

United Methodists Join Forces to "Turn Worlds Upside Down"

Area Two: New Places for New Faces; Renewing Existing Churches

Friday morning, participants centered on congregational development. The Rev. Thomas Butcher, executive officer, New Church Starts and coordinator of Path1 at the United Methodist Board of Discipleship in Nashville, said that his mission is to lead a movement that starts new churches -- re-evangelizing the United States.

"From 1870 to 1920," he said, "the Methodist Church started one new church every day. Starting new churches is the most effective evangelism tool we have. We want to get to the point in the future where we are starting one new church every day."

That's the vision of the Path1 team, the group charged with recruiting, training and providing resources for 1,000 new church planters to start 650 churches in the next four years. One-half of those churches are targeted to be racial/ethnic congregations.

The Rev. Candace Lewis, pastor of New Life United Methodist Church in Jacksonville, started her church in a store front in 1996. Lewis was fresh out of seminary and knew only two people in Jacksonville. "And neither of them joined the new church," she said with a laugh.

The new congregation started in an urban community and its parking lot was its mission field, the pastor said.

"When you're committed to reaching new people for Jesus Christ, you have to try just about anything," she said, and that included carnivals in the parking lot, concerts, picnics, fellowships, a health fair and "heavenly harvest," an alternative to Halloween trick or treating.

"Most of the people who came were not part of a church or the United Methodist Church," she said. "We had contemporary, excited worship with people lifting hands; they weren't getting arrested, they were just excited to be praising God."

After being in the commercial space for almost nine years, Lewis said the congregation discovered that leasing worship space in a community with slow population growth and increasing monthly expenses made it difficult for them to save money for their first building.

But just four years ago, they put in a contract on a new building...and moved in. A former Baptist church is now proudly United Methodist with more than 200 members.

Even with all the excitement of starting new churches, the challenges the church faces today are real, said the Rev. Dr. Bener Agtarap, new church system strategist for the General Board of Discipleship and the Path1 team.

Agtarap spoke from his Philippine background and how the church in his home country learned to grow again.

"Prior to the 1980s, most congregations in the Philippines had no program on mission or evangelism," Agtarap said. "Most pastors had no training in mission evangelism. We had more clergy employees than clergy evangelists; more local pastors and fewer mission pastors."

Further, he said, there was no clear policy at the annual conference level to promote mission evangelism.

"What if every annual (regional) conference had a policy that every local church had a mission to start a new church?" he asked.

That was the question asked in the Philippines, and the church responded. In 1984, the church declared the province of Cavite as its mission field. Churches in metro Manila started 30 new churches in Cavite between 1984 and 1999.

"We were a new mission field in 1984; a new district in 1999; and a new annual conference with two new districts in 2008," Agtarap said. "Today we have 600,000 members from a membership of 100,000 in 1984."

Then there's the story of Oak Cliff United Methodist Church in Texas. "Two minutes from closing," by the pastor's own admission, with the endowment used up and the people gone, the church decided to change drastically.

The Rev. Diane Presley, the church's pastor, told the seven-year story of this church that could be almost anywhere in the United States. She said there are three things to look for that any transforming church needs to have: a stable financial base; nurture the vision; and "You gotta have people."

"The question was, 'do you want to live or do you want to die?' It was put to the congregation. and they said they wanted to live," said Presley. "So, then, are you willing to change drastically?"

The congregation did, and through the chaos and change reached out to its neighboring community and found its purpose and mission again.

"We are responsible for those who live around us, who live in our community," said the Rev. Edgar Bazan, who joined the staff at Oak Cliff several years ago to reach the Hispanic population around the church. "Are we preparing a place for the people around us? We cannot reap where we have not sown. We need to give ourselves to others. They need to know that there is more than just this life. There is eternal life in Jesus Christ, and we have this message. We are responsible for sharing the message and we are doing our best to share this story."