



The United Methodist Rural Fellowship
(Soon to be U. M. R. Advocates)
Bulletin

Strong Rural Churches Build Strong Rural Communities!

Volume LXIII

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Missing Plan?

By Ed Kail, UMRF past president

On Thursday, the Global Ministries legislative committee approved several pieces of legislation related to rural ministries for which we are thankful. The committee will also consider several plans for mission and ministry with several ethnic/language constituencies of the church, and we rejoice in those as well. But, we want to point out that one plan is missing: the National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministries in the U.S., aka “Born Again in Every Place.”

The development of a T&C plan was authorized by the 1996 General Conference. It was funded and approved for implementation in 2000 at Cleveland. A “Local Church Action Guide” was written, and a plan for dissemination throughout the church was devised. Before it could be implemented, GBGM reorganized and simultaneously the Office of Town and Country Ministries was vacated by retirement.

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Hospitality Center

Contact Info: 740-707-2901

Hours: 7 AM to 7 PM

(fellowship, light meals, snacks)

Website: www.umrf.org

Office

Hours: 7 AM to 7 PM

(copies, computers)

Sheraton Riverwalk Hotel

200 North Ashley Drive

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Konica Minolta is pleased to provide the printing capabilities for the United Methodist Rural Fellowship at General Conference.

Rhonda Gledhill 813-297-8229

Konica Minolta Faith Based Representative

RGledhill@kmb.konicaminolta.us



A subgroup of the Discipleship Committee discusses General Conference legislation as Mollie Stewart (far right), UMRF observer, takes notes.

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The Action Guide was posted on the GBGM website as a gesture toward resourcing local churches, districts and annual conferences.

UMRF publicized the Plan and the Action Guide over the intervening years, and members of the Fellowship provided leadership for workshops on using the Action Guide. We could always at least point to the GBGM-UMC.org website as a source for downloading resources. But the responsibility for championing T&C and the Comprehensive Plan was passed around and parceled out among busy, sympathetic and well-meaning staff. Eventually, the Office of Rural-Urban Networking was established, but without time to develop any strategy regarding “Born Again: the Action Guide”.

Now we find that that resource has been removed from the GBGM website. People in the field who want a context-specific resource for developing vision for mission in rural communities will need to look elsewhere. UMRF members who worked on the Plan/Guide feel that it never really had a chance to fulfill its potential for practitioners in the field. The current anxiety about general agencies now further complicates the situation.

We will be talking with our partners at GBGM and RUN about resources for the future. But in the meantime, couldn't the one resource we spent hours and dollars on be made available to the Church?



“Circles”: Proven Strategy To Fight Poverty

Circles asserts that in order for families with low income to improve their situation, they must have

--bonding social capital (trustworthy friends within the community); and

--bridging and linking social capital (people who can offer information, contacts, support) to access the resources available to higher income networks.

The primary participant is a family working to get out of poverty. The family is the **Circle Leader** and sets the direction for activities and actions which will result in their emergence from poverty. Circles are conducted in cohorts of up to 25, to ensure that Circle Leaders have peer support from each other (bonding social capital) as well as the support of their **Circle Allies** (bridging social support).

Each cohort begins with training for Circle Leaders as a group, using a variety of training curriculums. During the first few months of Circle Leader training, participants assess their current relationships, resources and reason or purpose for making the necessary changes to escape from poverty permanently.

It is during this time that Allies are also attending training sessions that increase awareness of poverty issues within the families with which they will be matched. They also become aware of issues that affect the community as a whole. Both the **Circle Leader and Ally Training** curriculum teaches participants to understand better the “hidden rules” or “social norms” associated with class in the US as well as how to build a long-term vision for their future both individually as well as for the community. Looking at poverty in a more holistic manner is necessary for both Circle Leaders and Allies once they are matched in an intentional team for a minimum of 18 months.

Helping each family set and achieve goals unique to their own needs will be the responsibility of **Circle Allies**, who are middle to upper income



community volunteers. Leaders and Allies meet monthly to build relationship, review goals that have been set, and discuss and problem-solve barriers to getting out of poverty, such as improving self-sufficiency, expanding social networks, and enhancing academic performance of both children and parents.

Moving forward, **Weekly Community Meetings** gather Circle Leaders, Circle Allies, and other interested community members to provide support and networking opportunities. Big View Meetings are held once per month and feature a far ranging discussion of the causes of poverty in the community and how to address them for the long-term, in the process removing systemic barriers.

(Note: Circles has drawn national attention for helping families out of poverty and inspiring communities to commit to new long-term solutions for addressing this persistent issue and to building more wealth. Several national organizations have members who have initiated implementation of the Circles model, including United Way, Goodwill, United Methodist Church, Lutheran Social Services, Community Action Partnerships, and Catholic Charities.)

--National Circles Campaign