UMRA news & updates

April 2025

WE ARE ...
THE UNITED METHODIST RURAL ADVOCATES

You would not ignore a community more than seven times larger than New York City. Yet the rural population in the United States, with over 60 million people, is often overlooked because they are not all living in the same area.

Whether your church is urban or rural church, large or small, the UMRA invites you to join our association of clergy and laity in reaching out to meet the needs of people from rural communities, their churches and their pastors.

We provide advocacy at General Conference and Annual Conferences to affect rule changes that enable churches to better minister in their communities, provide educational opportunities for the leaders of rural churches to better serve their church bodies, and support church leaders in personal growth and ministry.

For a printable brochure and cover letter, click the links above.

Officers
2025-2028
Chair - Jodie Flessner

Prayer, Praise, and Pizza

By Dottie Martin

This article comes to us from one of the Emerging Youth Ministry Grant recipients.

New and Emerging Young People's Ministry
Limestone United Methodist Church
And
Loring Job Corps Center

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Limestone, Maine

PRAYER, PRAISE, AND PIZZA

In 1962, the youth unemployment rated was twice the non-youth unemployment rate. To address this concern, a Department of Labor task force was established to design a program which would improve both educational and vocational skills for the youth. The original design of the Job Corps program was for the all-male student body to spend ½ of their time improving national parks and forests and the other ½ of their time improving basic education skills which were severely limiting their occupational accomplishments. The program was to be limited to the Federal National Parks, National Forests, and other Federal Lands.

When President Lyndon Johnson declared his War on Poverty in 1964, the Job Corps program was well along in the planning stage and was an easy program for rapid implementation, so the Labor Department's Job Corps program was slated to be the initial operational program.

Sargent Shriver, the first Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, modeled the Job Corps Program, following the successful Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC provided rooms, board, and employment to thousands of unemployed young people.

During its 60-year history, Job Corps has served approximately 2 million young people throughout the United States and Puerto Rico.

When the town of Limestone, Maine heard about the pending closure of Loring Air Force Base in 1994, leaving a large facility empty, planning was immediately put into place to evaluate possible new uses for the variety of spaces that would become available for economic and community development.

One successful strategy that was implemented was the location of a new Job Corps Center to be located at the former Loring Air Force Base. Opened in October 1997, the Loring Job Corps Center would utilize former residential, recreational, and dining facilities. Several of the former maintenance buildings would be repurposed to serve as vocational training sites. Former office buildings were refurbished to become academic areas.

Today, the Loring Job Corps Center is home to approximately 200 students from 24 states. Students spend an average of 7-8 months working on development of technical training skills. Since students' ages range from 16-24, many of the students have not completed the requirements for a high school, so they have the opportunity to work on that important achievement.

The role of a good citizen is built into the curriculum and service activities of clubs and organizations on the Job Corps campus. Seeking opportunities to participate in community service is an expectation for students, staff, and faculty. The Limestone United Methodist Church was a recipient of several community service projects, from construction of a handicap ramp for the parsonage, to the no-stair entry addition to the church building, to the culinary students assisting with preparation of community meals, to the automotive technology students assisting with the United Methodist Men's Transportation Transformation project.

Member of the congregation looked at all that the church and community were receiving and determined that it was time for the church members to reciprocate. Thus, the beginning of the Prayer, Praise, and Pizza worship service held at the Job Corps Center on Saturday night. The pastor, supported by a group of volunteers would take out pizzas to serve the students, share songs of praise and a message of redemption and love, followed by a time of groups and personal prayer.

This program was very successful until changes in both center and church leadership. The project was put on hold and then unfortunately, COVID hit the Center and students were sent home. It was determined in 2023, that both the Limestone United Methodist Church and the leadership of the Loring Job Corps Center was ready to reinstitute Prayer, Praise, and Pizza. During the very first session in December 2023, students began asking for Bibles. Some were donated by members of the church's congregation but more were needed.

Through the support of the United Methodist Rural Advocates grant program, the Limestone United Methodist Church has been able to purchase additional Bibles for distribution to students for their personal use. Remember, previously in this article, it was

stated that the average length of training is 7-8 months. It is the goal of this project that students leave with their Bible and not have to return it to the group, upon departure.

Changes Among Us

by Michele Holloway - Editor

As you read through this newsletter, you may notice some things that are new. We have a new logo, which you will find at the top and bottom of the page. They will both link you to our new website: umruraladvocates.com. In fact, every logo should link you to the website. If it doesn't, please let me know. We have new board members, three of whom are introduced below. Several of our officers have changed and you will find their information above on the left-hand side. Also, we have a new brochure and cover letter available for anyone to print and distribute at local, district, or conference gatherings. You will find the links for these documents, also on the left-hand side, beneath the **We Are**... section.

Meet Our New Board Members

by Editor

Rev. Luke Christy is an ordained elder in the Western North Carolina Conference. He currently serves Mills River United Methodist Church in the Southern Appalachian mountains. Luke was raised in rural churches and a Rural Fellow at Duke Divinity School. He enjoys spending time outdoors with his wife and two young children.

Jeff Fuller: This very outgoing and embracing Man of God was born in historic Tuskegee, Alabama and blessed with a Cultured childhood. As an infant, God began broadening Jeff's horizons – Family in Chicago, Il engulfed and secured him several months of every year as did family in Syracuse, NY. Thusly at some point every year while growing up, Jeff lived

Gloria Marple *– I live about 60 miles from Portland, Oregon in forest area above the town of Yamhill, Oregon Before retiring in 2018 , I had worked as Mental Health Counselor in a local county Jail. This was my primary ministry, working with both men and women on issues around addiction, parenting, and their beliefs about their*

and received rearing in rural Lee/Russell County Alabama; Chicago, Illinois; and Syracuse, New York.
Semi-Retired Medical Professional.
God has tremendously blessed my life with one 3-year-old.
Credentialed as a Health Minister from Wesley Seminary & holds a Certificate of Theology from the International Theological Seminary.
Consecrated as a Home Missioner in 2022.
My Passion is Wellness and Humanity, Relational Wellness, Emotional Wellness, Spiritual Wellness, and seeking to draw others to operate from a space where the Base of the Cross is Level.
Appointed and Serving as Abundant Health Network Coordinator.

life. Because I have had some health issues, I am listening to God's call as I continue to get healthier. I have been a DHM coach since the Program started. I am very involved in United Methodist Women/United Women in Faith at both the Conference and National level. I have also been a florist and am continuing to try to figure how all these pieces come together for my next adventure in ministry. My husband and I will celebrate 52 years together and we have two adult Special Needs sons.

Commentary: the Definition of Rural

by Christopher Chavis, The Daily Yonder, January 29, 2025
Submitted by Dave Ruesink

Do you live in a rural area? For most of us, that question is relatively easy to answer. We can simply look outside of our windows and make an assessment. This simple question, however, becomes complicated when you consider the many definitions of "rural" that currently exist within the federal government.

There is no standard definition of "rural" and whether you live in a rural area depends on who you ask. This makes defining rurality complicated and has real impacts on both our understanding of Rural America and the ability to ensure that some rural

communities have access to grant funding to address the issues in their community.
The federal government must work to correct this issue.
Perhaps the most egregious example of this can be found in San Bernardino County, California, the largest county (as measured by area) in the United States, approximately the size of West Virginia. It has deserts, mountains, and sprawling cityscapes. Most of the county is sparsely settled with most of its population residing in a relatively small strip of land between the Los Angeles County line and the City of San Bernardino. To a casual observer, most of the mountain and desert towns in San Bernardino County would seem rural and according to some definitions, they are. The complication exists within the definitions that would classify these remote communities as “urban.”
Consider Joshua Tree National Park, which is in San Bernardino County, approximately 80 miles away from the City of San Bernardino. Is Joshua Tree rural? That depends. The Rural Health Information Hub has a resource that you can use to determine whether your location is rural. If you type in the address for Joshua Tree National Park’s visitor center (6554 Park Blvd, Joshua Tree, CA 92252), you are going to get a variety of results.
Any agency that defines “rural” at the county level (such as the Office of Management and Budget definition) is going to flag Joshua Tree as metropolitan. In fact, the Economic Research Service has multiple metrics for “rural” that operate at the county level, both designate Joshua Tree as metropolitan. However, the Economic Research Service’s Rural Urban Commuting Area code system (which operates on the Census Tract level) recognizes Joshua Tree as rural, as does the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy.
Joshua Tree is not an anomaly. Consider also Needles, a relatively isolated mountain town near the Nevada and Arizona borders. Needles is approximately 200 miles from the City of San Bernardino. By any reasonable metric, it is well outside of the influence of any city. If San Bernardino County were a state, it would unquestionably be a rural community. Despite this however, it has the exact same profile as Joshua Tree. Multiple federal agencies would classify it as metropolitan.
This has real consequences. For example, federal agencies use a variety of definitions of rural when making grant opportunities available. An isolated town in San Bernardino County may not be eligible for one opportunity because it is located in a “metro”

county but be eligible for another because they are located in a “rural” Census tract. It really depends on which definition of rural a federal agency chooses to adopt. This can create a confusing landscape for local governments and non-profits. It also means that some opportunities are simply unavailable to these communities. It also distorts any count of rural people. 15-20% of Americans live in rural communities, but these different definitions make it difficult to land on an exact percentage.

The federal government must work to achieve uniformity in its definition of Rural America, and I would recommend using definitions that focus on the Census tract level. It is important to ensure that all Rural Americans are not only accurately counted but afforded access to the resources necessary to address their communities.

A remote stretch in Joshua Tree, California. Joshua Tree is in San Bernardino County, which is classified as "urban." (Photo by **Megan Clark** / **Unsplash**)

I Can Do It Myself! (Really?)

by Jodie Flessner UMRA Chair

A neighboring pastor was stopping by my house when he slid into an embankment of snow just shy of my driveway, burying the front end of his front wheel drive vehicle. As I was retrieving shovels from the garage, the neighbor across the street came over to help. As I was heading to the stuck car, I saw my next-door neighbor over the hill and filled him in on what we were doing. Soon the four of us were working on this together. After trying several methods which “usually work”, we finally managed to free the car, and we all went about the rest of our day.

As a culture, we value self-sufficiency. Which is great, until we deny our need for our neighbors or anyone else. When we let the pendulum swing too far into self-sufficiency we can begin to devalue what gifts others might bring. And often we are uncomfortable asking for help. We don't like feeling vulnerable. We feel like we should be able to do it ourselves. We don't know who to ask. We are all busy and don't want to bother others who are also busy. I wonder if maybe we are all too busy because we are all trying to do it by ourselves.

"I can do it" can easily drift into "I don't need to bother God with that." Which can slip into "I can do this myself, without God." And the minute we say this out loud we know it's wrong!

I was recently preaching on I Corinthians 12 where Paul talks about the Christian Community as the Body of Christ. We are reminded that we are created to be in community, that we need each other to function well … and to be healthy. We are called to acknowledge no one is self-sufficient, otherwise we devalue others, others who are created in God's image. And dismiss and devalue God.

I believe the Church is called to model how connected we are. One of the blessings of UMRA is that we connect with each other and we connect our churches *so that* we can do ministry better together. By connecting we can start to learn "who to ask." Instead of one person trying to figure out how to disentangle the car from the snowbank, we can work together to try things out, laugh when it doesn't work, and encourage each other. We can bring whatever gifts we have – shovels for digging, buckets of dirt for traction … and the realization that none of us had a tow strap. Sometimes it takes a project to get people to come out of their houses (or houses of worship) and get to know each other. It's hard work, but we are richer for it. I love the African proverb: *If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.* I enjoy and appreciate the journey we are on together as UMRA.

Emerging Ministries Webinar

United Methodist Rural Advocates Webinar Registration

Friday. May 9, 2025 1:00 p.m. -2:30 p.m. EST

Please register below to receive zoom log-on information:

Name_____

Please check as applies to you:

____ Bishop ____ Clergy ____ Lay ____ Deaconess / Home Missioner / Missionary

___ Other_____

Home Address_____Email_____

_____Phone_____

Church / Ministry_____ Email_____

Email or Mail Registration To:

Email completed forms to: Mrs. Sue Grace smgrlg51@yahoo.com

Mail Form: Mrs. Sue Grace
2755 Independence Court
Grove City, Ohio 43123-1710

This Webinar Is Free. Funded by The Generous Donations of UM Rural Advocates

Registration Deadline:

May 1, 2025

Devotions

by Luke Christy, Spiritual Director

I've been struck by Psalm 63:3 recently. David prays to God, "*your love is better than life.*" As David prays, he is in the Judean wilderness on the run from Absalom. By God's grace, even before David's circumstances change he receives God's steadfast love.

In our most recent UMRA Board gathering, we meditated on this verse together. Afterwards someone said to me it was a reminder that part of our work as Christians is to “receive and rest in that love.” Indeed, receiving love is an important discipline. Thankfully, the local church invites us to practice that discipline through relationship with God and others. The church continues to teach me that no worthwhile mission can be accomplished without first pouring ourselves into relationship. So, whether we are in wilderness or abundance, may we pour ourselves into God’s relational love.

Growing Hope Globally

submitted by Rev. Mark E Swanson, Interim CEO/Regional Director

Growing Hope Globally is a Christian response to hunger that works predominantly in rural communities through **Growing Projects** to raise funds for agricultural development programs with our **trusted partners including UMCOR**.

One of our Growing Projects is in Greenfield, Iowa which involves Greenfield United Methodist Church called "Fields of Faith". Here's a video the church made: **https://vimeo.com/875320741**.

SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE

The national organization, United Methodist Rural Advocates, is pleased to announce we have a limited number of scholarships to offer for attending programs or trainings that can enhance rural ministry. An applicant can be considered for a scholarship of up to the lesser of $400 or one half of program/event fees, etc. It is through the UMRA IGNITE fundraising campaign that these scholarships are being offered.

Please contact Treasurer Judy Hill to learn more. Contact information is listed below.

Judy Hill, Treasurer UMRA
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Email: **judyh@plainstel.com**

RURAL TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

BeADisciple.com
CHRISTIAN ONLINE EDUCATION

What is BeADisciple?

BeADisciple.com has provided quality online educational experiences with roots in Wesleyan theology since 2006. We offer online studies, courses, and certification programs on a variety of ministry, formation, and leadership topics. All of our courses offer CEU credits. Our goal is to make rich learning experiences accessible to church leaders and laity, no matter their location or life situation, and to help them grow as disciples in faith and ministry.
Read more on our **About page**.

Be A Disciple Course Schedule

Vision & Mission

Mission
The Academy's mission is to Advocate, Celebrate, Teach and Serve small membership churches as it empowers their ministries to serve their communities and the world.
Vision
Small membership churches thrive.
Goals and objectives
The Academy does not produce ministers that fit into a singular mold. Each minister has a different set of gifts, and each church has a different set of needs. With that in mind, the Academy's goals are:

- Help lay persons and churches focus on God's call in their situation. By the end of the programs lay persons are able to articulate their call and gifts, and churches are able to claim their God given mission.
- Help lay persons proclaim the love and hope of Jesus Christ in their communities. Lay persons and churches are able to share with their communities in ways they can hear God's redeeming love and grace.
- Develop the foundation for future learning and growth. Lay persons and churches develop a love to grow in Christ.

SHARE MINISTRY/BEST PRACTICES STORIES WITH US

Are there ministries and outreach programs in your churches that you want others to know about? We celebrate the truth that rural/town and country

churches are vital and active within their communities and we want to share that information around the country. Do you have a story of joy or hope that you would like to have shared here? There are others who could greatly benefit from what has worked for you and even what hasn't worked but that has allowed you to grow. Send stories to Michele Holloway, Communications Director, at chele101953@gmail.com and your stories will be published in upcoming editions of this eNewsletter.

This newsletter is published every other month: February, April, June, August, October, and December. Please send all submissions to the above email address no later than the 25th of the month prior to publication.

UMRA MEMBERSHIP

Memberships are available in the following categories:
Limited Income (What you can afford.)
Student $10.00
Basic One-Year $35.00
Church One-Year $50.00
Sustaining Membership $25.00/month
Advocacy Membership One-Year $250.00
Membership Letter and Form - click here
Two Easy Steps to Membership
1. Please fill out membership form:
United Methodist Rural Advocates Membership
2. Pay Membership Dues through PayPal
For more information or membership, contact:
Email: smgrlg51@yahoo.com
Sue Grace - Membership Secretary
2755 Independence Ct,
Grove City, OH 43123
740-707-2901
UMRA membership provides not only voice and vote in the organization, but also includes a subscription to the UMRA E NEWSLETTER.

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