

The Mustard Seed Movement

A Partnership of the Town and Country Committee,
the United Methodist Rural Fellowship
and the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative

*“Jesus put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed
That someone took and sowed in his field;
it is the smallest of all the seeds,
but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree,
so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’ –Matthew 13: 31-32*

The calling to rural ministry offers both great blessings and great challenges. Rural clergy and laity are often able to cultivate deep personal relationships with their fellow parishioners, in places that still practice, or at least remember, the lost arts of community life. They have the experience of living in close kinship with God’s creation. They have the opportunities of playing an important public role in their communities and of sharing in a rich cultural life. Such blessings can allow rural clergy and laity to engage in vital and life-changing service to Christ. At the same time, however, many rural clergy and laity face the challenges of ministering in rural environments of great need, where job losses, disappearing farms, changing demographics, physical isolation, entrenched congregational patterns, and a lack of affirmation can make church leadership a lonely and bewildering task. As a result, many rural clergy and laity often feel alone and overwhelmed as they seek to faithfully serve Christ in these communities.

In response to the great blessings and great challenges of rural ministry in North Carolina, the Thriving Rural Communities Initiative, the WNCC Town and Country Committee, and the WNCC United Methodist Rural Fellowship are creating a new series of gatherings to benefit rural laity and clergy and to glorify God. The goals of this proposed program, called “The Mustard Seed Movement,” are to:

1. **Re-affirm the great goodness and significance of service to Christ in the rural church**
2. **Support rural clergy and lay leaders by connecting them for fellowship and prayer**
3. **Empower rural pastors and laity for more fruitful servant leadership through the study of Scripture, encounters with selected writings, group discussion, times of worship, and shared discernment and listening**

The framework for the Mustard Seed Movement revolves around groups of 10 rural clergy and laity who will meet together once a month for a three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half hour gathering at a local church in their general area. Each Mustard Seed Gathering might begin with a time for gathering, checking-in, and community-building. Participants will then engage in an hour to hour and fifteen minute block of guided Scriptural study, during which they will read, ask questions related to, and discuss a selected Scripture(s) as it/they relate to their unique ministries and rural context. (This is not an attempt to glean homiletical nuggets). This study is guided by the use of one-sentence “I wonder . . .” statements after the Scripture is read, and then focused discussion on a few issues raised by the text and its images. After this time of formation, the clergy and laity will divide into distinct groups of three (or perhaps four) for an hour of more intimate mutual prayer, listening, and accountability. (A clergyperson and layperson from the same church should be sure to be in different groups.) Each of these “Trinity” groups will then engage in Listening, Accountability, and Prayer (LAP). Each member will first be given space to answer the question, “What has God been doing in your life or in the life of your church recently?”; or alternately, to share about some issue upon which they are seeking clarity or some area where God might be calling them to take a risk. In doing so, these Trinity groups will use principles of a Quaker Clearness Committee model, where, after a participant speaks within one of these groups, the other two members of the Trinity group will not be allowed to overwhelm their colleague with advice, but instead only will only ask open and honest questions intended to assist their colleague in thinking about and discerning a faithful response. The focus here is on the service of listening that we can offer each other. To ensure accountability, after this sharing, each participant will then let the group ask them the accountability question they had requested at the last gathering, as well as give the group another (perhaps the same) accountability question that they request the group to ask them about the next time they meet. The Trinity group time will conclude with prayer for one another. A “Prompter” within each group will gently ensure that he group sticks to time limits so that all may speak. (In an

alternate model, a Trinity group may choose to use their time by answering questions related to the Three General Rules: “What is one way you may have done harm in the past month?” “What is one good thing you have done for others in the past month?” “How have you stayed in love with God?”. At the conclusion of the Trinity group meeting, all of the participants of the Mustard Seed Gathering will then gather together for final announcements and reflections, and for a brief service of Holy Communion. Participants may then share in a catered or local restaurant lunch, which will offer an opportunity for nourishing fellowship as well. The Town and Country Committee and Thriving Rural Communities will provide funding so that this meal at the first three gatherings of each Circle will be offered free of charge to participants. (Table leaders may fill out a grant application to the Town and Country Committee for \$12 per participant/per meal to receive these funds for the first three meetings.)

A typical Mustard Seed Gathering could perhaps follow this pattern:

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| 9:00am: | Gathering, Reminder of Circle Manners, and Checking-In |
| 9:20am: | Scripture Study |
| 10:30am: | Break |
| 10:45am: | Trinity Groups |
| 12:00pm: | Break |
| 12:10pm: | Holy Communion |
| 12:30pm: | Lunch |
| 2:00pm: | End |

Or, if a Circle needs to meet in the evening, perhaps this schedule would be more helpful:

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|---------------|--------------------------|
| 5:30pm | Fellowship Dinner |
| 6:15pm | Checking In |
| 6:45pm | Scripture Study |
| 7:30pm | Trinity Groups |
| 8:30pm | Holy Communion |
| 9:00pm | End |

Each Mustard Seed Gathering would be convened and guided by two facilitators. These facilitators would work together to personally contact (by phone) and recruit local clergy and laity (a 50/50 ratio of clergy and laity would be ideal, although perhaps difficult given work schedules) who might be interested in participating in their group. (Not all of these clergy or laity have to be, or perhaps should be, United Methodists: see recruiting reminders.) One helpful model would be to have each person added to the group be asked to recruit one other person they’d like to bring with them. The two facilitators will then work together to help arrange the meeting place and meal, to guide discussion, to give shape to each meeting, and to supply the elements for Holy Communion. They will also be tasked to ensure that each gathering takes place according to the “Circle Manners” agreed upon in the program, and does not become a “moan and groan” session, but instead a helpful time of learning and encouragement. Each pair of facilitators will have a large degree of flexibility to shape their circle as they feel is best.

It is proposed that each Mustard Seed Circle would meet monthly over a period of 9 months (for a total of 9 gatherings). For the sake of program continuity, at least five of the nine gatherings of a Mustard Seed Group should center around the following five themes and suggested related Scriptures: “Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?”, “Looking for the Lost,” “Mustard Seed Spirituality,” “Change and Conflict in Christ,” and “Right Relationship.” The remaining four gatherings might come from a suggested list of Scriptures and themes provided by the design team, or may include original Scriptures and themes determined by each pair of table servants. The Town and Country partnership will begin a weblog where table servants may go to find resources and discussion questions for each gathering.

At the conclusion of each Mustard Seed Group’s nine months of gatherings, participants will be asked to complete an evaluation of the program focused on discerning the fruit that has come from these gatherings. It is also hoped that following this time at least two of the participants might become table servants willing to start their own group to share this process with others.

We pray that these gatherings would bear much fruit to the glory of God in the lives of participants and in their congregations.