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# Rural Church Organizations in the United States

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## The Rural Church Network

by Dave Ruesink

*Executive Secretary, Rural Church Network*

The Rural Church Network of the United States and Canada (RCN) was established in the 1980s when two groups who had previously met separately decided to meet together. One group was made up of church lay leaders wanting to share ideas about how to do rural ministry more effectively. The other group was made up of denominational staff with rural portfolios who thought it would be beneficial to share information and see if there were common concerns that they could work on together to be more useful. After they joined forces, they met twice a year, usually once in Washington, D.C., and once in a different location in the United States. This worked well as long as there was denominational support for a person on the staff to work on rural issues. In its most effective time, there were as many as forty participants at a meeting. As time marched on, denominational support started to decline to the point that there is now only one denomination, the United Church of Christ, which has a national staff member devoted to full time rural work. All other denominations have relegated rural work to someone part time and usually a “small part” of their time.

The Rural Church Network today has evolved and adapted to the times. It is made up of a few seminaries and non-profit agencies with a rural component. It is chaired by the Director of the Center for Theology and Land at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dr. Mark Yackel-Juleen. The current emphasis of the Rural Church Network is to provide a continuing education program called Discovering the Uniqueness of Rural Communities (DURC). This program intends to provide an online source of information relating to several rural components. It will be available to both church and community leaders desiring to have a better understanding of the community where they are living and working.

Another function of the Rural Church Network is to provide email messages related to social, economic, and cultural

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information for the members who are subscribed to the mailing list. This information is gathered from many sources, but mainly from academic and professional organizations, or members who find something that they think would be of interest to the rest of the membership.

## Rural Social Science Education

Rural Social Science Education (RSSE), now known as “Discovering the Rural Community,” is a program designed to help local church leaders to develop more effective relations with the people in their communities and with their religious colleagues while discovering the uniqueness of rural ministry.

RSSE was established in the late 1980s when Bob Greene, the national Director for Rural Ministry at the Episcopal Church and part time priest at a small Episcopal Church in Luling, Texas, came to Texas A&M University with a special request. He noted that more than one half of the students graduating from seminary are from “tall steeple” churches, while their first call is to a church in a rural or small town. This causes “cultural shock” for either the minister or the minister’s spouse in many cases. Greene wanted a

training program that would assist the clergy with adjusting more easily in their new assignment.

An ecumenical committee of about ten clergy and lay leaders from all around Texas was formed to explore ways to accommodate this request. The final committee recommendation was to develop a small group continuing education program that could be organized in the local community. This committee suggested about eight topics that would be most useful to include. At first it was thought that there might be a rural sociology book that could be used as a text for this study. After consultation with the president of the Rural Sociology Society, it was determined that the topics deemed important were not available in a single book and that it would be better to find original writings for each theme. The topics included the basics of rural social science, the rural scene, culture and values, economic base, dynamics of leadership and power, the political structure, and affecting change.

While the material was being gathered, Dave Ruesink, from Texas A&M University, and Bob Greene visited with administrators at the University of the South, an Episcopal Seminary that had a continuing education program for students interested in studying theology, who could not attend a seminary. This was called “Theological Education by Extension.” The faculty was very helpful with suggesting ways that their program could be adapted to RSSE. Rural sociologists, agricultural economists, and political scientists were contacted to contribute papers related to each topic. Gary Farley, a rural sociologist on the staff at the Southern Baptist Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, was asked to be the general editor to pull the papers together.

The final product consisted of a looseleaf notebook with five to twelve articles covering each topic. These were used by groups of six to twelve people who gathered for about three hours on a weekly basis for twelve weeks. Each group had a facilitator, not a teacher, that organized a colleague group and provided the connection between the group and the organizing office. Social science knowledge was not needed to become a facilitator. Responsibilities included: helping the group make decisions about meeting times and places, assisting in selecting appropriate readings, creating opportunities for each person to participate in discussions, conducting low-level community research, and making additional study resources available to the group.

Each participant agreed to devote thirty-six hours to group participation and an equal amount of time for preparation. The distinctive of the program was that after reading the articles, participants discussed how their experiences related or did not relate to those articles. The group members would then divide into small groups and go into the community to discuss the topic under consideration with community leaders. For example, if the topic was on economic development, they would talk with business leaders and others who were involved with local economic development. At the next group meeting they reported on their findings. The next week they would do another topic, such as education, and then go to community leaders, such as school administrators and teachers, for their viewpoints. Each week a

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different set of leaders were interviewed. As new material was discovered, it would be added to the notebook.

In the initial offering, RSSE was tested in Texas and three other states. It was discovered that not only did newly called ministers desire to participate, but also many “seasoned” church leaders, both clergy and laity, were interested in validating their personal insights, sharing their experiences, and discovering new resources from the educational material. One participant said, “I have lived in my community for over sixty years, and this is the first time that I really understood my own community because I was able to see it from a completely different viewpoint.”

Another minister said that he thought his sermons were well-grounded in theology, but after a few years of continued decline in the church membership, he found that he was not including the community in his sermons and outreach. He changed his approach and involved the church in community ministry and mission. The result was that church membership increased both from the return of members who had quit coming and residents who never attended before. Another minister was told by a community leader that the only time they ever heard from church leadership was when the church felt there was an issue that the community leader needed to address. This minister learned that it was healthy to have the church leaders coming to the community leaders to talk about what was going on and how the church could be part of those activities.

Alternative styles of colleague meetings for the thirty-six hours of interaction included: meeting weekly for three hours at a time, meeting every other week for three hours at a time, meeting monthly for three or six hours at a time, combining the meetings with other gatherings (such as a monthly cluster group), having a forty-eight-hour retreat with one and a half to three hours devoted to each topic, or as part of some other conference.

The program is currently centered at Wartburg Theological Seminary where it is being digitized so that it can be used as an online continuing education program anywhere in the world.

## Rural Chaplains Association

by Roger Grace

*President, Rural Chaplains Association*

*Member, Core Leadership Team*

The farm crisis in the United States and elsewhere around the world in the 1980s was the impetus that led to the founding of the Rural Chaplains Association (RCA). Many family farmers who had lived and worked in small towns and rural areas for generations were faced with mounting debt that resulted in the loss of their income, lands, and homes. Families that had lived on the same land for generations were forced to sell and begin again. It was a time of despair in many rural, town, and country settings. Mental health issues, lack of care, and suicides were rampant. Often the church was the “first responder” for those in anguish. Rural chaplains, both lay and clergy, came to stand with and support rural people, their communities, and churches.

The objectives of RCA include:

1. To experience the rich diversity of people, cultures, and traditions that contribute to life in rural communities.
2. To gain perspectives on the state of rural communities, environmental/land use, economic challenges, and religious/family life concerns.
3. To learn from Native Americans, First Nation People, and other ethnic populations regarding past and present issues/struggles/opportunities.
4. To provide consequential learning experiences in working with others to advocate for justice.
5. To facilitate training experiences on cooperative styles of ministry as a way of working together to enrich the ministry of the churches as well as serving community needs.
6. To create a greater awareness of the church around the world by holding periodic focus events in and beyond the United States.

Recognizing that in some settings the church was the only local institution readily available to many rural communities, the Rev. Dr. Harold McSwain, and the Rev. Dr. J. Brien McGarvey in Ohio and the Rev. Dr. Dorsey Walker in Alabama, combined efforts to create the organization that became the Rural Chaplains Association. It was decided that both lay and clergy with a variety of skills and specializations would be included as Rural Chaplains. While the RCA was created within the structure of the United Methodist Church General Board of Global Ministries, it has been from its inception an ecumenical body. Over its lifetime Rural Chaplains have come from the United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Roman Catholic Church, Presbyterian Church U.S.A, United Church of Canada, The Episcopal Church, Russian Methodist Church, the Methodist

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Church of Great Britain, Disciples of Christ, and others.

The primary goal of the Rural Chaplains Association is to promote connections among people living and serving in rural areas and to provide training and learning experiences for leadership and personal development of Rural Chaplains. RCA was officially founded in 1991 in Louisville, Kentucky, when forty Rural Chaplains were certified. Among the initial Chaplains certified there were seven lay persons and thirty-three clergy with nine being women. Chaplains came from twenty-two Annual Conferences across all five Jurisdictions of the United Methodist Church in the United States. Since that time, the RCA has had Chaplains come from Canada, Mexico, Russia, Great Britain, and Kenya among other countries.

The process for becoming a Rural Chaplain is well-defined. Candidates must receive recommendations from their local congregation, a judicatory leader, attend a Focus Event for training, and participate in the fellowship of RCA. Due to Covid-19, some of the process has been modified to allow for interviews of candidates, fellowship, networking, and some training to be accomplished by video conferencing. However, after three years of being apart, the first post-Covid-19 in-person Focus Events were held in Southeastern Ohio in October 2022. RCA and Fort Scott, Kansas in October 2023.

The Annual Focus Events are the tool that RCA employs to provide training, fellowship, networking, and the administrative work of the organization. The Events are planned by the RCA to provide both lay and clergy persons a supportive setting for sharing insights and perspectives on rural churches and

communities. Special emphasis has been placed on responding to hatred and violence and identifying ways to advocate for justice among all people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, or economic status. The intent is to create increased understanding about the issues of environment, pollution, global warming, food production, and multi-national economics that impact farmers, workers, migrants, and rural businesses and communities. Our Focus Events bring together dynamic, innovative practitioners from many areas to share vital ministries that are transforming communities, institutions, and congregations across the United States and beyond.

Focus Events over the years have taken place in a variety of settings and have dealt with several different issues concerning those living and serving within rural communities. The belief that as Christians we are stronger when working together, has led to a commitment on the part of RCA to regularly promote cooperative parishes and cooperative ministries. The 1995 Focus Event met in conjunction with the 4<sup>th</sup> National Consultation on Cooperative Parish Ministry. The theme for the gathering was: Shaping Communities of Hope for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Additionally, RCA has met with the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> Consultations on Cooperative Parish Ministry. Those gatherings have occurred about once every four years and have been instrumental in recognizing and encouraging cooperation between local churches, communities, denominations, and government entities.

In response to the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, RCA worked with the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church to provide three workshops across the U.S. that focused on combatting terrorism and hate groups. Among the resources provided to participants was a book titled, *When Hate Groups Come to Town*.

Among the most popular Focus Events held by RCA over the years has been the international events. The 1998 Event was held on the Mexico/U.S. border in Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico. Training was offered on immigration and asylum, farm worker issues and housing, and poverty and hunger. Shortly after the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon, Rural Chaplains met in Guatemala under the guidance of Peacework, to learn about working toward reconciliation following the civil war in that country and to gain insights into the work of the coffee plantations there.

Another border event was held in 2002 in Dearborn, Michigan, and Ontario, Canada, to study “Sustainable Communities in an Era of Globalization.” The event was held in conjunction with the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. The 2007 gathering was held in Puebla, Mexico, and included a visit to the United Methodist mission site, Give Ye Them to Eat. It is a rural mission south of Puebla, which focuses on providing health care, training on sanitation, cooking, and sustainability.

The 2023 RCA Focus Event took place in Fort Scott, Kansas. Fort Scott is in an area of southeast Kansas that is struggling economically; the population there continues to shrink, and addiction continues to rise. Participants visited successful rural

ministry sites, assisted in a feeding program in a local church, and learned about the work of a congregation that helps address the needs of low-income families in the area. Panel discussions addressed the efforts that go into accomplishing ministry in settings that have cross-cultural leadership in small town and country or rural areas. Additionally, we examined how to reduce hunger by increasing access to fresh, healthy produce and teaching people to grow, cook, and preserve their own foods. An asset-based approach increases the quality of life for individuals, communities, and beyond.

The Rural Chaplains Association has worked to establish partnerships with the United Methodist Rural Advocates, United Methodist Appalachian Ministry Network, the Rural Church Network, and the International Rural Church Association. We are interested in partnering with other groups that share similar goals and values.

For those who may be interested in becoming a member of the Rural Chaplains Association, our application process includes:

1. Recommendation from your local congregation and a judicatory leader
2. Attendance at a Focus Event
3. An interview with a committee composed of Rural Chaplains
4. Approval by the Core Leadership Team
5. Rural Chaplains are expected to attend at least one Focus Event every three years, submit an annual report of their activities, and be current in their membership dues.

To learn more about the Rural Chaplains Association or for more information on our upcoming Focus Event, please visit <https://rcahome.org/>

## United Methodist Rural Advocates

by Randy L. Wall

*President, United Methodist Rural Advocates*

The United Methodist Rural Advocates is a faith-based organization that has a primary focus on rural issues within the United Methodist Church (UMC). It was founded in 1940 at the General Conference of the Methodist Church by rural church leaders across the United States who felt the Methodist Church was losing its focus on rural churches and rural communities. The name of the organization was originally Methodist Rural Fellowship. When the Methodist Church transitioned in 1968 to becoming the United Methodist Church, the organization became known as the United Methodist Rural Fellowship. The name was changed around 2014 to become the United Methodist

Rural Advocates to emphasize that the organization was more than a group where people gather for “fellowship” but was an action group that advocates for rural people, rural churches, and rural communities.

While church leaders saw many changes in the rural focus of the Methodist Church through the organization now known as the United Methodist Rural Advocates (founded in 1940), more changes have come to rural America in the subsequent decades. These changes include:

1. Family farms have been sold as farmers died and their heirs chose to move away from rural communities. Land has been sold for housing subdivisions in suburban communities or to large corporations that have entered the agricultural industry.
2. People born and raised in rural communities who went away to college in urban or suburban centers have remained after college to live and work in those areas.
3. Large retailers (such as Walmart) have moved into rural communities with an adverse impact on local businesses and their livelihood.
4. Small manufacturing plants located in rural areas have closed as those industries faced increased competition from manufacturing companies outside the U.S.
5. Access to health care in rural areas is limited due to closure of rural hospitals and a smaller number of physicians in rural areas per capita when compared to health professionals in urban and suburban areas.

While the above changes in the rural U.S. have been the trend for decades, there have been some changes in recent years. For example, one of the trends from the COVID-19 pandemic has involved some people desiring to flee urban and suburban areas, since they can now work remotely. I think of a married couple who moved from a suburb in North Carolina to the rural mountains of North Carolina because his employer, Bank of America, now allowed him to work remotely through the internet. Another recent trend from COVID-19 has been an increased use of telehealth services with doctors and mental health professionals. I think of a mental health counselor who lives in New Mexico and sees many of her clients virtually via the internet. This is a positive development for people in rural communities because it means, provided they have internet service, that they can have greater access to primary health and mental health services.

Though rural America has changed dramatically since the United Methodist Rural Advocates (and its predecessor organizations) was founded in 1940, one thing has not changed: the focus of the United Methodist Rural Advocates on rural churches, rural people, and rural communities. The United Methodist Rural Advocates raises a voice to the United Methodist Church in particular and to the world in general about the needs of rural churches, rural people, and rural communities. There are many things that seek our attention in the world where we live

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and in the United Methodist Church. Without diminishing other voices that seek our attention, we need to recognize that rural churches, rural people, and rural communities are an important asset to the wellbeing of the world where we live. In the early days of the Methodist movement in the 1700s, rural churches were planted in rural communities, and they continue to be a wonderful asset today. Rural people also have been an important asset for our world. For example, President Jimmy Carter was raised in a rural community and has spent his final years living in the same rural community where he was raised. Rural people, like Carter, have touched the U.S. and the world far beyond Plains, Georgia. Above all, rural communities continue to have a huge impact on our world, for it is in rural communities where much of the food that we eat is grown.

The place where the United Methodist Rural Advocates has done most of its work as an advocate has been at the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, a gathering of clergy and lay leaders across the globe who meet every four years to “conference” on how the UMC will be in mission and do the work of the church. At these quadrennial gatherings, the United Methodist Rural Advocates are present to make sure that the work and mission of the church proposed and passed by church leaders is compatible with and in the best interest of rural communities, rural churches, and rural people. Unfortunately, many of the clergy and lay leaders who attend these gatherings are far removed from rural communities, rural churches, and rural people. The United Methodist Rural Advocates seeks to remind laity and clergy across the globe that the work and mission of the church must take rural churches, rural people, and rural communities into serious consideration.

A new and emerging focus of the United Methodist Rural Advocates has been to offer “seed grants” to creative ministries in rural churches and rural communities. When COVID-19 came into our lives and world in 2020, this meant that large gatherings like the General Conference of the United Methodist Church were not able to meet. Since the United Methodist Rural

Advocates had spent most of its focus on the General Conference gatherings, the group pivoted to look at how it might still have an impact. As the United Methodist Rural Advocates heard of new ministries being born even during the COVID-19 crisis, it decided to offer seed grants to rural churches doing creative ministry. For example, one rural church offered free meals to people in the community. Another church offered a Personal Care pantry, insofar as many food pantries offer foodstuffs but do not offer items like toothpaste. Some of the rural churches that received the seed grants were featured on a national webinar that the United Methodist Rural Advocates organized in 2023.

What is the future of the United Methodist Rural Advocates? That is unclear. None of us have a crystal ball to gaze into the future and know for certainty what the future will hold. Who among us would have surmised that so many facets of national and international life would be adversely affected by a disease like COVID-19 and its aftermath? The uncertainty of the future for the United Methodist Rural Advocates is even more murky because of a schism happening in the United Methodist Church. What we do know is that this nation and the church have faced troubling and changing times in the past. To paraphrase the words of Jesus, we will always have the poor among us and we will also have rural people, rural churches, and rural communities among us. What I know for certain is that God is faithful, and God will see us through the changes and challenges.