postville led the way with trying to welcome and trying to incorporate diverse populations into the community. That hasn’t always gone smoothly, and for the people who were here already and who grew up here, it was a difficult transition. I think, as happens in other places, people had to make a decision. Do we stay here and make it work with the changes that are happening around us or do we leave and try to find some other place where we are more comfortable? There were some balances that had to be reached. But in the end, I think, for the most part, those that are still around decided that it’s worth trying to make our community work. Because of that, I think there have been some great successes here and some things that have certainly helped in our embracing of the diversity and in dealing with the challenges that come with that. This can be a model of how the rest of America can cope with the changes that are happening in communities. I think the other choice for Postville, if they hadn’t opened the plant if they hadn’t embraced some of the diversity that happened, is to just die like a lot of rural communities of this size have done over the past [10:00] few decades.

_in what ways have you seen or experienced the Postville community handling issues that arise with the diversity?_

In what ways did the community deal with?

_or continue to deal with._
One of the things that was helpful was when the Diversity Council was formed, it really tried to address the different challenges and work on the front end of those challenges and to look at ways that the people who were already here could help by embracing the people who were coming, or learning about them at least to better understand them and then also for the people coming in that they would learn about how the Postville community operates and what are the things that are expected in this community as far as behavior- even things like keeping your lawn up and how you act and behave in the community. So really the Diversity Council has done a lot to try to combat ignorance in the truest sense of the word. It’s that not knowing, not having information. Often the fear and the reaction against someone who is different from us comes out of ignorance. We have things set in our mind about how someone is, or how they behave. We have prejudices that cloud our thinking and block our ability to really get to know someone or welcome them or interact with them. I think there were a lot of efforts by the Diversity Council, by the City Council early on, and by different people, by the churches in town, to try to welcome people and help the community integrate all the new people and deal with the changes that came as a result.

*Can you talk to me a little bit about your involvement with the Diversity Council?*

Sure, I came in 2005 and at that time things were kind of settling in. The largest population that we had at that time was Guatemalan. People were starting to buy houses, their kids were going to the school, they were really becoming an important part of our community. There was a Guatemalan grocery store and restaurant. We still had certainly evidence of other folks who had come here to work. The Mexican restaurant was still in place and the grocery stores and other stores, the Ukrainian and Russian immigrants that had come were still present to some
degree. Certainly others, the Jewish population for sure had been here and was well established by the time I came. So I think it was less critical that the Diversity Council respond or act with any immediate urgency. That’s I guess what I’m looking for. There was not really an urgency that the Diversity Council act to get everybody to get along and to understand one another because a lot of that had happened over time. I would say the Diversity Council wasn’t quite as active when I first came but it was still nice to be able to get together with representatives from the different populations in town to try to look at how we could better interact. Then when the raid came, it just really hit the reset button. We went from being pretty comfortable, I would say, with where things were to having everything completely upset again. Then we had many, many new people coming into town, not necessarily all of the same background, certainly more U.S. born folks coming in as replacement workers. Again the priority was dealing with the effects of the raid and with the new workers coming in- not so much trying to help integrate the community together. Finally when that settled in and a new owner was found for the plant, we started [15:00] to see another change and really saw a different population coming in with the Somali population that has come to work in the plant. The Diversity Council, following the raid started to focus on all right, what’s next? What’s our next challenge? And I think we found that it’s the new Somali refugees that have come in to the community to work at the plant and then also, a new influx of Latinos. We have done things recently to try to help the communication open up with those two groups, and the Diversity Council, I think, has done a good job of trying to make that happen and to facilitate it.

Have there been any events lately?

Brackett_S_08092014
We did have an event at the YMCA community room where we had a Fiesta Hispaja, a Spanish festival. We had a potluck. We did that as a follow up to an event that we had for Somali families where we had them come together. Both were successful, we had hoped for a little better turn out at the Fiesta Hispaja, but you know, having something in the summer and on a Saturday. There just are different things that affect whether or not people are willing to show up and turn out, but word of mouth will help the next event we have to have better attendance and be more successful. I think the event before that with the Somali families was even more successful. We had quite a good turnout for that and had a real great conversation about what their needs were coming into this community and some of the roadblocks and barriers that they have. One that comes to mind in our discussion was that they said we could go get our drivers license at the Waukon County Offices, and the computer has a test in the Somali language, but it’s not in their dialect. It’s not the dialect they are familiar with, so it’s very difficult for them to take the test. I made the comment that it would be like me going down to Louisiana into Cajun country and having a test given to me in that dialect and that language, which I could probably make it through, but I don’t know that I would necessarily pass it. Just things like that, that we are assuming, okay we are offering the test in the Somali language but oh, it’s not a dialect that they easily understand. It helped us to see some of the barriers and problems that they experience and that they have in the community as new arrivals. Every time we get together in this way it’s helpful for us as a Diversity Council to see the challenges that are there, but also to tell folks that hey we are there to help and we are there to assist if we can.

*You were in Postville during the ICE raid, were you here in Postville on the day of the raid?*

Brackett_S_08092014
Yes, it was my day off. My wife just jokes that everything happens on my day off, funerals, deaths. So “day off” is kind of in quotes, when you are a pastor it is 24/7 for the most part. The Sunday before I had gotten a call from Pastor Gary Catterson, who is the pastor at the Presbyterian Church here in town. He had said he had received a call from a pastor in the Cedar Falls-Waterloo area that they had heard rumor that there was going to be a raid in Postville the next day, and that ICE was gathering at the Cattle Congress. I had no doubt that ICE was gathering at the Cattle Congress but we had heard before many times that, oh, there’s going to be a raid, or there might be a raid. You kind of take it with a grain of salt and think well it may be somebody jumping to a conclusion, but still [20:00] a call was made to the Hispanic ministry at St. Bridget’s [Catholic Church] just to say this might be happening. I really didn’t hear anything more until 11 o’ clock in the morning [May 12th, 2008]. My wife, Susan, was driving to work and saw the helicopters, police cars, and all the activity at the plant, and called and said, oh, it’s not a rumor anymore, the raid- it looks like is on. So I jumped in my car right away and drove around. I tried to drive around the perimeter of the plant, which you really can’t do. To the north of the plant, especially it’s cornfields. I wanted to get a sense of the activity that was going on. Most of it seemed to be isolated to the plant, it didn’t look like they were going through the community at all. I was kind of amazed at the level of response or the level of the raid. The helicopter I guess I could understand, to see if anyone was trying to get away on foot, but seeing how armed the police were, I thought hmm really? Sniper’s rifles? From what I could tell it looked like possibly some machine guns of some sort. I just thought well really? For mainly Guatemalans who tend to be a little more petite or shorter in stature and very peaceful people from what I had
seen. To me it looked like overkill in terms of the amount of police presence and federal officials presence. But I thought they were just trying to keep everybody safe. After the fact, I think my thoughts were justified that this was really overkill in terms of what they really would have needed in order to execute the raid. So I couldn’t get in, I couldn’t really see much, I didn’t see anyone that I knew that I could stop and ask, hey do you know what’s happening? I knew that the officials executing the raid weren’t going to want me to stop and start asking questions. So I went ahead around and drove by St. Bridget’s and drove by the Presbyterian Church to look for activity there. I didn’t see any. So I thought, well I better go home and wait in case somebody calls and needs something. So I pretty much spent the rest of the day camped out near the phone just waiting to see if anything would come in terms of information or conversation and then watched the news as well. That was kind of how the first day went, with not a whole lot more information than what other people were seeing on the news. The next morning though, I got a call from one of the parishioners here that said, did you know that there are people staying at St. Bridget’s? So I said no I wasn’t aware of that. One of our other members, Ardie Kuzie, had stayed overnight with them at St. Bridget’s to help out. So I quickly went down on Tuesday morning to St. Bridget’s, and saw the mass of humanity gathered there and the look of shock on peoples’ faces, the children who were there, and just the volunteers that had shown up to that point to help deal with the humanitarian crisis that was there. That was far more shocking than what I saw in terms of the initial raid that went on, on Monday. I will never forget the looks on the faces, the looks of shock and terror on the faces of the men, women, and children gathered there at St. Bridget’s as a result of the raid on the plant. Then over the course of that day, the stories about what had
happened on Monday were just overwhelming. For the most part, by Tuesday morning a lot of the officials and law enforcement had left the area, but there still were some around. There was a fear that they were going to come into the church or they were going to go into the school or into peoples’ homes to try to execute some of the arrest warrants that they had. At least by that morning, we had been told by the school officials that ICE had said that they would not enter a [25:00] church, they would not enter a school bus, they would not enter the school. But still, in executing their search and their arrests at the plant, they did it on the first shift. That adversely affected families far more then it would have if they would have gone to second or third shift, which is primarily, or was at that time, primarily single men and women, not as many family members. So we had a huge, huge crisis on our hands because families had suddenly been ripped apart. In many cases the primary wage earner had been taken away. We had no answers for people who said where’s my husband, where’s my wife, where are my parents, where’s my mother, where’s my father. The raid response began, in earnest, on that Tuesday morning just trying to let the dust settle and figure out how we could best help the people affected. It was shocking as well because this was the biggest employer at the time in Postville. There were questions about, well are they going to be able to stay open even, without workers. It’s unfortunate that the vast majority of the workers were undocumented, but at the same time there was a realization that this type of response to that, or this type of enforcement action, was going to have a horrible effect on the families involved, on the community, and on the plant itself in terms of the economics, the stability of the community, and the people who had come to live here and had been here for years and years, in some case 20 years, and now were ripped out of the community. It’s just a terrible day, a day
that none of us really like to recall or remember. [They are] very painful memories, very difficult things to think about. Not a bright spot in the history of Postville. I think not a very bright spot in the history of our country and in immigration enforcement, most certainly.

*Were you able to participate in any of the marches and rallies that were held?*

I did in all of them. I think probably the most striking one was the one that was held in Waterloo, where we first met at a local Catholic Church and then marched to the Cattle Congress where the detainees were being held. Again, to walk up to this place, and to see armed guards looking at us very suspiciously, and with, I think, a little bit of concern in their eyes, I’m thinking, this is a group of people mostly from Postville but from other areas, that are giving no cause for concern. I was dressed in clerical garb, so I had a clerical collar and shirt on, and a suit. We had the representatives of the Catholic Church dressed similarly. The rest of the people who were marching were well dressed, I would say. None of us were holding any weapons or really providing any need for concern. We came up to the fence, nobody touched the fence nobody attempted to enter the Cattle Congress. We just wanted to make it known that there’s a problem here and that we were supporting the people who were arrested and who were being detained. We wanted to make it clear that these were members of our community that were taken away. In addition to having the armed guards looking threatening and looking at us like we had no right to be there, there was someone there taking pictures of everyone. I very distinctly remember an ICE agent pointing the camera at me and focusing in and taking a picture and thinking, [30:00] oh well, I wonder if I am going to have a file, an FBI file or ICE file, and how much background information are they going to have on me? Am I going to be considered some kind of dissident or problem? But I thought, well I don’t care. I think if they look back in my

Brackett_S_08092014
background they’re not going to find a whole lot, maybe a couple of speeding
tickets here and there, beyond that never any problems. They could find that
I had a full background check and finger printing done when I had a Series 7
securities license when worked for Lutheran Brotherhood. I had background
checks done when I became a pastor. There’s nothing in my background of any
kind of a criminal nature. To me I’m thinking it’s a waste of a digital photo, or if it wasn’t
digital the paper it was printed on to have a file started on me, and I think that’s probably the
case for most of the rest of the folks there. But I did worry that for some that if they were on
the list of people they were hoping to arrest the day of the raid, that that could be a problem.
That if they were seen marching and their picture was taken they’d know that they were still
probably in the Postville area and they could be sought out and arrested. Then we had a march
in Postville that I thought was particularly effective. We went to the plant and a Jewish rabbi
and Catholic priest prayed over the plant trying to purge it of the evil and the sinfulness and the
different things that had happened in that plant that were pretty horrible. It was also a way to
try to bring some peace to Postville. Then we marched back around and came by a group of
protestors who were trying to speak against anything that we were representing there that day.
But again, no violence broke out, no problems resulted, nobody went to blows or fisticuffs and
everyone exercised their rights that day to free speech, I would say. One thing that I did find a
little disappointing just based on what people were afraid of what might happen, when we did
get to the plant the Postville Fire Department was stationed there with hoses ready in case
some violence broke out or there was a problem. We were just going to the entrance of the
plant to pray and to speak and to call for justice in a situation that seemed pretty unjust at the
time. It was kind of a warm day so I walked over and said to one of them, well if things get
too much warmer you can spray us down to cool us off a bit. Just trying to joke a bit, it was not something I expected I guess. I would think that members of our community and members of the city government and whomever else was involved, the Postville police department, would realize that with me, Sister Mary McCauley, Paul Rael, and Father Ouderkirk involved that we’re not going to let anything get out of hand. We’ve never given any indication that we would support anything that would turn violent or that would cause problems.

Everything was very well planned to avoid anything like that. The marches that happened I think were good, they gave people an opportunity to express opinions and try to call for help and call for action. I think in many cases the people who were against it were ill informed about what our purpose was, and maybe ignorant about what our views were on the topic. Maybe they had their own pain and their own axes to grind that they wanted to talk about the same day when we were really just interested in getting help for the families and the people who were given criminal charges, but no appropriate representation in the criminal hearings that happened, [35:00] or in the criminal courts they entered. That, I think, was the biggest crime in all of it. It wasn’t just an immigration action, which is really handled through an administrative court. For the first time, the people who were arrested were criminally charged. Then you think, well at least they’ll have the full protection as people who are accused. That they will be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and that they’ll have their time in court and adequate criminal representation. That didn’t happen in the Cattle Congress. There are a lot of things that were learned by a lot of people through what happened in the raid. Our hope is that some of the lessons learned prevented future mistakes like this from happening. Ultimately, one of the surprises about Postville and about the raid is the affect that our response had on changing policy at the federal level in terms of
the charges that are allowed if people are arrested in the future, and really in calling for justice in the face of the humanitarian crisis that was caused by this kind of a raid. The thing that is unbelievably frightening to me is the plan that ICE had in the event that the local churches or some other organization didn’t respond to the humanitarian crisis left, the families that were left affected by the raid, the ones not taken away. It was to go through the Department of Human Services. In my work in mental health I have great respect for Department of Human Service workers in Iowa, but I also know they are some of the most overworked, understaffed people in government. To expect a Department of Human Services worker, or even a couple of them, to be able to come in and deal with the level of crisis that existed following the raid was just a foolish, foolish thought or idea. It was barely handled by the churches coming together, not just locally but at the level of the state of Iowa and beyond through the national churches. It was barely able to be handled that way, and there was a lot of help that came in through those organizations. I just don’t see how in the world the Department of Human Services for Iowa could have come in and responded as quickly or effectively. On the one hand, it is the most tragic thing that’s happened in this community, but on the other, some positive things occurred as a result to the point where I just can’t imagine seeing another large-scale immigration raid like this ever happening again. I don’t see how, after all that we learned from what happened here in Postville, that anyone could call for that or think it is a good idea.

Where you present when Rigoberta Menchú came to Postville?

I was. One of the things that I regret is not continuing my Spanish language training I had in high school. I took three and a half years but it was Castilian Spanish, which would help me in Spain—not so much with Mexican, Central American, South American, or Caribbean Spanish. When I
was in college and heard folks speak Spanish, their native language, from those areas, I thought

*I know very little Spanish. Really wish it was something I would have continued with or become proficient in. We did have translators, that was very helpful, but I was not able to talk [40:00] to her personally. It was always through an interpreter. Even the discussions that happened were translated. I think it would have been beneficial for me if I could have translated them in my head as things were going by. Because with a translator you always have their interpretation sometimes of what someone said, or if they say quite a lot and don’t allow the interpreter to come in soon enough, you’re going to miss things. So it was a helpful time.

There were lots of visitors that came into the Postville community who brought hope or brought attention to the problems that were going on. That was one that really stuck out in my mind because she was very gracious and had a positive message of hope for the people who were affected by the raid, but also really thanked those of us who responded for the work that we had done. That was one of those memorable moments for people in the Postville community as a way of calling attention to the problems, but also having someone who has national and international recognition coming to talk about the problem. There were officials from Guatemala who came, there were officials from Mexico. We had several dignitaries that came over the years and over the months of the response to offer their support and find out how they could help. There were lots of good memories related to the collaborations and having an opportunity to hear from people who had been dealing with this all along and try to look at it from an international perspective, not just a local perspective.

*How do you feel about the media’s portrayal of Postville?

Brackett_S_08092014
That was interesting. I had never had any formal media training. I was complimented by my
bishop, though, when he saw some of the results of the interviews, that he said, you
definitely looked like you had had media training. The thing we realized early on was
you had to know the perspective that the media people were using in their reporting of a story
because you could spend an hour in an interview saying very brilliant things and be shocked at
what piece of that was used and how maybe it was just a clip of a longer narrative. The thing
that we had to be cautious about is that there would be times when the media would report
just the angle they were looking at, and the story might focus on something vastly different
from what you were trying to get across. For the most part, it was useful for us to have the
media come because it got the story out there. That then helped with publicity, so that
donations could come in to help deal with the crisis that we were experiencing. It could also be
a negative, because there were times when the media could get it wrong or maybe take a
quote out of context and could ultimately hurt us. I would say for the most part the media
coverage was beneficial, it was for the most part accurate. The local Iowa media did a very good
job. We had some people who really wanted to portray what was really happening and get the
truth out there. I think Orlan Love from the Gazette did a fine job. I think a lot of television
media came in and they do a lot of initial reporting of the story and typically back away unless
there’s hot news or hot topics really happening. The Des Moines Register, some of the
reporters from there did a good job of delving more deeply into the stories to try to report
what was going on. So I’d have to say overall I was pretty pleased with the local media [45:00]
coverage. I was mostly pleased with the national coverage that we received. There were some
good reports through public radio and public television. There were other national reports that
were pretty decent. It was hard for anyone to come and spend the amount of time needed and to have the amount of time for a story that was necessary to really tell the true tale of Postville. I was disappointed that we didn’t have more news magazines come and maybe present a full half hour or a full hour on the story of Postville, because that would have been beneficial to telling the whole story. The media, I think, sometimes is a necessary companion as something like this is going on, but they also take up a lot of time and a lot of energy. As I said, you could have an hour interview and just have this small snippet that comes through. We did decide that one of the things we had to have was a media relations person. We did have a volunteer who was appointed to that task to try to filter what was going on and to not have us spend a lot of time talking to the media if we weren’t necessarily going to get benefit from it or if it was going to take us away from providing response, and time really spent where it was needed in dealing with the families that were in crisis. If I had to characterize it, I’d say overall I was pretty pleased with the media coverage and response. We were also cautious and needed to be cautious in the amount of time it was taking, and to know for sure what the perspective was going to be of the story so it didn’t end up being a hit piece on, whether it be anti-immigration or anti-illegal immigration or something that was ultimately going to harm or cloud the issue. Our issue was we had to respond to the needs of people who were affected by the raid. The politics and the discussions of the debate were not at all important to us at that time. Our focus had to be on the raid response.

*Can you tell me more about your volunteer activities in Postville, maybe the food pantry?*

Sure, the food pantry. I was kind of surprised when I came in to Postville. It was so well organized in 2005 that I just assumed it had been around for years. Well, it resulted from
another crisis that happened in Postville, the turkey plant [Iowa Turkey Products] that had burned down. If you come in on the west end of Postville you see the Agristar water tower and the plant, but in front of that had been the turkey plant. I remember that from my visits to Postville before I was ever a pastor here. After marrying Susan we’d visit Postville often. The turkey plant was another employer, a useful thing certainly. When it burnt down there was a realization that, hey, this is a small town and we just don’t have a lot of resources and we don’t have a way to respond. So a group came together and formed the Postville Community Support and it was the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Lutheran Church and the Jewish community and the Jewish Synagogue involved. Through Postville Community Support they came up with food, they came up with housing, and other kinds of things that were needed to deal with the workers of the plant who were affected by it burning down. The thing that lasted out of that was the food pantry. It was a collaboration of the religious organizations in town. I became a member because two of my parishioners said, we’re serving on this committee because we haven’t had a pastor and now you have to go do it. So I did. Then I became the treasurer very quickly because one of our members, Merle Turner, it was just becoming too much for her with some of her health concerns. So we went along, and it was a great group to be a part of, and a great thing because it offered food assistance (50:00) for low-income folks. That is primarily what Postville Community Support did then. Then, when the raid hit, the food pantry already existing was of incredible benefit because we had a resource right away that could help. And it was helpful that it was the same players who were involved in the raid response because we could tap into some resources that could bring help into the community. One of the great things about the
food pantry was that for people who maybe were a little squeamish about giving to help immigrants in the community who were not necessarily documented or were here illegally, they could give food. Food was pretty innocuous. Food was something that didn’t have a lot of political ramifications attached to it or they wouldn’t be making a statement about, oh I support the immigrants that are here or, gee I hate illegal immigration. You are just giving food to help families and children. So a lot of donations were channeled through the food pantry, or I shouldn’t say that, not ‘channeled through’ because that sounds like money laundering, channeled to the food pantry. So if someone didn’t feel comfortable giving to St. Bridget’s for the raid relief they would give to the food pantry. So we didn’t have to expend a whole lot of St. Bridget’s funds trying to get food to the people who needed it, that could come through the food pantry, and as well as supporting the workers who were still at Agriprocessors and supporting the families in need who had been coming to the food pantry since it started. We were able to keep that pantry operating throughout the time of the raid and still help the people who had been receiving help all along, but now really step up our response to help the people affected by the raid. I think I have been involved in it continuously for nine years, in fact I know I have continuously for nine years. It’s been a very helpful resource and something I have been happy to be a part of because of all that has been done through it. As the treasurer of the food pantry I worked very closely with St. Bridget’s in the response through that capacity. Then when Agriprocessors closed we had a second crisis develop. We had all of these workers who were suddenly affected by the closing of the plant. It went into bankruptcy [November 2012], and it didn’t technically close for very long because it was kept open under bankruptcy. But we then had a crisis- workers that were going to either lose their job or were panicking and
wanting to leave because their pay was going to be interrupted and affected. The pantry helped in that respect again. As the community responded to the bankruptcy of the plant, then we had a new team of people form to try to cope with that. St. Bridget’s still dealt with the raid response, but by then they had pulled enough resources together that I was able to leave that response to try to respond primarily to the plant going into closure and needing to get these workers moved to different places. Then, because we have the 501(C)3 designation and can take donations through the food pantry, we were asked to oversee the humanitarian response to the plant going into bankruptcy. So, money was brought in to help with that and then we were able to move people as needed. A good example, before going into bankruptcy Sholom Rubashkin had visited the island nation of Palau, which is in the Pacific, not too far from Guam, and convinced folks there to come work in the plant. Many of them had come. They had round trip tickets purchased. That was part of their requirement for coming, is that they’d be able to return if they didn’t like it. They were here, [55:00] many of them had settled in Postville, and then boom! Here’s the plant going into bankruptcy and the doors are closed and they don’t have work. Most of them chose to leave to try to seek work elsewhere in the country, or return to Palau. They had these tickets from Continental Airline, I believe it was, and some of them didn’t want to go back home. They wanted to move to another part of the country. So a lot of my time was spent on the phone trying to find out, well, how do we get them where they want to go, and if we get them where they want to go will they still have the ability to return to Palau if they decide to? And the answer was yes. So, through a little bit of work, actually a lot of work, and a little bit of finagling, and for fifty bucks, we could change one of the legs of their ticket. So instead of flying from Des Moines to Colorado they
could instead fly to Texas. Then at a future date if they wanted they could fly from Texas to California to Palau or Texas to New York to wherever, Japan, there’s just a whole host of things that were possible. That was one of the ways we were able to move people on. Others we would give Visa cash cards that they could use for fuel to drive somewhere else. We had plenty of people that we purchased bus tickets for. For those that decided to stay or while they stayed, the food pantry was able to provide them with food. In some cases we were able to help with rent or with mortgage payments through a state grant that came. So we went from this small town, little food pantry board that would be open a couple times a week to providing all kinds of resources for people to try to help them leave the community, or to stay while the plant reorganized after bankruptcy. So a volunteer opportunity that didn’t take much time every week in normal circumstances was able to grow and balloon into a seven day a week kind of a resource in a small town that met the needs of the people who were dealing with the bankruptcy of the plant. I am glad to say that after the raid and after the bankruptcy we were able to finally come back down to this much smaller Postville food pantry that is now open one day a week for three hours and helps to provide some assistance for people that need it to help make their food budget stretch. We do know that at times of crisis and when the need is there it can become much more and do much more. I moved from the treasurer to the president of the food pantry board, and remain the president now, just because I know how important that resource is and how useful it’s been. Not just as a small town food pantry, but also to help respond in much larger crises that have emerged.

*How has living and working in Postville affected you personally?*

Brackett_S_08092014
I think I have grown a lot. I think for somebody who is a first call pastor, normally when you come out of seminary, even for second career people with other life experiences, you usually end up in a smaller congregation. It can be a rural, usually is a rural, congregation or you end up as an assistant or associate pastor in a larger congregation, but to come to a community that is already hurting and already kind of reeling from all the changes that are happening, as a first call pastor was a great learning opportunity but also a huge challenge. Then two and a half years in, experience an immigration raid and help with that response, and then to deal with a few months later the bankruptcy of the largest employer and the changes that that meant, to have the vast [60:00] majority of the workers in your community ripped out of the community and replaced with others, and all of the transitions that have happened throughout that time. On the one hand, it has been an amazing learning opportunity, but it has been something I would not wish upon my worst enemy because of the level of, how do you even describe it? The level of pain and hurt I have witnessed over time and had to see. All of the controversies and all of the problems, and to try to be a voice of hope and a voice of faith throughout all of that has been a major challenge, but it’s also been an incredible opportunity to be a witness and to be someone who professes the Gospel, the Good News. Yeah, you have to be careful about that because I, as a Christian pastor, as a Lutheran pastor, profess the Good News of Jesus Christ. Not everyone is Christian. We have Jewish members of our community, we now have Muslim members of our community, we have some Christian members of our community that do not believe or profess in exactly the same way that I do as a Lutheran Christian. You want to bring that Good News and you want to have people show and express their faith and live their faith, but not do it in a way that says well you have to believe as I believe in
order to get help or in order to be saved or in order to have hope. I really find
that I walk a line of expressing my faith as I believe it is to be professed, or as I believe through
the Bible and the things that I believe. That hope has to be expressed to fellow Christians and to
my parishioners, but it also has to be expressed, given, and provided without any expectations
for people who are hurting, for people who are my neighbor, for people who would and should
get that help from anyone who is a person of faith, regardless of what that faith may be. It’s
been an amazing journey. It’s been a journey fraught with a lot of pain, suffering, tears, and
difficulties. It’s been a journey that I would not have avoided looking back now because of what
it’s done to me. If anything, it has reaffirmed my faith. It has reaffirmed my call to be a pastor in
this place rather than making me think why did I come here? Why did I do this? Why did I ever
accept a call to be a pastor and why did I ever accept a call to be a pastor here in Postville? I
have seen the changes that it’s made in the community and the members here. This was a
congregation that was already hurting. The previous three pastors to me were asked to leave
and were asked to leave the roster of the ELCA. They can no longer be pastors in the ELCA
Lutheran Church. That’s a hurting community within a larger community of Postville that’s also
hurting. For me, I’ve seen it as an opportunity to try to bring calm, to try to bring stability into a
place that was already hurting, and then was further devastated and further hurt by an
immigration raid, and then was further devastated and further hurt by the closing of the major
employer in the town when the plant closed. Being able to be a part of [65:00] that has been
quite a challenge and has caused a lot of personal growth and personal questioning and
certainly personal challenges. But, I think, perhaps, that I was called to be someone in this time
and in this place who could weather those storms and help people though it. I have met some
incredible people through this process that I never would have met. I have been able to work side by side with Sister Mary McCauley, Paul Rael, Pastor David Vasquez, Luz Marie Hernandez, Erik Camayd-Freixas, and just a whole host of people who have been shining examples of what can be done facing adversity and what can happen to change things if we work together and try hard together. The list of people is amazing, when I look at it, of the people I have worked with and fought with side by side and who have come to the aid of Postville- this little tiny northeastern Iowa town that could easily be ignored or forgotten. You can drive through in a matter of moments. Yet this has been the epicenter of a response to some terrible things, but more important than that, an epicenter of a story. A story of just resilience, a story of people not willing to give up. A story that hasn’t ended but continues to be told and continues to evolve and emerge of a community that’s been through a lot, and been through an amazing amount of transition, but is still here. It’s still here and it’s still operating. Within that we have this congregation that still has much to do, still has ministry, and still has a necessary part to play, and a very important part to play, in this community, and really, in this world. I think there is a lot yet to do. There is a lot of hope, there is a lot of possibilities that we still can’t even imagine that will play out over time throughout this community. The very things we see in this community are a lot of the things and the struggles that happen out there in the big cities and on the coasts, in our country and really throughout the world. I think we can be very proud of all that this community has accomplished under some very, very difficult, and challenging, and almost insurmountable obstacles and challenges. I think the people of Postville have every right to be very proud of this town and of its people. To me I just am humbled to be a part of it, and to have been a player in all of the things that have happened here. I think history will look back
and in many ways be amazed at what all has gone on in this little town, and that it has still survived and thrived.

Did you have any other closing comments you wanted to say before we wrap this up?

I think one thing I would say is you look at the diversity that is here in Postville and has been throughout, and I think a lot of times people hear diversity and they have a negative thought or negative connotation about it. And maybe you’re fearful because when you think diversity you think, that which is different from me. I think Postville is probably one of those places where if you really try and you embrace the diversity, you find it’s not something to be afraid of. It’s not something to look at and try to [70:00] run away from, but it is really something that can make you so much more if you embrace it, because of the experiences. That’s true whether it’s Ukrainians, or Russians, or Guatemalans, or Mexicans, or Somalis or whatever group it may be, I think we’re all enriched if we seek out others who are not like us and try to learn from them and let them learn from us. We can all be enriched through that experience rather than have to be worried about it or be fearful that it is going to be something bad or in some way harmful to us. I think that is one of the lessons of Postville that even people in large cities can learn from, that diversity is not something to be afraid of or to shun or shy away from. It’s something that we can embrace and that can really enrich our lives and make us more than what we are. It’s not our normal response. It’s normal for us to be afraid of people not like us. As I said at a diversity training here recently that I was a part of for Helping Services for Northeast Iowa, we’re programmed to be afraid of people who are not like us. It’s in our genes. We are programmed in our families and in our communities to be afraid of people who are not like us. We are the one species on earth that is capable of overcoming our programming, both our
genetic programming and our behavioral programming and family upbringing, to overcome that
and to embrace people who are different from us and not be afraid. That’s the thing, if nothing
else, that we can learn from the experiences here in Postville. That there are positive things
that can come from coming together as diverse people and living as one, living unified.

Well Pastor Brackett, thank you so much for talking to me today.

You are very welcome. [72:22]