

An Action Plan

For

“Born Again in Every Place”

The National Comprehensive Plan For Town and Country Ministry Of the The United Methodist Church

A challenge to the Church:

- Are we tired of viewing town and country churches as problems?
- Do we dream of energized, faithful, effective congregations in every place?
- Do we yearn for the renewal of ministry to communities in every possible place?
- Can we envision thousands of United Methodist disciples serving in town and country settings, motivated by the love of God to take up the cross of self-denial, freed for joyful obedience, committed to making disciples and to making a difference in their communities, so as to rekindle the historic fires of holiness of heart and life?

If we can dream in faith it can happen!

An Invitation to the Church:

Imagine what will happen when more than 25,000 United Methodist town and country churches in the United States catch a renewed vision of ministry in their communities, are supported and resourced for such work, and are affirmed in their importance to the church and its transformative work for the Kingdom of God.

Imagine what will happen when these congregations, their districts, and the annual conferences, and the Church of which they are part catch FIRE:

- Moving their **F**ocus from self-serving and survival to self-sacrificing Servanthood.
- Taking **I**nitiative for Christ’s ministry in their own community by no longer waiting to be “rescued,” but rather by activating themselves for service and witness.

- Recognizing and using the **Resources** available to them by giving up their notions of scarcity and inadequacy and embracing the abundance of God's gifts to them.
- Releasing the **Energy** they had expended in controlling a defeated and timid vision of God's call to ministry and liberating it for empowerment and promise.

This Action Plan for the National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry of the United Methodist Church invites the town and country congregations and the church as a whole to catch the FIRE of God's spirit, to be "born again in every place," and thus transformed for renewed and effective ministry in the places God has called us to live and to serve.

I. Task and Background

The 2000 General Conference of The United Methodist Church adopted a 14,000 word study report, "Born Again in Every Place," as the foundation document for a National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry in the United States of America, and mandated the formation of an implementation plan during the 2001-2004 quadrennium. As directed by the General Conference, the General Board of Global Ministries organized a task force to formulate A Plan of Action for *Born Again in Every Place*. The task force members came from five national program agencies, theological education, and from town and country constituencies across the Church, including persons serving within annual conference structures (see pages 11 and 12 for the members' names, affiliations and locations). The broad-based representation is in keeping with the fact that the National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry is a church-wide initiative, with administrative responsibilities assigned to the General Board of Global Ministries.

1. The Foundation Document

Born Again in Every Place is in large part a research document built upon extensive surveying of the assets, attitudes, and needs of rural and small town congregations. The denomination has more than 25,000 such congregations, some strong and confident and others weak and uncertain of their futures. Based on a survey of local churches in every annual conference, the foundation document celebrated the strong faith and ministry of rural congregations and registered the appeal from churches to better serve and strengthen the weak. That document also looked at such issues as the changing economic and social patterns in rural areas, the role of United Methodist connectionalism in the conduct of effective ministry, patterns of pastoral and lay leadership, and perceived needs in specified areas of ministry, such as evangelism, spiritual formation, community outreach, children and youth, finances, and communications. It took account of a variety of

productive ministry models, especially cooperative parish ministry, and it reported on the town and country ministry curricula in denominational theological seminaries.

The research indicated that whether strong or weak many town and country congregations feel left out of the current United Methodist system -- ignored within the connection. Few of the 1,623 responses in a comparative sample from 120 rural districts showed anger. The congregations represented typically pay their apportionments and proudly claim the name "United Methodist." They do wonder when their voices will again be heard in the councils of the Church. They wonder when rural images will again appear in United Methodist educational materials. They question why exemplary ministries of evangelism and community service are rarely reported or celebrated in the Church media. They ask where to look for assistance in learning how to minister to new populations, including influxes of former city-dwellers or non-English speaking immigrants. In other situations, where populations continue to decline, they wonder whether anyone in the connection is willing to share their anxieties.

Born Again in Every Place is not concerned only with weak and uncertain venues of ministry. It is equally interested in those locations of rural growth and vigor, models not only for other town and country settings but also living sermons for the whole connection. This Action Plan is vitally concerned that The United Methodist Church develop a philosophy less concerned with managing decline and more determined to boldly move in mission, especially where rural congregations are already seedbeds for mission.

An essential point of the document is that the Church is not divisible by geographical designations; but that urban, suburban, and rural congregations are inextricably linked to one another. The United States is a mission field, imperfectly evangelized and served. The thousands of United Methodist congregations are exactly the means, or the potential means, of enlarged mission and ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. New life in one sector fuels the whole and lethargy in one area burdens the whole. At the same time, social and cultural differences are parts of the whole, and ministry in a particular environment requires culturally-appropriate vocabularies, resources, and styles of leadership. Town and country settings are distinct cultural realities that deserve respect as part of a multi-cultural understanding of society and the church.

2. Broad Goals

Born Again in Every Place made no specific recommendations for town and country ministry but, rather, as a foundation document, outlined broad goals toward which to work in the implementation stage, in the development of an action plan. The five stated goals are:

- To enhance the effectiveness of United Methodist churches in town and country settings in the United States.
- To make the denomination more aware of and responsive to the assets and needs of town and country congregations.
- To strengthen the relations between town and country and urban worshipping

- To recognize, train, and utilize lay leadership in town and country ministries.
- To provide effective pastoral leadership for all town and country churches.

3. Developing the Action Plan

Review of the previous work led the task force to focus on two desired outcomes strongly indicated in *Born Again in Every Place*, in the research, and in the initial goals. These are:

- Effective ministries for town and country cultures and contexts
- Effective leadership for such ministries.

Achieving these outcomes depends both upon the rural church itself and upon the overall United Methodist response to the rural church.

The task force surveyed assets and resources for the development of effective pastoral and lay leadership already available within The United Methodist Church. It explored the primary contextual and cultural issues relevant to both effective leadership development and to positive understanding by leaders within the Church of the assets and needs of congregations in town and country settings. The decision was reached to organize the Action Plan around strategies for 1) developing, supporting, and affirming effective town and country ministry and 2) developing, strengthening, and sustaining effective leadership for town and country ministry.

A part of what the task force means by “effective” involves the development of a “learning/teaching culture” within The United Methodist Church, such that anyone who has information or experience shares it with others, and everyone learns from others. In such a culture, whatever information is gathered is made available and actively distributed to the whole church. A strong conviction guided this thinking, namely, that the gifts and expertise needed by the churches are present among the churches. The following Action Plan envisions open systems of communication that encourage and enable the sharing of data, information, ideas, models and experiences.

II. An Action Plan for Town and Country Ministry

1. Developing, supporting, and affirming effective ministries for town and country cultures and contexts.

A. Culture and Context: Education and Awareness

Understanding the rural context and the varieties of rural culture is a task for the Church as a whole as well as for local congregations. Rural communities are changing in profound ways. The effectiveness of each rural congregation and the value of the connectional system to them

require that United Methodists keep abreast of social, economic, political, and demographic changes, even while retaining cherished place-specific traditions.

Local congregations are called to know their communities and the broader context in which they function. Denominational leaders, and especially those in annual conferences with rural congregations, are called to comprehend the complex realities of contemporary rural life. They need also to appreciate long-established rural cultures as vital parts of a multi-cultural society. These are aspects of God's call to ministry wherever it may take place.

Strategy One: Study of *Born Again in Every Place* and the Action Plan

- **Annual Conferences:** Bishops, district superintendents, connectional ministry staff members and others in positions to affect town and country ministry are called to collectively a) study these documents to increase awareness of town and county issues, b) develop a plan for disseminating the comprehensive plan documents to local church leadership (in all settings), along with suggestions for study, and 3) select or formulate and implement at least one town and country goal or objective derived from the study. Superintendents are encouraged to synchronize local church studies and schedule subsequent report-back sessions on district levels.

This study should be completed within one year after the close of the 2004 General Conference.

The General Board of Global Ministries, United Methodist Communications, and the United Methodist Publishing House will collaborate in providing the study documents in print or electronic versions at no charge to conferences, districts, and congregations.

Annual Conferences may wish to call upon the several rural centers within the connection to assist in their studies of the "Born Again in Every Place" documents.

Written reports on the three aspects of the conference-level studies should cover such issues as how goals and objectives were determined, what the annual conference leaders learned, and how the conference will proceed in the future to develop, support, and affirm town and country ministry. Reports may contain data collected and mention resources found to be particularly helpful. The General Board of Global Ministries will receive these reports and will publish the findings for the benefit of the whole Church.

- **General Agencies:** All general agencies that resource ministry through the connection are called to organize studies of the foundational document and action plan for staff members and boards of directors, with requests that offices and

Strategy Two: Form a General Church Team on Town and Country Ministries

- A General Church Team on Town and Country Ministries will be organized for the 2005-2008 quadrennium (to be in place by June 30, 2005). The team will promote collaboration among the several general church agencies as the Action Plan for Town and Country Ministry is implemented. Participating agencies will include the Boards of Church and Society, Discipleship, Global Ministries, and Higher Education and Ministry; the General Council on Ministries; the General Council on Finance and Administration; the General Commissions on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, Religion and Race, Status and Role of Women; United Methodist Communications, the United Methodist Publishing House, and others as appropriate. Team members will be named by the agency or organization and may be staff or directors.

The Council of Bishops will provide two members of the Team, one of whom will be designated by the Council as chair.

The General Secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries will initially convene the team, and that Board will provide administrative services through the Office of Town and Country Ministry, although each agency will cover the meeting or consultation costs of its participants.

- Study of the comprehensive and action plans will be among the initial tasks of the team.
- Assist in implementing strategies three, four and five below.

Strategy Three: Develop a system of feedback and data collection/sharing.

- Annual Conferences, districts, town and country congregations, and general church agencies are called upon to identify and share information on educational and program resources that prove helpful in developing, supporting, and affirming effective ministry for town and country culture and contexts; this information is to be shared with the general church agencies with specific responsibilities for town and country ministries, and with the editors of Church School and other educational materials.
- The General Board of Global Ministries and the General Board of Discipleship are called upon to collaborate in setting up and maintaining a database of concepts, ideas, and resources that can assist both congregations and annual conferences in implementing the comprehensive plan; that this information be utilized by United Methodist Communications, curriculum planners, and

- Become self-conscious within the denomination of the importance of giving voice to the voiceless in every place, including town and country settings.

B. Discerning Local Mission and Ministry

The Gospel requires that each congregation lay claim to its community as a place of mission and ministry and be energized by God’s spirit of FIRE to make disciples and to make a difference in their place. Implementation of the comprehensive plan on the local level, and the enhancement of a learning-teaching culture in The United Methodist Church, will lead to more effective ministry in town and country settings.

Strategy Four: Gather and disseminate effective models and promising practices of town and country ministry.

- Areas of emphasis. Six are delineated in *Born Again in Every Place*:
 - a. The “visioning” process by which rural congregations plan their mission and ministry,
 - b. The development of cooperative ministries, parishes, and projects, including ecumenical shared ministries,
 - c. The ways of addressing social, economic, and demographic changes in rural settings,
 - d. The ways of effectively encountering and engaging new populations (e.g. minorities, retirees, urban migrants, seasonal residents),
 - e. Approaches to systemic justice issues (ranging from racism to violations of land and water), and
 - f. Identification of emerging issues.
- Information gathering. Collect information utilizing the components of the connection: Districts, annual conferences, general agencies, networks (such as United Methodist Rural Fellowship and Rural Chaplains), rural centers, seminaries, and ecumenical groups. The General Church Team on Town and Country Ministry will work out a system of data collection and seek specific service commitments from appropriate agencies.
- Information dissemination. The sharing of the data will be done by various means, including print, audio-visual resources, the Internet, and formal and informal study courses. Electronic “list serves” can disseminate valuable information with minimum operational costs. Collaborations may be possible with existing Internet sites and services devoted to rural ministry. The availability of town and country ministry models and resources will need to be promoted and underscored through tasteful marketing devices.

Strategy Five: Development of Feedback Channels from Town and Country Churches

- Solicit and share responses from rural congregations to the models and other resources provided: Are they helpful, how and how not? Share these responses.
- Use field visits organized on conference and district levels to gain information, evaluations, testimonials, and to hear of challenges and opportunities. Share these insights.
- Develop ways to recognize “born again” or “on FIRE” congregations.

2. Developing, strengthening, and sustaining effective leadership for town and country ministries.

A. The Nature of Leadership

Leadership in The United Methodist Church and its congregations is both a gift to and a responsibility of all believers, laity and clergy, men and women, because all share the ministry of Christ Jesus. The following strategies affirm this fundamental Protestant tenet. They also acknowledge that leadership at various times and places take different forms and roles. Often, differing roles are drawn for “clergy” and “lay” leadership, and there are functional distinctions. This plan recognizes specific clergy and lay responsibilities but it typically speaks of “pastoral” and “lay” roles.

Many town and country churches are not served by “clergy” in the form of ordained elders. They are increasingly served by licensed local pastors, lay pastors, laity assigned, and lay speakers. This is a pattern that is likely to continue and expand in the future, and it out of the grace of God that The United Methodist Church recognizes and encourages the pastoral capacities of the laity. The Church’s flexibility in regard to pastoral responsibility is one of its great strengths, historically making it possible to move quickly in establishing new faith communities on many types of frontiers. A reemphasis on this part of the Methodist DNA can release energy to meet contemporary challenges.

Some proposed actions below relate specifically to pastors/clergy or to lay leadership but unless noted the strategies apply to all.

Strategy Six: Develop delivery systems of educational opportunities for pastoral leadership, lay leadership, and pastoral/clergy-laity ministry teams.

- Include effective leadership models and styles in the data gathering and dissemination specified in Strategies Four and Five above.

- Provide orientation on district or annual conference levels for clergy appointed for the first time to town and country settings; affirm the call to and place of persons in rural ministry.
- Develop town and country ministry certification process, utilizing existing educational venues, the Internet, district conferences, and training taken to rural communities; the fundamental contents to be developed by the General Boards of Higher Education and Ministry, Discipleship, and Global Ministries, with technical assistance in long-distance learning from United Methodist Communications.
- Develop and maintain rural ministry mentoring and/or coaching through cooperative parishes, districts, and annual conferences, using existing and emerging models.
- Include town and country ministry prominently in the Course of Study and in seminary curricula; every United Methodist seminary should offer courses in rural ministry, and one seminary in each jurisdiction should provide a specialty in this field.
- Provide skill development training for local pastors on district and annual conference levels.
- More strategic utilization of the several rural life centers in The United Methodist Church as leadership training facilities.
- Develop district and conference Rural Lay Institutes that provide practical skills and affirm the call to ministry in baptism.
- The General Church Team on Town and Country Ministry (see Strategy Two) will provide guidance and assistance in accomplishing these goals.

Strategy Seven: Prepare a Town and Country Ministry Toolkit to resource and extend training opportunities.

- Key contents will include resources to equip pastoral leaders in practical skills, such as strategic planning, conflict resolution, community development, and cooperative ministry.
- Other resources will foster great lay leadership initiatives, such as the development of lay specialists who assist congregations beyond their own, skills in grant writing, Internet site development and utilization, and the fundamentals of pastor-lay leadership teams.
- Resources to help new rural clergy
- Models and “here’s how” resource on rural “teaching congregations,” with a goal of at least one in every annual conference by 2008, with particular attention to ministry with new populations, children and youth, and community development.

Strategy Eight: Deployment of more rural ministry specialists.

- Reemphasize the rural focus of Church and Community Workers and enlarge the pool of this category of missionary personnel.
- Develop “rural missionaries” in collaboration with the General Board of Global Ministries, the ethnic ministry plans, racial/ethnic caucuses, Rural Chaplains, and United Methodist Rural Fellowship.
- Develop volunteer “intentional rural interims” and seminary rural interns.

B. Collaboration and Cooperation to Develop, Strengthen, and Sustain Leadership

The future of United Methodist ministry in town and country settings depends on efforts across the connection to develop, strengthen and sustain leadership. The General Church Team on Town and Country Ministry (see Strategy Two) will serve as a symbol of United Methodist determination to identify and fuel FIRE (see above, page ___) in rural congregations and communities. Congregations themselves will find strength in local and regional collaboration and cooperation.

Strategy Nine: Promote the transference of leadership skills among the several ministry settings.

- Employ the General Church Team on Town and Country Ministry (Strategy Two) as a means to promote the transference of effective leadership skills among rural, urban, and suburban ministry settings, affirming the indivisibility of the church.
- Promote ecumenical cooperative parishes and projects on local and regional levels.
- Build an advocacy network within the connection to promote the implementation of Town and Country plan and its leadership components.

C. Research and Reporting

A lack of demographic data on town and country churches severely hampered the work of the comprehensive plan teams across two quadrennia. While recognizing that “rural,” “town and country,” and “suburban” may have overlapping geographical and demographical implications, the Church faces the task of obtaining comprehensive data that can help to define locus and focus of ministry.

Strategy Ten: Initiate research and revise reporting forms to produce more accurate and comprehensive data on town and country churches and their communities.

- National program boards, the General Council on Ministries, and the General Council on Finance and Administration are called upon to engage in research on rural demographics, key rural issues and leadership questions, and to disseminate this information throughout the Church.

- Devise ways to address financial and demographic issues in low per capita income and low population density areas, with the objective of determining adequate pastoral salary bases.
- Update statistical year-end statistical report forms so that a congregation can self-identify its context and setting for ministry (that is, town and country/rural, urban, suburban, and other), and make this information easily accessible to the whole church.
- Petition the Commission on the General Conference to schedule a report on the product of this comprehensive plan and a celebration of town and country ministry on the floor of the 2008 General Conferences, utilizing worship, media, and testimonial.

Conclusion

This Action Plan envisions The United Methodist Church as “a connection of congregations, institutions, and boards and agencies that are joyful and vital centers for Christian discipleship in every place.” [*Daily Christian Action Advance Edition 2000*, p. 850]. It is offered us a series of practical next steps on the journey toward becoming a denomination of congregations on FIRE in the ministry of Jesus Christ in every place. The Action Plan recognizes and anticipates powerful and passionate witness to Jesus Christ in the smallest, most remote places and in places of power and large populations.

The future of town and country ministry, as one locus of making disciples and making a difference, rests primarily with the congregations, as they are resources and strengthened by the connection. The United Methodist Church thrives as it upholds and celebrates that connection wherever it is found. Upholding and celebrating town and country ministry provides a sense of wholeness and can reawaken the family of faith to our responsibility in all places. We have too long treated the rural church as a “problem,” but we have a chance to repent and change our ways. Many town and country congregations LIVE, and others can live again, through the Spirit of God. They do, and can, bring FIRE to our denomination as it ministers in cities, villages, on prairies and mountains, by the sea sides, and in the forests of this world.

Implementation of this Action Plan by congregations, districts, annual conferences, and national agencies will plant the seeds of the Gospel. And this act of faith will bring an abundant harvest of disciples, men and women who make a difference in their community and who confound the mighty and uplift the weary of an all too often cold and hopeless modern world.

Possible Appendices on Demographics

Team Members:

Annual Conference and Local--

The Rev. Randy Beeler, pastor, Byran, Texas

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Judy Bortner Heffernan, director, Heartland Center for Town and Country Ministry,
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Carolyn Little, Rural Chaplain, McColl, South Carolina
Gary Locklear, missionary, Pembroke, North Carolina
The Rev. Carol Thompson, pastor and director, Western Small Church
Center, New Meadows, Idaho, and Executive Secretary, Office of Town and
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The Rev. Alan Rice, district superintendent, North Wilksboro, North Carolina

General Agency—

General Board of Global Ministries

Lynda Byrd, assistant general secretary
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General Board of Discipleship

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