

## COLLEGE OF REGIONAL MINISTERS

*Ruth Fletcher, President*

In 2000, the General Board of the Christian Church, (Disciples of Christ) adopted an Imperative that calls on the church to strengthen congregational life for our mission (Ephesians 4:11-13, 15-16) In January, 2009, the College of Regional Ministers devoted two days to a consultation in which we considered that imperative and its implication for our ministry. We invited several guests to make presentations that framed our dialogue:

Rick Spleth, Indiana Region  
Rick Morse, Church Extension  
Dennis Landon, Higher Education  
Timothy James, National Convocation  
Geunhee Yu, North American/Pacific Asian Ministries  
Huberto Pimentel, Hispanic Ministries  
April Johnson, Reconciliation Ministries  
David Vargas, Overseas Ministries

These guests along with Jim Powell of Church Extension, Ron Degges of Homeland Ministries and Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President participated in the consultation process.

Where congregational pastors may have a depth of knowledge about the life and ministry of one particular congregation, Regional Ministers and others who work with congregations through the General Church have a breadth of knowledge about congregational vitality and mission.

Rick Spleth, Regional Minister in Indiana, started us off with a keynote entitled: "Is Our Imperative Really Imperative?" He noted that, although an "imperative" has to do with something absolutely necessary and obligatory that is not to be avoided, it has been rather easy for Regions to ignore our denomination's imperative to Strengthen Congregational Life for Mission: It has not been lifted up as a priority of the church; we have not been held accountable for implementing it; it is a General Board directive, not a directive of our individual Regional Boards. Yet, he went on to talk about why the Imperative is an appropriate focus for Regional Ministry:

*If all our congregations were to close and there were endowment funds left to sustain our ministries, I have no doubt we could figure out something to do to stay busy, but we would not then be doing what has historically been, formally and informally, our essential task.*

Next, Rick Morse, Vice President for New Church Ministry and Mission Initiatives with Church Extension offered a statistical analysis of Yearbook data in order to paint a picture of the current state of congregational life among the Disciples. It should be noted that these statistics only show certain aspects of congregational life and do not measure the ways in which congregations and pastors are empowering people to grow spiritually.

### TRENDS IN CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY

Here are the percentages of Disciples churches that fall within various sizes of congregations:

Family	1-60	47%
Pastoral	61-120	32%
Program	121-200	14%
Corporate	Over 200	7%

79% of Disciples churches are in the Family or Pastoral Size Categories.

About 50% of all Disciples congregations are located in small towns or rural areas; nearly 80% of the U.S. population lives in suburban areas or cities.

In the 1950s Disciples planted 180 new congregations. Today only 8 of those are sustainable.

Overall, our Disciples congregations are getting smaller.

63% of Disciples congregations are in numerical decline. 33% are growing. 4% are staying the same.

In 1930, an average worship attendance of 30 people could sustain a full time pastor, keep up a building and provide funds for church programming and mission outreach. Today, a congregation needs an average worship attendance of 100 to sustain that kind of ministry. That means 50-79% of Disciples congregations struggle with sustainability and the number is growing.

Vital congregations tend to budget about

- 50% for salaries

- 25% for facilities

- 15% for program

- 10% for mission

Congregations who are in the last quarter of their life cycle tend to budget

- 65-70% for salaries

- 30-40% for facilities

- 1% for program

- 3% for mission

In 1988, 52% of Disciples congregations exceeded a tithe to Disciples Mission causes. In 2007, only 12% exceed a tithe to Disciples Mission causes. This decrease cannot be attributed to people giving less because individuals actually are giving more now than they were 20 years ago (adjusted for inflation). Disciples outreach is receiving less from congregations because churches are spending more on salaries and building upkeep.

In 1988, Disciples on average gave 13% for local causes and 10% for Disciples related mission. Now congregations give an average of 9% for local causes and 5% for Disciples related mission.

Over the last twenty years, overall mission giving to all sources has decreased by 4%, giving to local mission has decreased by 33% and giving to Disciples mission is down 52% (adjusted for inflation).

The decrease in mission giving has drastically reduced the number of ministers employed by General Units and the number of missionaries we are able to send out. Several regional staffs have also downsized.

Disciples do not lack for buildings or monetary assets, but many of our buildings are not in growing areas, and many congregations are maintaining facilities that are much too large for their needs.

50-75 DOC congregations are removed from the Yearbook each year by withdrawal, removal, merger or closure.

The planting of new churches has allowed us to increase our total number of Disciples congregations over the last six years.

## **LEADERSHIP**

In the afternoon, we focused our attention on leadership issues related to the imperative. Dennis Landon talked about the characteristics leaders need for today's church:

- An evangelical sensibility that believes the gospel can change lives

- Emotional health that allows them to be resilient in the face of conflict

- Knowledge about how to lead an organization through change

- A willingness to sacrifice in order to be a servant leader

David Vargas focused on the need for leaders to be mission driven, shaped by a global perspective.

## **RACIAL/ETHNIC CONGREGATIONS**

A panel moderated by April Johnson offered insight into congregations of African American Disciples, Hispanic Disciples and Asian Disciples. Timothy James noted that the Convocation churches have experience with hard times and might be able to offer some insight to the rest of the church about how to get through the current economic crisis. Huberto Pimentel noted that Hispanic churches noisily celebrate the gift of empowerment that was given at Pentecost in their worship and that "Pentecostal" identity is

important to them. He also observed that growth in the number of Hispanic congregations and the effect of immigration policies are presenting challenges to their leadership. Geunhee Yu lifted up the fact that

there are now over 100 NAPAD congregations. He noted that sharing facilities with Anglo congregations can prove to be problematic sometimes for Asian congregations. All three panelists challenged Regional Ministers to keep developing relationships with racial/ethnic congregations in their Regions. Regional Ministers reiterated the urgent need for a new “Policies and Procedures for the Order of Ministry” that will allow for more flexibility about how ministers can be trained for service.

Break-out sessions followed the panel discussion. Those sessions focused on the areas of ministry with young adults, ministry with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Christians and further discussion about particular leadership issues related to racial/ethnic congregations.

## **TRANSFORMING CHURCHES**

In order to strengthen congregations for mission, it is important to envision what a strong congregation should look like. When asked, “What would characterize a congregation that was being and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ?” Regional Ministers offered these responses:

It would be passionate about following Christ.

Participants would regularly engage in the practice of prayer.

It would have in place a process for discipling newcomers in the faith.

It would reach out to serve instead of focusing on its own needs and interests.

It would offer radical hospitality.

It would allow itself to be shaped by the Alternative Reality of God set forth in scripture.

It would offer joyous, authentic worship with communion at the heart.

It would see itself as a people on a journey—moving like a river.

It would seek to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

It would provide systems of care for those in pain.

It would reach out in mission to “the least of these.”

It would celebrate and give God glory.

It would provide opportunities for true community to develop.

When considering what blocks churches from living into this vision, those present for the consultation named these factors as the primary hindrances to growth and vitality:

A maintenance attitude (rather than a mission focus)

Lack of knowledge, resources and vision that could move them forward

Leadership that keeps a stronghold on the church, vetoing any change

Fear of the future and lack of faith in God

Buildings that suck money and time

Many regions have been involved in congregational transformation efforts over the last seven years. Here is a compilation of best practices that we agree lead to the creation of strong, vital congregations:

The conversation about transformation often must be initiated by an outside source.

The congregation must be able to develop a common understanding of its current reality (conditions). Tools are needed in order to assess the situation with some objectivity and to develop the motivation for change.

The transformation process must be driven by people who have a passion for the work, both the pastor and the laity of a congregation.

To transform, a congregation must become a learning community asking, “What is God calling us to become?” This conversation must take place over time.

Congregations in the transformation process can benefit from being clustered together for prayer, support and shared learning.

Pastors don’t necessarily know how to lead congregations through transformation; they need assessment training and ongoing coaching.

Spiritual renewal that comes from the regular practice of prayer and immersion in scripture is essential to transformation.

Transforming congregations need to regularly celebrate the way God is working in their midst in order to stay connected to the Source of their courage.

Transformation requires risk; a congregation must often take bold steps (rather than engaging in incremental change) to move forward.

Transformation requires an investment of time and money.

Those leading the transformation efforts in the Disciples must themselves be engaged in personal and corporate transformation in the ministries they serve.

Transformation takes place in the gap congregations recognize between their call from God and their present reality.

Transformation is a path that must be consciously chosen.

Transformation must be contextually relevant.

Sometimes transformation processes focus on filling gaps; sometimes they focus on augmenting strengths. In each case, they must take into account the gifts and abilities of the congregation.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

The information that was gathered during this consultation points to several areas for future work that Regional Ministers named as strategies or “next steps” to effectively strengthen congregations for mission:

1. Congregations need to be able to access their current reality as a first step toward change. We need more **diagnostic tools** for churches to use in this endeavor.
2. We need **assessment tools to help us identify pastors who have gifts and skills for congregational transformation.**
3. We need to train **both pastors and lay leaders in organizational development**, teaching what makes for a healthy congregational system.
4. In order to become culturally relevant, faithful, vital churches, congregations need **models of processes they can use to have conversation over time** about what God is calling them to do and to be.
5. Many congregations can no longer afford to call a full time ordained minister. Regions need **effective alternatives to full time pastoral leadership** to be able to offer these churches.
6. Congregations who are experiencing a lack of vitality often have become ingrown and myopic. Often they need new perspective that can only come from outside their context. Our church needs a **network of coaches** that can work with these congregations to help them see new possibilities. (Those coaches might actually be Regional staff.)
7. We need **strategies for providing competent congregational leadership** when it is lacking.
8. To help churches focus outwardly, rather than inwardly, congregational participants need **opportunities to engage in hands-on mission.**
9. Many of our churches have lost vitality because they are bound to the ways of the world instead of to the Alternative Reality (Kingdom) of God. We need a **renewed emphasis on adult faith formation and spiritual practices and the creation of effective resources for discipling new Christians.**
10. We need to provide **opportunities for clergy refreshment and support.**
11. We need **creative strategies that allow congregations to spend less time and money on church buildings.**
12. If we want to strengthen congregations for mission, then we need to **quit doing those things that only burn people out trying to maintain the status quo.**
13. We need **coordinated effort, effective structures and systems of accountability** within all expressions of our church in order to get the work of church transformation done.
14. If we are committed to living out our imperative, then we need **money dedicated to strengthening congregations for mission.**