

# Pathways to Congregational Vitality

PATHWAYS TO CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY • SERVING THE NEEDS OF LEADERS IN FOUNDATIONAL CHRISTIAN MINISTRIES

The United Methodist Church, at its finest, has an outstanding history and contribution to the Christian church. Like other US mainline denominations, we have seen our membership decline. Though we are over 11 million strong world-wide and growing, to be faithful we must also continuously seek to be ever more nimble and creative in hearing and responding to the call of God. To be vital, we must also look outward to the world God has created and wants to redeem, and inward to ensure that our efforts, passions, and gifts are used wisely in God's work of grace and transformation.

This challenge extends from our Council of Bishops to the smallest of our small membership churches. Pastoral and laity leaders deserve to have the resources they need to respond to the urgent call for renewal and vitality. The CALL TO ACTION REPORT has identified four key drivers to congregational vitality:

- Effective pastoral leadership
- Ministry through small groups
- Contextual worship
- Engaged lay leadership

To this end, the General Board of Discipleship offers a new occasional resource, *Pathways to Congregational Vitality*: a series of articles on issues related to the foundational ministries of all congregations: worship and preaching, evangelism, Christian education and formation, stewardship, and others.

This series will touch on these issues together in this monograph; future monographs will focus on a particular ministry area. Each article will include information and reflection on the selected topic, ideas for discussion and application, and other resources for further information and assistance. While future issues will be oriented to information and best practices in a particular ministry area, they will recognize that these foundational ministries, as well as all others, work together synergistically to form a whole, inter-related system of disciple making in the local church.

*This resource is intended to be used with your leadership team perhaps as a prelude to either short- or long-range planning. It will be most effective in a dedicated session rather than added to a regular council meeting.*

In this issue, we bring you a brief overview of perspectives on and inter-relationship between the four historical discipleship ministries. In addition to the commentary on vital ministry, you may want to mull over the highlighted statements as food for thought in your own ministry and context. "Making the Connections" on page 6 helps to put these ministries together so that you can work with your leadership team to see how each ministry serves and is served by the others.

## The Preaching Ministry

Preaching is perhaps the most practiced and least understood of our worship practices. While we all expect to preach or hear a (good) sermon each week, not everyone agrees about what a good sermon is and what it accomplishes. From Early Church times, groups of people have been meeting in worship to hear the Scriptures read and explained. So, we could say that preaching is an explanation of Scripture texts. However, we have all heard enough sermons to know that effective preaching is much more.

### Preaching in the 21st Century

Do we still need preachers and preaching? The preacher was often the only person in the congregation with enough education to read the sacred texts in early days; and later, often the only one with theological training. Now, with wide-spread literacy in a Wikipedia world, everyone claims to be an expert – so why do we still need preachers?

*Invitational preaching offers opportunity for reconciliation, love, and justice. Prophetic preaching interprets the times, holds fast to God's vision of the future, and offers ways to redeem society now.*

Preaching is much more now than merely explaining what anyone can read. One of the most important aspects of preaching is helping people understand the *implications* of the text. The most educated generation in our history is still asking for help in integrating the Good News of the gospel into daily life. For this generation, effective preaching has aspects of both *information* and *spiritual formation*. Good preaching in the 21st century employs biblical text, context, history, tradition, reason, and experience to equip congregations for godly living in confusing, complicated times.

### Preach for Multiple Audiences

For the family of God, preaching's function is nourishing and formative. Worshipers come to the well weekly to offer praise and thanksgiving and to take an intangible *something* home with them. They come in hopes of hearing *a word that comes from God* that will help them make sense of daily life. They also come hoping to hear a word that will help them live as more faithful disciples. Walter Brueggemann suggests in *The Prophetic Imagination* that preaching is the opportunity to summon and nurture an alternative community with an alternative identity, vision and vocation (see Ch. 1). This definition rightly suggests that preaching is also invitational, fueling opportunities for hearers to be reconciled with God and neighbor, to enter into ministries of love and justice, or to come and be healed.

For the community outside the walls of the church, preaching is prophetic, alternately painting pictures of God's Beloved Community, offering glimpses of a loving God, and offering a livable alternative to the corruption that seeps into society. Our world needs prophetic preachers today more than ever. Prophetic preaching interprets the times, holds fast to God's vision of the future and offers ways to redeem society – now!

Preaching plays a pivotal part in the life of the congregation that extends far beyond weekly worship and fuels further reflection and response. For some congregations preaching functions as the entry point to congregational disciple-making systems by beginning conversations about Christian discipleship that are best finished in small group settings. For others, preaching is invitational, pointing the way to God and Christian community.

*In future issues look for topics on: preaching inside/out, preaching for transformation, seasonal preaching, and Methodist preaching for the 21st century*

## *The Ministry of Evangelism*

Evangelism—no ministry of the church is more vital. A common truism notes that the church is always one generation away from extinction. Despite its importance, many people avoid participation in evangelism because of some negative experience they may have had. Such experiences have created a caricature of evangelism that must be addressed. Just as coaches remind professional athletes to get back to the basics, we can re-visit the fundamental aspects of evangelism for guidance and instruction.

### *The Evangel*

In the early church, three Greek words described “the evangel”: *euaggelizesthai*, *marturein*, and *kerussein*. Translated, these three words mean: to tell good news, to bear witness, and to proclaim. This three-fold description helps expand narrow understandings of faith sharing.

There is Good News—as expressed in the life of Jesus Christ, who spoke about and demonstrated how we can experience new life in the kingdom (reign) of God.

*People outside Christianity often want to know what difference Christ has made in our lives. How do we tell the story?*

The early church embraced the Greek understanding of “bearing witness,” a legal term used to denote witness to facts, events, and truth. The validity of the act of bearing witness depended on personal involvement and assurance of truth by the person bearing witness. In bold fashion, the early disciples also retold or proclaimed the story of Jesus—his deeds, his miracles, his teachings.

Re-examining the *evangel* should stir within us provocative questions. What is the Good News and how can we articulate it? Is proclamation reserved for clergy or should laity also help tell the story? What personal involvement with Jesus can I share in witness to Christ?

### *Inward and Outward*

In the church context, evangelism should be understood as both an inward and outward task. The inward task is engaging your congregation in a clear understanding of the biblical call to reach others for Jesus Christ. A fundamental part of this process should involve examination of another critical question: “Converted to what?” What is involved with conversion to Christianity? What does it mean to be a follower of Christ? Was our conversion just a commitment to mouth new loyalties? Were we just converted to a new habit, merely adding the one-hour meeting on Saturday night or Sunday morning to the long list of other things we do? Or were we converted to a new lifestyle, where, as forgiven people of God, we persist in looking for ways to live, think, and act as those who follow Christ?

The congregation must quickly turn understanding of evangelism and Christian conversion into participation in the *evangel*. The outward task is to turn the attention of the congregation toward the people outside the four walls of your church building.

### *Christianity Is Personal*

The key consideration in our Christian witness is the personal evidence that Christ is alive in us. People outside of Christianity often want to know what difference Christ has made in our lives. The validity of our witness depends on the reality of our personal interaction with and transformation by Jesus Christ.

*In future issues, look for topics on ways to create an evangelistic church culture and how to design ministry that matters (to God and the unchurched).*

## *Christian Education and Formation Ministry*

Lifelong learning is at the heart of Christian vitality, both for the individual and for the congregation. A Christian life is based on a foundation of learned beliefs, values, and behaviors. These are modeled for us by mature Christians, so some of that foundation is experienced, not just studied.

With the example and lessons of Jesus Christ, we know that God has formed us in God's image. The Son, a master teacher, lived among us to prepare us for a life of discipleship. The Holy Spirit moves among us to empower and remind us of all that we have learned in faith. All of us, then, have the mandate to transmit the faith, and we do this largely through our teaching and formation ministries.

### *Classes and Groups*

Our teaching and formation ministry includes the obvious settings and opportunities: Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, confirmation, new member classes, and short- and long-term mid-week classes (DISCIPLE, for example). If we think broadly about "Christian education" we will expand our understanding to include other small groups and classes, both those formally organized and those that gather spontaneously or casually.

Any small group in the church can and should be a place of faith formation and disciple making. One naturally thinks of study or prayer groups in that way. But others may, with a bit more imagination and effort, become faith forming as well. When all participants recognize and act on their biblical/theological reason for being and incorporate the practice of spiritual disciplines, they can reframe their orientation and purpose for intentional disciple making, whether their group is a class, administrative group, fellowship group, or devotional gathering.

### *A Firm Foundation*

When groups and classes, including the committees and short-term task groups, understand how and why they are places of Christian formation and education, they are

better positioned to offer a systemic approach to disciple making. Since any group or function in the church can be an entry point for a person new to the church, denomination, or faith, each "veteran" member becomes the beacon and model for those newer or less practiced in the faith. This mentoring function is much easier and more effective when our own biblical foundation is firm. The more we are steeped in the Scriptures and spiritual disciplines the better able we are to apply that Wisdom to the ups and downs of daily life—for our own benefit and for others.'

*The question is not whether we are formed as Christians, but how well.*

### *Valuing Christian Formation*

We would not have the Church were it not for those willing to learn and transmit the lessons and Word of God through the generations, so the teaching office is a highly valued and necessary one. The congregation that values Christian education and formation will not only participate, but will support that ministry in the church budget, recognize and applaud the dedication of their teachers and group leaders, and invite others to join in.

We do well to remember that everything and everyone teaches, so our hospitality, focus, language, biblical knowledge, and behaviors all advertise our own understandings of and commitment to a godly life. The question is not whether we are formed as Christians, but how well.

*In future issues, look for topics on Christian education and vital ministry, training teachers, working with small groups.*

## Stewardship Ministry

What would it look like to lead a congregation of joyful, generous gospel stewards? *Stewardship* is what we do with what God has entrusted to us. Vibrant Christian stewardship includes what we do on God's behalf in our relationships; use of time, skills, abilities, and passions; management and sharing of possessions; and current and planned giving for God's work through the church.

Such faithful stewardship grows not from obligation or membership, but from a grateful response to God's initial out-pouring love and covenant faithfulness to us. When we start with gratitude, we end up living out of God's abundance instead of sinking into scarcity thinking. We nurture generous living in ourselves and others, encouraging one another to trust God's empowering work among us.

Some church participants focus on the natural world as a loving gift from God. They form church Green Teams, Terra or other *care-for-the-earth* groups to raise people's awareness of our carbon foot-print, lift up God's vision for Creation's renewal, and advocate for justice and peace, seeking to become better stewards of God's creation.

Giving generously causes us to reprioritize our lives, seeking to offer to God the first and the best of all that God has given us, and managing all the rest according to God's generosity. This is *first fruits living*, and our goal and cornerstone of discipleship. We can give the first and the best of our time each day in devotions and each week in worship, the first of our relationships through Christian conferring, and the first of our income through tithing and additional percentage giving. Tithing – giving to God's work ten percent of what we have received – is a starting point for our growth in giving.

At the same time, first fruits living goes beyond tithing. Instead of asking, "What percentage can I give to God?" it prompts us to ask, "How little can I live on in order to give more to God's work?" In this way, John Wesley is a model and a precursor in the call to simpler living. Those who use Bishop Robert Schnase's resources on "extravagant generosity" find helpful guidelines for congregations and for the personal joy of giving.

*Giving generously causes us to reprioritize our lives.*

Whether we use the word "stewardship" or "generosity," it is crucial to speak the language of each generation, particularly engaging children and youth. This includes highlighting not only abundance as well as sacrifice, but also personal meaning, life/work balance, and the importance of community. Various social media are essential communication channels, as well as hands-on ministry.

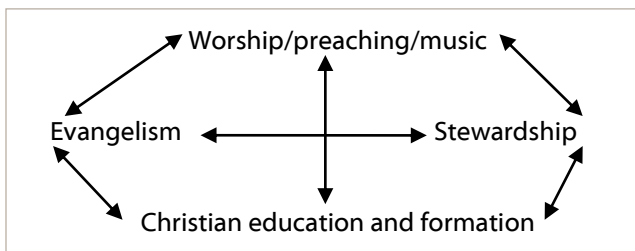
All of these aspects of nurturing generous living lead to *year-round stewardship* in the life of the congregation, where pastors and lay leaders work collaboratively to raise awareness and offer opportunities for engagement. It is especially important to invite worshipers to participate in small group life, testing their beliefs with personal experience and group accountability. Teaching stewardship begins with young children and leads into youthful years. People of all ages are drawn into stewardship through participation in hands-on mission, and all ages benefit from a sense of personal connection in our wider, shared ministry of Apportionment giving.

*In future issues, look for topics on generosity, first fruits living, care for the earth, and year-round stewardship.*

## Making the Connections

Worship and preaching, evangelism, Christian education and formation, and stewardship are four “pillars” undergirding and shaping ministry in any local church. While they are certainly not the only necessary ministries, they are crucial to the ongoing life of the local church. When they are coordinated and treated systemically, rather than as discrete or mutually independent areas of activity, there is greater chance for vitality.

This ministry system will look different in each local church as you develop it in your own context. Think about these ministries connecting and supporting each other as in this diagram.



To conceptualize this in other ways:

- If you are responsible for a particular ministry, what do you need to receive and to give to the other ministries for a holistic disciple making experience?
- What is the ministry “fuel” that comes from each ministry that needs to continue elsewhere and in what ways and places can you facilitate that?

### *Worship and Preaching in Service to...*

Worship is the one place where we see the most members of the congregation. Preaching is pivotal, holding the potential of turning the focus of the congregation to areas where the congregation needs to grow in its discipleship. The sermon can purposely be designed to

begin conversations that could be continued in Bible study or in service. The critical issue of stewardship of life, and not just our money, is one that can be started in the pulpit and finished in small group conversations. The need and mandate for evangelism could begin in sermons about related texts and be continued in other settings.

### *Evangelism in Service to...*

Evangelism is sharing the Good News, for the purpose of offering the kingdom of God to others, and that is the work of everyone who claims the name of Christ. The worshipping community receives the Word not only to equip and form themselves, but to share it with others. The community of lifelong learners studies the Scriptures in depth in order to share and live out the gospel. The recipients of God’s bounty are to be responsible stewards in sharing the Good News with others in word and deed.

### *Christian Education in Service to...*

Worship makes sense to someone who has been taught the hymns, the Scriptures, and the liturgy. Evangelism is only possible when we are acquainted with the story that needs to be told. Giving of ourselves and our resources gains its power from an awareness of the Giver of those good gifts. Conversely, an ignorant disciple is not a very good disciple. Faith is experienced, but it is also learned.

### *Stewardship in Service to...*

If evangelism is proclaiming the gospel, stewardship is living it out. God challenges Christian witnesses to express their beliefs through the stewardship of everyday actions and lifelong non-verbal witness. Worship empowers us in the love of God to engage in extravagant generosity, witnessing that in God’s economy, all have enough. Christian education provides content and experience of God’s love that is translated into daily decisions to trust the promises of God and to work on God’s behalf for all God’s Creation.

## *Helps for Discussion and Application*

Share this resource in advance of a **dedicated session** with all your church council leaders, as well as the teams or committees with whom they work, if possible. Distribute an advance copy to each person present. Ideally they will have read it before your gathering. Plan for 1½ to 2 hours for this conversation and reflection. Open and close with prayer or other devotions.

### *1. Share Perceptions*

Divide into four small groups. Assign to each group one of the highlighted comments on pages 2-5, but not the one that pertains to that leader's area (i.e. the evangelism chair does not get the evangelism comment.) Dig in to consider what that comment would mean in your church with your membership if everyone took it very seriously, both personally and as a congregation. Avoid "they" answers; this is about you and the congregation.

After some conversation about those specific comments, skim the rest of the page for points of interest.

- What "aha" responses did you have?  
What "oh, no" responses?
- What point might be the most new or radical one for your congregation? Why?

### *2. Look at Current Ministry*

Begin a discussion about what each of your ministry areas is doing, filtered through the mandate of "making disciples."

- Just how does each activity contribute to disciple making, and how, specifically, do you know?
- What are the measures you have in place to evaluate?

Back up a bit to examine the **goals** for each ministry area. (If there is only a collection of activities but no **stated**

**goals**, that should be the topic of discussion.)

- Do your goals lead to the results you hope for?
- Do your goals take into account the capacity and gifts of your congregation? Are they too ambitious? Too modest? Are they fresh or "the same as always"?
- If you continue working on the current goals with the current activities, will they lead to a vital congregation of mature disciples? How do you know? How will you tell?

### *3. Look at Your System of Ministry*

Note especially, "Making the Connections" on page 6. All ministry areas should be interconnected for a common goal of disciple making. In the whole group, talk about how the ministry you lead helps to prepare people for discipleship within and between ministries.

- How do you consciously work in each area to prepare people to mature and go deeper in that ministry?
- How do you consciously work together to help people understand the complementarity of all the church's ministries?

### *4. Imagine Something Further*

Refer to the "... in service to..." sections on page 6. Ask leaders and workers to cluster according to their ministry area, then to consider

- What that ministry has to offer other areas.
- What they wish other leaders understood about that ministry.
- What they need from other ministry areas to be as vital as possible.

After some time of small group or individual work, bring the entire group together for discussion. Make note of what insights arise and plan for time to prioritize and work on them.

## Resources

### Worship

- + *Preaching Helps for the Revised Common Lectionary* [www.gbod.org/lectionary](http://www.gbod.org/lectionary)
- + *Purposes of Preaching*, Jana Childers, ed. (Chalice Press, 2004).
- + *Hearing the Sermon*, by Ronald J. Allen (Chalice Press, 2004).

### Evangelism

- + *Transforming Evangelism*, by H. Henry Knight III and F. Douglas Powe Jr. (Discipleship Resources, 2006).
- + *Missional Renaissance*, by Reggie McNeal (Jossey-Bass, 2009).
- + *Your Church Can Thrive*, by Harold Percy (Abingdon, 2003).

### Christian Education

- + *Becoming a Church of Lifelong Learners*, by John Roberto (Twenty-Third Publications, 2006).
- + *The Church as Learning Community*, by Norma Cook Everist (Abingdon, 2002).
- + *Making Disciples*, by Sondra Higgins Matthaai (Abingdon, 2000).

### Stewardship

- + *Ministry and Money: A Practical Guide for Pastors*, by Janet Jamieson and Philip Jamieson (Westminster-John Knox, 2009).
- + *Radical Generosity* (weekly lectionary stewardship reflections, prayers and worship re-sources) at [www.umfnw.org](http://www.umfnw.org)
- + *Simple Rules for Money: John Wesley on Earning, Saving and Giving*, by James Harnish (Abingdon, 2010).

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For more information about the needs and requirements in specific ministry areas, see the leadership series *Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation*, which includes

- Christian Education
- Evangelism
- Finance
- Small Group Ministry
- Stewardship
- Worship

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