

2024-2025
**ANNUAL
REPORT**



CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE
Promoting Catholic Life in Rural America

Letter from the Executive Director

This past fiscal year CRL saw a surge of growth and financial support that has amazed all of us. Praise be to God for His unfailing love and faithfulness. The Lord is opening many new doors of ministry and service to rural communities throughout the country. Here are some highlights:



Thriving in Rural Ministry – This program has reached nearly 400 priests in dioceses through five-day retreats, workshops and conferences supporting and developing rural pastors through sharing of best practices, discussing effective rural lay leadership models, and exploring integral ecology principles, and spending time in fraternity with other rural pastors from all over the country. CRL is now expanding the program to deacons serving in rural communities. I asked one of the deacons who attended a recent retreat how he heard about the program. He replied, “Jim, I was serving a rural pastor who was very down and out. He went to a CRL Thriving in Rural Ministry retreat, and he came back a different priest. He is now thriving in his ministry.” Give praise to the Lord for working through our programming to strengthen pastoral ministry in rural communities!

Thriving Rural Congregations – Launched in 2024 this program is focused on developing lay leadership in four pilot dioceses: the Diocese of Salina, KS; the Diocese of San Angelo, TX; the Diocese of Saginaw, MI; and the Diocese of Fargo, ND. CRL has involved over 70 lay leaders this past year in various in-person training workshops and virtual meetings. The goal is to develop lay leaders who are confident, competent and courageous in their Catholic faith and to share the lessons we learn with many more lay men and women around the country.

Ministry in Rural Areas and Small Towns Initiative – CRL received a generous five-year grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc. that will support CRL Chapters and regional partners in developing lay and pastoral leadership throughout the rural America. CRL’s regional partners include Saint Paul Seminary, St. Paul, MN; University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN; Saint Kateri Institute, Williamstown, MA; Mexican American Catholic College, San Antonio, TX; and the Diocese of Stockton, CA.

Rural Ministry Practicum Course - This course is a five-day intensive experience. The course includes two-and-a-half days of lectures on Catholic social teaching as it relates to agriculture, rural communities, care of creation, and rural ministry, and two days of visits to farms and presentations from rural pastors. CRL has taught over 250 seminarians from 15 dioceses how to prepare for ministry in a rural setting.

Thank you for your partnership with CRL over the past year. We could not do this work without your financial support.

Blessings,

James F. Ennis, President & Executive Director



Mission

*Promoting Catholic
Life in Rural America*

Vision

*Thriving families, farms,
and parishes – centered
on faith, community, and
care of creation.*

Ministry in Rural Areas and Small Towns

In 2025, Catholic Rural Life launched the **Ministry in Rural Areas and Small Towns (RST) initiative through a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc.** This initiative aims to meet the need of providing support to more rural parishes, pastors, and lay leaders across the U.S. Key actions include expanding CRL's chapter network, launching partnerships with other organizations, supporting regional events and conferences, and hosting a national conference. The project focuses on strengthening CRL's presence in rural areas and providing resources and support to rural Catholic communities.

One central focus of the RST Initiative is seeking to **grow our chapters to 60 by 2029, and increasing support and resources directly to chapters, current and future.** Part of the initiative includes beginning a grant program for chapters, giving them access to funding for events, projects, and initiatives. By providing grants, we hope to spark innovation and creativity in how chapters serve their local communities.

Building off of our work with the **Saint Paul Seminary**, CRL is establishing partnerships with the **Mexican American Catholic College (MACC)**, **the Saint Kateri Institute**, and **the Diocese of Stockton**. By establishing these four key partnerships, we hope to expand our reach geographically by hosting regional conferences, workshops, and events. These events will be aimed at bringing rural leaders together, sharing best practices, and fostering peer learning for leaders. These partners will also allow us to expand our ability to develop resources and programs that are deeply rooted in Christ and offer transformational leadership experiences for rural parishes and lay leaders.

Coming from the momentum of CRL's centennial year and national gathering in May 2024, RST includes plans to host another national gathering with our collaborators: Chapters, partners, program participants, and members. We will again gather to celebrate progress, share best practices, lessons learned, and to pray and plan for the future. Work has commenced on the formal partnership agreements and chapter support development.



Since 2019, Catholic Rural Life's Thriving in Rural Ministry (TRM) program continues to equip and renew clergy who serve the Church's rural parishes across the country. The program is built around five pillars—spiritual renewal, sharing best practices, leadership development, integral ecology, and fraternity—which are brought to life through retreats, workshops, and online gatherings.

Last fiscal year, TRM reached **91 new participants—adding 84 priests and 7 deacons from 12 dioceses**—bringing the program's total reach to **391 clergy in 56 dioceses nationwide**. The year featured two major retreats: an inaugural diaconate retreat in October 2024 and a priest retreat in June 2025, each providing clergy with time for prayer, fraternity, and formation. Surveys indicated a satisfaction rate of nearly 90%, underscoring the value of these offerings.



Three in-person workshops extended TRM's reach, including sessions in the **Dioceses of Sacramento and Madison**, as well as at **St. John's University School of Theology**. These gatherings covered rural evangelization, lay leadership, and adapting to rural culture.

TRM also expanded its digital offerings, hosting six online sessions on topics such as parish restructuring, mental health, and rural liturgies. Some of the fruits of TRM have also been published in outside publications, including *The Priest* and *Our Sunday Visitor*.

As dioceses increasingly move toward collaborative "pastorate" models, TRM continues to develop new ways to serve clergy navigating these transitions. Time management, burnout, and serving multiple parishes remain challenges for many priests, which CRL seeks to address through increased outreach and offerings. By building community, sharing rural ministry insights, and offering opportunities for spiritual renewal, Catholic Rural Life helps ensure that clergy who serve rural America continue to flourish in their vocations and ministries.



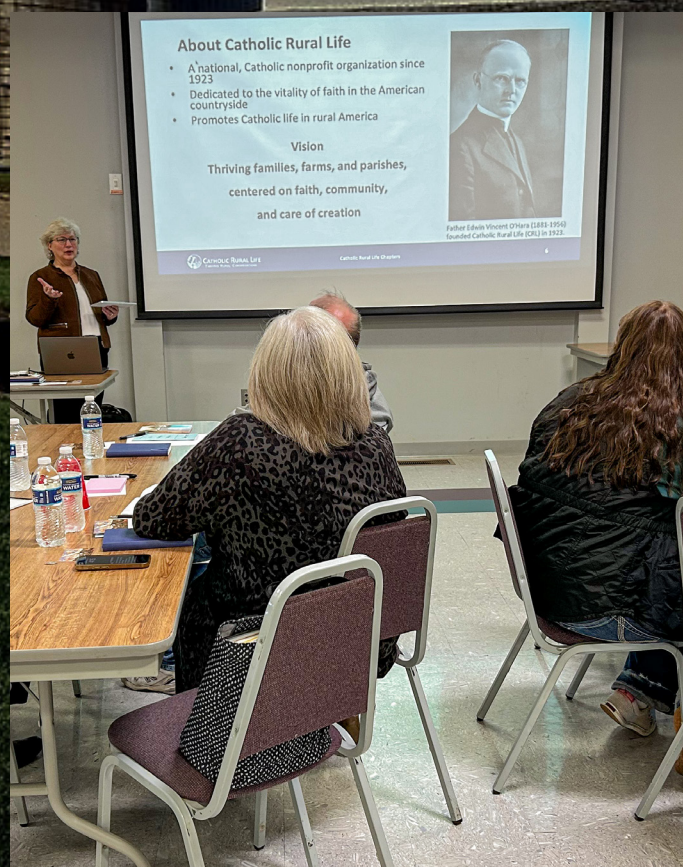
Thriving Rural Congregations

The Thriving Rural Congregations (TRC) program completed its first year of research and recruitment. We have provided multiple training and support activities and significantly increased our participation. At the beginning of 2024, the program had fewer than twenty participating lay leaders and priests. In 2025, the program has increased to over 70 participants from over a dozen parishes.

Our four pilot dioceses, with the support of their bishops, include:

1. Diocese of Fargo, ND; Bishop John Folda
2. Diocese of Saginaw, MI; Bishop Robert Gruss
3. Diocese of Salina, KS; Bishop Gerald Vincke
4. Diocese of San Angelo, TX; Bishop Michael Sis

The purpose of CRL's TRC apostolate is to train rural parish teams of lay women and men in collaboration with their pastors, equipping them to be competent, confident, and courageous leaders in their faith and in the face of a rapidly changing rural culture. Our hope is through this program, our selected pilot participants will grow in their own interior faith life, be a source of support to their pastor, and be a beacon of encouragement to their community as they walk in faith together.



We are grateful to the Lilly Endowment Inc. for their generous grant and their support through regular interaction with us providing encouragement and information. Some of our activities and accomplishments last year include:

1. Our Advisory Committee began a regular bimonthly meeting schedule to review our program and offerings. Their passion and wisdom are an inspiration and help us continue to improve our support to our rural lay leaders and pastors.
2. We surveyed our current participants (rural lay leaders and pastors) for their level of interest and need for training and education. Results varied by diocese and overall indicate a desire for diving more deeply into the Catechism and Scripture, finding ways to create a parish of invitation and welcome.
3. We provide a bi-monthly lay leader forum with short presentations and discussion to share best practices with each other.
4. An Advisory Committee retreat in St Paul initiated planning for our 2026 inaugural annual Thriving Rural Congregations retreat planned in St Paul, MN, July 17-19, 2026.
5. 15 priests and deacons participated in the LivingWorks Faith and Start program for ministers to education on intervention and connection with individuals and families impacted by suicide. It also contained suggestions for funerals, homilies and walking with families as they heal. It has been found that those with suicidal thoughts in rural are more likely to reach out to a pastor than a mental health professional. In many areas mental health resources are not very accessible and rural area suicide rates that are 2.5-3 times the national average. This will remain a relevant topic for us.

Thriving Rural Congregations Advisory Committee



Yohan Garcia
Catholic Social Teaching
Education Manager
Secretariat of Justice &
Peace USCCB



Angie Bittner
Rural Youth Outreach
Coordinator, Archdiocese
of Kansas City, KS



**Susan Windley
Daoust, Ph.D.**
Executive Director of The
Mark 5:19 Project



**Father Luke Austin,
J.C.L.**
Pastor
Assumption of the Blessed
Virgin Mary



**Christopher J
Thompson, Ph.D.**
Academic Dean and
Professor
Saint Paul Seminary
School of Divinity



Meg Moynihan
Sr Advisor,
Strategy and Development
MN Dept of Agriculture



Father Stan Mader
Pastor
St Joseph Church



Father Jorge Herrera
Pastor
St Francis of Assisi



Gordy DeMarais
Founder of Saint Paul
Outreach
Speaker, Theologian



Polly Duncan Collum
Director
Justice, Peace & Integrity
of Creation
Glenmary Home Missioners

Catholic Rural Life (CRL) Chapters are a witness to our Catholic faith in rural America. **As of July 2025, CRL has developed a network of 36 Chapters across 19 states and 32 dioceses.** The chapters and their members live out the CRL vision of thriving families, farms and parishes centered on faith, community and the care of creation.

CRL Chapters have been committed to fostering and celebrating Catholic rural culture. Each Chapter finds unique ways to bring their community together to share in liturgical celebrations, provide education about faith and rural topics, and ways to work together in service for their larger community. Many chapters meet regularly, host an annual Mass celebrating rural life, organize social programs and events, and pray the St. Isidore Novena each May with a feast day Mass.

CRL currently has two college chapters at K-State in Manhattan, Kansas and at West TX A&M in Childress, TX and we will soon add additional campus locations. In our visits with our rural college chapters, we are hearing about the increased attendance in Catholic Masses on college campuses. We will continue to engage our young rural adults who are away from their homes and farms and ranches and enjoy our common culture while at school. Our plan is to focus growing Chapters at land grant colleges to share our common faith and love of rural life.

Supporting ongoing chapter growth and development is our recent Ministry in Rural and Small Towns Initiative grant awarded to CRL, by the Lilly Foundation. This grant directly benefits all Catholic Rural Life programs and also increases our ability to support Chapters in a greater way in the future as we continue to grow in membership. See page 3 for more information on the Rural and Small Towns Initiative.

We are inspired to see our members living and working and celebrating in their local communities. We pray for their intention and we are excited to expand the reach of Catholic Rural Life Chapters in the coming year.



Staff



Jim Ennis, Executive Director

"I feel a tremendous responsibility to be a good steward of the organization and to help CRL serve the rural Church in ways that can inspire the next generation of men and women to take their faith in Christ seriously and to use their gifts and talents for the glory of God and for the good of their communities."

Kate Schmitt, Director of Development

"Interacting with our members and donors is a privilege – without them, CRL couldn't support, inform, and promote rural Catholic communities in America. God's economy of grace is always at work showing us that it is worthwhile to trust in Him and be good stewards of the gifts he gives us! It's a joy to be part of."



Zach Wiese, Communications Manager

"It is a blessing from God to be able to take my love of rural and the Catholic faith and use it everyday in my work at Catholic Rural Life. Communicating the mission of Catholic Rural Life helps build up the Church and thriving communities in rural America. I am grateful to get to work with the CRL team, those that live in rural, and those that love rural life."



Laurie Forner, Program Manager (TRC and Chapters)

"My Catholic faith has been handed down to me from my parents, my grandparents, and their grandparents and ancestors. I treasure this gift. I look forward to working with, and supporting, the members and friends of CRL."



Seth Forster, Office Manager

"Though I personally come from the suburbs of the Twin Cities, both my parents and their families grew up on cattle farms. They passed down to me an appreciation of rural life, the craft of hunting, and the love of Jesus Christ. I am blessed and honored to be a part of the everyday operations to help us serve you as the office manager."



Tim Streiff, Program Manager (TRM)

"I love working with priests in the Thriving in Rural Ministry program across the country. Rural life is a beautiful calling. When we build up Catholic culture and dedicate our work to God in rural places, it elevates and returns to God the gifts He has given us."



Board of Directors 2024-25

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Most Reverend
John T. Folda

Most Reverend
Myron J. Cotta

Most Reverend
James R. Golka

Treasurer

Mr. Emery Koenig

Mr. Art Befort

Sr. Esther Mary Nickel, RSM

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Mr. Michael Hirt

Fr. Jesús Mariscal Guzmán

Ms. Kathy Janssen

Ms. Jill Rauh, USCCB
Observer

Sowing Seeds for Faith and Growth Capital Campaign

From 2024-2025, Catholic Rural Life's capital campaign, *Sowing Seeds for Faith and Growth*, made excellent progress on its two primary objectives:

- Increase support of current CRL Chapters and expand Chapters to a total of 60 nationwide
- Train 500 priests through the *Thriving in Rural Ministry* program through retreats, workshops, conferences, and ongoing formation
- 500 priests would serve in approximately 1,200 parishes across rural America, reaching about 250,000 Catholics

As of July 2025, CRL's campaign is at total of \$7.7 million pledged by over 60 generous individuals and organizations. We are grateful for all the early and generous leadership commitments to our *Sowing Seeds for Faith and Growth* campaign. These gifts have enabled CRL to sow many seeds of faith and achieve the following progress on our campaign goals:

- As of July 2025, we have served **nearly 400 priests** through the *Thriving in Rural Ministry* program! We continue to expand, grow, and improve the program to meet the needs of our rural clergy, and hosted our first retreat for deacons in October, 2024.
- We continue to grow not only the number of CRL Chapters, but to explore how better to support and enable Chapters to have a strong presence in their communities. Last year, CRL welcomed four new chapters, including our second ever university chapter! We now have **36 chapters and counting toward our campaign goal of 60 total CRL chapters.**

CRL FINANCIAL REPORT / JULY 2024 - JUNE 2025

EXPENSES \$2,192,900



● Program Services	● Administration
\$1,800,006	\$135,365
● Development	
\$257,540	

INCOME \$5,381,100



● Foundations	● Annual Appeal Fund
\$5,037,167	\$127,745
● Other	
\$216,188	

YEAR AT A GLANCE

This year was full of growth and impact across the country for Catholic Rural Life, and we want to share some highlights with you who made it all possible.

36

Total Chapters

55

Dioceses Gave

SECOND COLLEGE CHAPTER

West Texas A&M
University

RURAL MINISTRY PRACTICUM

18

Seminarians Attended
from

9

Dioceses

70

New Members

14

Rural Life Celebrations

St. Cloud, August 18th , 2024

Winona-Rochester, August 18th , 2024

Cincinnati, September 6th , 2024

Jefferson City, September 8th , 2024

La Crosse, September 18th , 2024

Dubuque, September 20th , 2024

Davenport, November 10th , 2024

Victoria, November 23rd , 2024

Davenport, March 22nd , 2025

San Angelo, May 15th , 2025

Green Bay, May 15th , 2025

Saginaw, May 31st , 2025

Fargo, June 29th, 2025

St. Paul-Minneapolis, June 29th, 2025



Diocese of La Crosse



Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis



Diocese of Winona-Rochester



Diocese of Green Bay