

## *A Local Church Action Guide*

### **“Born Again in Every Place”, The National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry of The United Methodist Church, extends an INVITATION:**

- **to view town and country churches as assets, not problems;**
- **to dream of energized, faithful, effective congregations in every place;**
- **to yearn for effective lay and clergy leadership for the renewal of effective ministry to communities in every possible place;**

**to envision thousands of United Methodist disciples freed for joyful obedience motivated by the love of God serving in town and country settings,**

- **taking up the cross of self-denial**
- **committed to *making disciples and making a difference in their communities, rekindling the historic fires of holiness of heart and life.***

***If we can dream in faith, it can happen !***

Across the United States, many United Methodist town and country congregations effectively make disciples for Jesus Christ and creatively minister to their local communities and the world beyond. Imagine what will happen when these more than 20,000 churches in the United States renew and enlarge their visions of ministry, 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. It is possible that the renewal and revival of the church will flow from town and country congregations to the rest of the world!

#### **Why a Comprehensive Plan?**

Most town and country churches were founded as a result of the desire of local people for a local Christian community. Across the years, numbers of us have become more focused on the maintenance of the church family and facilities than on the Church’s mission, and many have passively drifted into patterns of stagnation and survival. By trying to save our own lives, we have forfeited our vitality.

At the same time, many rapid changes are occurring in town and country settings, including the looming loss of thousands of family farms; the changing face of agricultural production; the growth of ethnic/migrant populations; the emerging challenges of forestry, mining, fisheries, and other industries such as small manufacturing and prisons; patterns of use and control of rural land; the prevalence of severely depressed economies with high unemployment; and environmental issues such as soil conservation, water quality, and hazardous waste disposal. Such changes affect and often frighten town and country congregations: “Is there a tomorrow?” “How do we learn to reach out to new people?” “How do we – clergy and

laity – get the kind of training we need for effective ministry in OUR time and place?” “Can we get quality leadership appropriate to our cultural setting?” “How is God at work in the changing world around us?” “What does God want of us?”

As town and country churches have struggled with these realities, those who work with them on district and annual conference levels are tempted to view these congregations as problems. “What pastoral leadership can these churches afford?” “What pastor can we appoint to this charge whose gifts and abilities will fit well with the needs and opportunities present?” “Can we sustain this congregation’s ministry despite an erratic record of apportionment payment?” “What resources or leadership should the annual conference invest to revitalize this church’s mission and ministry?”

The Action Plan for the National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry of the United Methodist Church invites town and country congregations, and the church as a whole to be “born again in every place.” This is an invitation to join in a movement, to explore the riches of history and tradition, to examine our current community contexts, and to open to the fresh movement of the Spirit of God -- to be transformed for renewed and effective ministry in the places God has called us all to live and to serve. It is also an invitation to join a nationwide community of learners and teachers, as those who attempt to foster renewal, experience success or failure, learn from it, and share our learning with others for the encouragement of all.

### **Where is this coming from?**

This action guide is the latest step in a journey that began in 1996, as a group of rural people who cared deeply about the faithfulness and effectiveness of rural churches proposed to the General Conference that a Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry be developed for the United Methodist Church in the United States. The proposal was adopted, and the plan that was subsequently developed was presented to the 2000 General

Conference and adopted. The text of the plan, “*Born Again in Every Place*” can be found and downloaded from the Town and Country page of the GBGM website: [www.gbgm-umc.org](http://www.gbgm-umc.org).

The 2000 General Conference also mandated that a plan be developed to implement the “*Born Again in Every Place*” report. The Action Plan was approved by the 2004 General Conference, and was delegated to the General Board of Global Ministries for implementation through its office of Town and Country Ministries. The text of the Action Plan for “*Born Again in Every Place*” can also be found and downloaded from the Town and Country page of the GBGM website: [www.gbgm-umc.org](http://www.gbgm-umc.org). Utilizing rural church leaders from around the nation, leadership from the Council of Bishops and staff from other boards and agencies, the general church team to coordinate the implementation of the Action Plan has been formed.

This Action Guide for Local Churches is offered to local church and district leaders as a beginning step toward the revitalization of the whole church. As clergy and laity work and worship together as partners in town and country ministry, it is the hope of the authors that God’s Spirit will again move among the people of Christ in every place, bringing a new birth of love and joy in ministry and fruitfulness in mission.

### **How to Use this Action Guide**

This Action Guide is intended for use by local church and district leaders, lay and clergy together, in finding the next steps they may take toward renewal and revitalization. It is designed to lead participants in “worshipful work,” as worship, prayer and other spiritual formation disciplines accompany study, reflection, discussion and planning. Each session will contain some of the same elements, while also having opportunity for new ideas, information or application. For the sessions to be meaningful, it will be essential that participants relate their own setting and its

realities to the issues, examples, and experiences of ministry presented. It will be up to you to “bring it home.”

The **General Outline for each session** is as follows:

- **Gathering and call to worshipful work** – be sure all are introduced, and are comfortably seated where they can see each other. Share any joys or concerns since you gathered last as a group. Agree to take part to the best of the ability of each.
- **Litany of Vision** – voice this piece aloud at each session to anchor the group’s work in hope and faith.
- **Hymn** – sing or say aloud the hymn suggested, as a way of uniting hearts and minds in a common faith journey; UMH # refers to numbers in the United Methodist Hymnal, FWS# refers to numbers in the Faith We Sing.
- **Devotional** – read aloud the scriptures suggested, and have someone present the devotional thoughts printed in the resource. Spend time in silent reflection and also in group response to the scripture and devotional text.
- **Experience of Ministry** – Look together at the examples of effective ministry that are offered. Talk together to clarify what issues and questions the example raises.
- **Rumination** – Use the questions listed to guide the group’s discussion of what the stories and experience of ministry teaches or has to say to you in your situation. Pray together for insight into God’s will for your church, in response to the experience of others.
- **Closing hymn** – use one of the hymns suggested as a way to bring the group toward a harmonious closure.

- **The Lord’s Prayer** – pray together for God’s will to be done on your part of God’s earth, as it is in heaven. Feel free to include other prayers during this time, along with a prayer of blessing as group members’ part.