

PATH 2

## Transforming Existing Congregations

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Can congregations change? Can God bring new life to congregations? Can congregations with a long pattern of numerical decline, of decreasing financial support and rising maintenance costs, of fewer new and younger people and an increasing median age actually stabilize, reverse the trends, and grow? Can cultural values and attitudes shift so radically that leaders begin to think and practice differently in order to reach the next generation?

In Oakton, Missouri (population 24), a United Methodist open-country congregation declined for forty years until only sixty people were left. However, during the last ten years the church has grown to 350 in worship, moved into a new facility, and has eighty children attending Sunday school. Led by a licensed local pastor, Oakton UMC now provides vibrant worship, significant outreach, and a positive witness that draws people from miles away in a county whose population is declining. Everyone who visits notices the parking lot full of cars and the nursery crowded with babies, and wonders, "Where are people coming from?"

In Sedalia, Missouri, First Church risked a second site and built a wonderfully inviting, child-friendly facility while also continuing worship in their historic downtown facility. Attendance that had declined for decades has grown in the last fifteen years from 130 to 750, with 2,500 people attending recent Easter Sunday services.

Two small-town congregations that had been declining for generations, each with forty to fifty people in attendance, decided they could not continue to afford the facility costs while supporting two

full-time pastors. They explored options with the conference and visited restarts and new congregations. The laity courageously decided to close both churches. They celebrated their rich histories with final services, and the pastors moved to other areas. A few months later the conference started a new congregation in the region. Eight years later the attendance at Trinity UMC, Piedmont, Missouri, is 250, and the new sanctuary overflows with children and young families.

In urban St. Louis, historic Lafayette Park UMC decided to focus its ministry on the poor and the homeless through direct service ministries. Members actively engaged feeding programs and housing ministries in partnership with other churches, community agencies, and even with congregations in Mozambique. With the growth, energy, and visibility of their outreach, new people began participating, attending worship, and offering support. Worship attendance has increased from 80 to 110 over the last five years.

Also in urban St. Louis, in a story reminiscent of Elijah passing the mantle of ministry to the next generation, Immanuel UMC, which had declined to a handful of elderly members, closed its doors. The facility was given to a new church called The Gathering of St. Louis. Two years later, The Gathering has more than three hundred in attendance, mostly young, educated professionals. In another part of the city, Mellow Memorial was closed and a new congregation called The Connection was started in its place, reaching out to a working-class neighborhood. Attendance has topped one hundred in their first year.

In the suburban rim surrounding Kansas City, most of the United Methodist congregational growth has resulted from relocations of longtime churches that have followed the population growth. With new facilities adapted to the lifestyles of their communities, they are thriving. Lee's Summit has an average attendance of 1,100 today, compared to 620 in the year 2000, and Woods Chapel has an attendance of 1,100, up from 610 in 2000.

These United Methodist congregations figured out how to reverse decline, strengthen ministry, broaden outreach, and move toward greater fruitfulness. They have succeeded in areas of population decline as well as of growth: in rural, urban, and suburban settings; and with small, medium, and large memberships. Decline

is not inevitable, and resurgence of spirit and vision can happen. Transforming existing congregations is possible.

In many of our U.S. conferences, up to 85 percent of our congregations are declining in membership, attendance, ministry activity, and financial strength, and this trend has lasted for more than forty years. Of the remaining, many are stable but are aging because they are not attracting new and younger people. In many conferences, approximately 10 percent of our congregations demonstrate a significant and sustained growth pattern that provides evidence of real strength and hope for continued vitality, and some of these are recent new church starts. The others are long-established congregations that have reversed decline, changed how they do ministry, adapted to their communities, and begun to grow. They are reaching new generations with the gift of God's grace. These transformed congregations may be few and rare, but they serve as a substantial sign of hope. Congregations can change.

Statistics that reflect the trends of many U.S. conferences match similar patterns in several European and Eurasian conferences while contrasting sharply with strong growth found in many conferences in Africa, Asia, and the Philippines.

Knowing that we can reverse decline in existing congregations shapes our strategic task as a denomination. A mission-focused strategy includes not only an aggressive posture toward starting new congregations but also a determined focus on transforming a significant number of existing congregations.

If 10 percent of our churches have already figured out how to reach new people and sustain growth, the strategic question becomes: how can we increase the number of transforming congregations to 15 or 20 percent or higher? More new faith communities and an increased number of transformed congregations—these are the dual strategies that provide a foundation for our mission.

### **Why Is This Important?**

A church consultant began a teaching session with the provocative statement, "God doesn't care whether your congregation thrives or declines, lives or dies." God cares about whether the transforming truth of Jesus Christ changes people—and changes the world through them—and God will gladly use our congrega-

tions for that purpose or work around our congregations for that purpose.

Congregations are not ends in themselves. Local churches are particular expressions of the body of Christ existing to further the mission that we see revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In the lessons Jesus taught, the people he touched, the suffering he relieved, the forgiveness he offered, the justice he proclaimed, the life he lived, the sacrifice he made, the death he died, and the new life he revealed is “the life that really is life.” Through congregations, the Holy Spirit knits people into communities that continue the life and witness of Christ.

The ultimate self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ drives our mission as The United Methodist Church. In a distinctly Wesleyan way, we carry Christ’s life-changing message. We offer the *invitation* and embrace of Jesus Christ, revealing to people the gracious love and open heart of God. We provide *worship* that connects people to God and allows God to remake our hearts and open our minds. In worship, we begin to see the world through God’s eyes, and this changes how we view ourselves, our families, our communities, our world, our joys and sorrows, our leisure and duty, our friends and enemies. Struck by God’s grace, we seek to follow Christ more nearly, to grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God, and so we open ourselves to *learning in community* through Bible studies, small groups, and mutual support. By these means we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in our own sanctification and our souls become interwoven into the body of Christ, the community of faith. As we grow in grace and develop our interior life (what Wesley calls “inner holiness”), we discern the call of God prompting us to make a positive difference in the lives of others through *service, mission, and generosity*. We begin to live for others and to find our identity, meaning, and purpose in following Christ. By God’s grace, we are a changed people seeking to change the lives of others and thereby transform the world.

Local faith communities provide the setting where souls are shaped, lives are sustained, truth is shared, and love is given so that people, by the grace of God, become disciples of Christ. Mission-driven congregations reach out, invite, and engage people, creating a sense of belonging as they practice the radical hospitality of Christ. They offer worship that is compelling, authentic,

alive, connecting, passionate, and life changing. They provide the means for people to deepen their faith with intentionality in community. They provide channels for people to reach out through service, mission, and generosity to respond to people in need.

The congregation is the primary means by which The United Methodist Church fulfills its mission. It is the fundamental arena where our human efforts, placed in service to God, change the lives of people and prepare them for greater service in the world. Therefore, the strength, vibrancy, fruitfulness, and witness of our congregations are absolutely critical to our mission. We cannot commit ourselves seriously to the mission of “making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” while neglecting the essential role of congregations in fulfilling that purpose.

Consider the impact of congregations on your own life. Suppose somehow you could extract from your life all the influences that congregations have ever had on you. Imagine that you could pull out of your mind and heart all the thousands of sermons, tens of thousands of hymns, all the pastoral prayers and personal devotions that you have experienced in churches. Remove all the people whom you have come to know and learn from and work alongside—the pastors, friends, colleagues, laypersons, youth leaders, and Sunday school teachers. Extract the work projects, service initiatives, soup kitchens, volunteer mission trips, and all the meetings, conversations, prayer groups, hospital visits, and support from others. Extract all the weddings, funerals, volunteer hours, stewardship campaigns, mission fairs, youth ministries, and children’s musicals.

If you could remove from your life all the influences congregations have ever had upon you, who would you be? After all the experiences and people and memories were removed, who would be left?

You’d be somebody totally different from who you are now. The congregations you have been part of—their people and pastors, their ministries and programs, their worship and service, their music and rituals, their communities and teachings—have changed who you are. They have shaped you. Congregations are a primary means by which God reaches works on your behalf, creates you anew, and claims you as God’s own. It is through congregations that God’s spirit shapes how we understand ourselves,

how we relate to our families, how we view our communities, and how we give ourselves in service to others.

Jesus intentionally formed his disciples into a community of followers to fulfill this mission, and in the second chapter of Acts we see the Holy Spirit's formation of the church to fulfill this purpose. United Methodist congregations exist today for the same mission for which Jesus gathered his disciples and for which the Holy Spirit unified those gathered on Pentecost. The United Methodist Church makes disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by repeating over and over again what has happened in your life and mine. In small congregations and large, in urban and rural churches, among the "up and coming" and the "down and out," in every place and culture, God works through faith communities to change lives. Sometimes the church has eighty years to shape a person by its ministries, and sometimes it has three. Sometimes it has six weeks, and sometimes it has only one worship service to shape a soul by the grace of God. Congregations matter.

To suggest that congregations are critical to our mission, and that focusing significant leadership, resource, and innovation to start new congregations and to transform existing congregations is critical as well, strikes some United Methodists as "too congregational." Don't we distinguish ourselves by our connectional system and conference relationships rather than by our focus on congregations? Will we dull the edge of social witness or limit our ability to address human need on a global level? Don't we risk turning inward and sacrificing our distinctive connectional engagement with the world?

A concerted focus on forming and strengthening congregations in no way limits connectional ministry. To the contrary: without strong, confident, mission-driven, outward-focused congregations, The United Methodist church cannot start hospitals, establish schools, change social systems, or respond globally to human suffering.

Jesus formed a community of followers around him, and through their invitation, worship, learning, and serving they offered the good news and invited others into their midst. The transformation that began locally changed countries and continents.

John Wesley did not "spread scriptural holiness" across the land and start Methodist chapels, preaching houses, and churches so

that one day he could have a conference! He held conference with churches and pastors and organized them into a connection in order to establish and strengthen faith communities to reach more people. The “conferring” with preachers and laity that evolved into an annual conference took place with the intention of strengthening us for teaching and preaching in our faith communities. Churches do not exist to support conferences; conferences exist to strengthen congregations and to multiply the fruitfulness of their ministries beyond what any one congregation can achieve.

Through faith communities God calls forth the leaders, witnesses, and workers who bring about the cultural, political, and social change that God calls the church to make. God uses lives changed in faith communities to change the world.

Far from slipping toward congregationalism, the Council of Bishop’s focus on congregations represents an awareness and public declaration of what many laity and clergy have long realized: vibrant, fruitful congregations are essential to our mission of making disciples and fundamental to our task of transforming the world, and if we don’t figure out how to reverse the trends of congregational decline by transforming more of our existing congregations, then we will fail in the task God has entrusted to us.

## **What Works?**

No single method or set formula leads to congregational transformation. And yet, by examining the diverse examples above, we discern common elements.

First, these congregations embrace extraordinary risk and change in order to shift from declining ministry to increased fruitfulness. They reach out to new people and make room for those people to express their ministries and offer their leadership. They display as much passion and care for those outside the congregation as they do for those already present. Leaders do not cling to old ways or to existing facilities or to their own preferences. They experiment, innovate, adapt, create, and learn new paths.

Second, in each case the primary vision, spiritual energy, leadership, and motivation come from the local congregation rather than from the conference or the denomination. The congregation wants a different future and willingly invests the time and hard work to

make it happen. In some cases, conference leaders provide consultation or connect pastors with new models, but the conference does not coerce, force, subsidize, or otherwise make the ministry happen. More information and outside coercion do not provide the impetus for unmotivated congregations to change. Bishops, district superintendents, and conferences cannot *make* local congregations turn outward, relocate, restart, renew, or grow any more than a farmer can *make* cornstalks grow faster by tugging them up by hand. The dynamics of congregational growth are internal to the congregation.

Third, these congregations are blessed with excellent pastoral leadership. Most enjoy long tenures with their pastors. The clergy leadership in these churches is widely diverse—elder and local pastor, male and female, young and near retirement. These pastors bring many gifts to ministry and they all carry an immense passion for those outside the church. They open themselves to the constant and exhaustingly hard work of learning and adapting to new challenges and changes in the communities they serve. They always look to the edges; they focus on the point where the congregation engages the community. They know that the principal mission field is “out there” and not “in here.”

Fourth, these churches enjoy streamlined structures and a more permission-giving environment than most mainline churches. They develop internal systems that are conducive to the outcomes they desire. Their organizational structures motivate and cultivate ministry rather than stifling and restraining creativity and energy. They are more agile and responsive than most other churches.

Fifth, they actively and extravagantly engage in one or more community or global outreach ministries that significantly influence the lives of people. Whether focused on the homeless in their own city, orphaned children in Africa, or clinics in Nicaragua, these congregations have developed one or two signature mission projects that channel the callings, gifts, and talents of their members to the hard work of changing the world.

Sixth, and most important, each has experienced a radical change of attitude, a new clarity of mission, and a taste for excellence; and they follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit toward the fulfillment of that mission wherever it leads. They reprioritize ministry, realign resources, reconfigure staff, redefine worship, reor-

ganize structures, and recommit to the mission of Christ. With a focus on fruitfulness, they stop doing things that don't work, change things that could work better, and create ministries that reach the mission field around them. They become new creatures in Christ, letting the old pass away and embracing the new.

## **How Can Conferences Help?**

Congregational transformation emerges from the vision, passion, and sense of mission of local congregations. The role of conference leadership and denominational support is to foster an environment that reduces obstacles to growth and feeds positive change and learning. To use the gardening metaphor, conferences provide the sunlight and rain to create the optimal conditions that cultivate local transformation.

First, conference leadership can focus the conversation, work, and learning on congregational fruitfulness. Leaders inspire hope, and they direct the attention of the organization toward the work that is most important. They set the agenda and focus the energy. They answer the question, *What are we going to work on?*

Conferences that take seriously the transformation of existing churches highlight congregational victories, recognize strategies that work, align conference resources, and rethink the purpose of annual conference. They reward learning, coaching, and progress. They focus on congregations through the congregations' mission statements, conference staffing, and appointment processes. The significance, leadership, and future of congregations are seen as important. They do not hold three days of annual conference sessions, hear dozens of reports, adopt a megamillion-dollar budget, and yet fail to mention congregations or to recognize their fruit. Their leaders do not focus exclusively on what is broken, dysfunctional, and conflictive, but rather turn their positive energies to what is generative, healthy, and effective. When the bishop, cabinet, conference staff, and conference budget emphasize the significance of vibrant congregations, then pastors and creative congregational leaders feel affirmed, and the garden receives sunlight.

Second, conferences that value congregational transformation create systems and cultures that motivate, recognize, and reward fruitfulness, excellence, risk taking, innovation, creativity, and

adaptive work. They embrace the “outliers,” those who have bucked the trends, and they learn from them rather than ostracize them. They provide a greater teaching platform for those leaders who practice responsible mission-driven risk. They actively stimulate conversations about relocations, mergers, restarts, second sites, networked home churches, and creative social media communities. They overstep boundaries and work together across congregations, districts, conferences, and denominations. They try and try again.

Third, conferences that support transformational leadership reexamine the streams that feed the call to ministry. How do we cultivate the call among gifted young leaders? Do we remove obstacles that frustrate and restrain our most creative candidates? Do we evaluate with a focus on fruitfulness, on one’s actual ability to mobilize people effectively to fulfill the mission of the church? Do we create contexts where new pastors can learn best from those who are doing excellent work in pastoral leadership? Do we place gifted clergy with the highest potential into ministry settings where their gifts will be valued rather than negated?

Fourth, conferences that promote transformation foster a culture of learning. The greatest difference between declining congregations and those that are growing in fruitfulness is their attitude toward learning. Thriving churches develop a culture of learning. Whenever they encounter an obstacle or a challenge, they reach for the phone, surf the Internet, ask for help, invite in experts, read books, or load people into vans and drive them to a church where they can learn. They figure things out and learn through the challenges. If churches are going to change, then pastors and congregations must learn in order to understand the problems, and must learn to create solutions.

Conferences can stimulate learning. They can create the expectation, provide high-quality events, connect people with leaders and churches who are making progress, and use fruitful pastors to teach others. There should regularly be high-quality learning events, focused on a niche of ministry somewhere in your conference, that help pastors, music leaders, finance committees, praise teams, youth leaders, children’s workers, VIM volunteers, or Bible study teachers to do their work better.

Fifth, conferences that take congregational transformation seriously align their resources toward this priority. How much of the

conference budget and conference staff time is directed toward excellent and effective congregational transformation? Are bishops, cabinets, conference lay leaders, and conference councils willing to do the extraordinarily hard work of alignment, the redirection of resources and personnel? Are we willing to stop doing things that do not work and adopt a strategy of planned abandonment for programs that bear no fruit? When we develop strategies for the future, are we willing to imagine the people in our communities who do not know the faith and have no church home, or do we simply picture the impact of our actions on our friends and colleagues, the chairs and members of committees, and the pastors and pastor-parish relations committees of local churches?

Sixth, conferences wanting to jump-start the transformation of existing congregations develop a credible and positive system of professional intervention with the key strategic congregations that are motivated to change. These approaches take many forms. In the Missouri Conference, we have developed the Healthy Church Initiative that requires pastors who want to participate to attend nine months of collegial learning sessions with a teacher, complete a reading curriculum, and avail themselves of trained coaches. Then if the pastor and congregation choose, they proceed to a similar pattern of learning for congregational leaders that culminates with a serious congregational intervention by outside consultants. This model, an adaptation of Paul Borden's work, is not unlike the interventions families hold for addicts: congregational leaders invite the painful work of hearing the truth, break habits that limit vision and ministry, and move forward one step at a time with a positive and specific agenda for change.

Seventh, conferences that seek to transform existing congregations adopt realistic goals. Not all congregations will change, and so conferences abandon egalitarian strategies that seek to influence all congregations equally. They unapologetically focus their resources and energies on high-potential mission fields. They pursue specific and achievable goals, such as increasing the percentage of growing churches by 10 percent over the years to come.

Eighth, conferences that foster the transformation of existing congregations don't wait for a denomination-wide program to provide solutions, and they don't seek to apply the same formula con-

ferencewide to all contexts. They focus on continual contextual innovation. They work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, trusting that God is at work in them.

## **What Does Not Help?**

No one pretends to know all the solutions. Church consultant Gil Rendle reminds us that reversing decline in existing congregations in a mainline denomination “requires all of us learning things that no one can teach us.” We’ve got to figure things out the hard way, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

There are some things we know will *not* work.

Ignoring or denying congregational decline does not help us transform existing congregations. Neither does blaming seminaries, general boards, bishops, superintendents, ordination processes, large churches, ineffective pastors, and myriad scapegoats while failing to take responsibility ourselves for the task God has given to us. We must not wait until everything aligns perfectly before we act. We can’t expect someone else to solve our problems, and we can’t keep asking God to do for us what God created us to do for God.

Doing things the way we’ve been doing them won’t help. “A system produces what it is designed to produce.” With that intentionally redundant sentence, W. Edwards Deming reminds us that if we were to carefully design a system that causes precipitous congregational decline for decades, we’d design a system that looks exactly like the one we’ve got! We need to rethink everything—the role of superintendents, the deployment of conference staff, the annual conference budget, our conference boards of ordained ministry, apportionments, the appointment system, and so forth.

Subsidies that create a culture of dependency and entitlement do not work. Rather, they remove local responsibility and artificially protect congregations from the consequences of their decisions while feeding the myth that solutions come externally rather than internally.

Analyzing data, making reports, changing mission statements, and adopting visions without really changing behaviors and realigning priorities will not work. Been there; done that.

## **Why Did It Fail?**

Imagine that your conference decides to take up the challenge of Path 2. You put your best minds at the table and use your most effective leaders. You make the hard choices, ending some ministries while initiating new ones, seeking to align resources with mission. Your leaders devise a way forward, a strategy that gets support at Annual Conference. Imagine your conference develops a bright and bold new plan.

Now imagine that five years have gone by since the plan was adopted, and it has failed miserably. What has caused it to fail?

Here are a few likely reasons:

- The conference's egalitarian approach that tried to change all congregations and all pastors dulled the focus and caused leaders to neglect strategic mission fields.
- The conference "old guard" never got on board.
- The pastors rejected systems of accountability.
- The laity were not involved in the strategies or invested in the outcome.
- The plan used old and ineffective approaches that did not reflect the changing culture of our communities.
- No money supported the plan, and the budget never matched the mission.
- Congregations expected the conference to solve all their problems for them.
- The conference became distracted by too many good things to do.
- The vision was lost with the turnover of bishops or other key leadership.
- The conference culture failed to shift from "churches exist to serve the conference" to "conference exists to strengthen churches."
- The conference thought a "one-size-fits-all" approach would work.
- The bishop and cabinet continued to focus their primary energy on problem-solving and conflict management.
- Each church and pastor assumed that it was all the *other* congregations rather than their own that needed to

change, merge, relocate, reengage, learn, restart, reorganize, or close.

## **Why Did It Succeed?**

Now imagine that you launched the strategy, five years later you are looking back, and the plan succeeded beyond your greatest expectation. More congregations that had been declining have stabilized and begun to grow. Congregations are clear about their mission, confident about their future, and fruitful in their outreach.

What caused the plan to succeed?

- The priority of transforming existing congregations had the focused attention of the conference, the bishop, the cabinet, the lay leadership, and the pastors for a sustained period of time.
- The “old guard” blessed it, the laity embraced it, and pastors and congregations stepped forward to risk real change.
- The conference fostered a rich culture of learning, and people felt safe trying new approaches.
- The conference developed a multifaceted, flexible plan for teaching pastors, coaching, and congregational intervention.
- The conference aligned personnel and finances with the goal of transforming existing congregations.
- Churches began to focus as much compassion, concern, and energy on those outside the church as on those inside.

## **My Hope and Prayer**

Path 2 stimulates courageous leadership, bold initiative, and real change at every level of the church so that more of our congregations follow Oakton, First Church Sedalia, The Gathering, Woods Chapel, and the many other congregations that have experienced rebirth.

Nicodemus asked Jesus, “How can anyone be born after growing old?”

*Transforming Existing Congregations*

It happens! By the Spirit's work and by the grace of God, churches that have offered decades of faithful service can continue re-forming their ministries to serve the present age.

Steps forward on Path 2 depend upon progress on the other Paths—starting new churches, clergy and lay leadership development, and facing global health crises. Like a cord of many strands, a strong United Methodism requires the interweaving and cooperation of these key strategies that deepen our inner life while strengthening our outward witness. We have much to learn from one another, from our most fruitful churches and conferences, and from our global sisters and brothers.

I hope that Path 2: Transforming Existing Congregations draws our focus to the work and health of congregations. There are no easy answers, quick fixes, or simple formulas. It's hard to be given a future that we have to figure out and work for.

I pray for a church that naturally and joyfully turns outward, a church that touches the next generation that seeks and serves people to the farthest margins of society. I yearn for congregations that innovate, experiment, and adapt, and where ministry is an exciting, dynamic, and life-changing adventure.

Pray with me as we hold one another accountable to Path 2: Transforming Existing Congregations, seeking to fulfill the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

