

TRANSITION TEAM Discipleship Plan Implementation

Transformation begins in the human heart when it is confronted by the amazing grace and boundless love of God in Jesus Christ. Change occurs when we help make disciples of Jesus Christ who are passionate about making new disciples who can transform our world. Change must be created by dynamic leaders who demonstrate servant leadership as God effectively works through them as modeled by Jesus Christ.”

—First paragraph, “Nebraska United Methodist Conference Discipleship Plan”

We are in a time of spiritual and organizational transformation in the Nebraska United Methodist Conference. We are creating a new culture—one grounded in spiritual formation for personal and corporate growth. A culture that is one in Christ, one in each other and one in ministry to the world.

The Transition Team was appointed by Bishop Ann Brookshire Sherer following the approval of the “Nebraska United Methodist Conference Discipleship Plan,” (hereafter referred to as “Conference Discipleship Plan”) at the 2006 Annual Conference Session held in June 2006.

THE TRANSITION TEAM ASSIGNMENT

The Transition Team’s work is to develop and guide a process for implementing the “Conference Discipleship Plan.” Chairpersons are Darrell Stock and Marilyn Moore with Steve Griffith serving as secretary. The team is comprised of five subgroups—Clergy Leadership, Laity Leadership, Structure and Resource, Signs of Discipleship and Transforming the World.

Transition Team members are pulled between the vision laid out in the plan on the one hand and, on the other, the familiar ways of the past. We are often tempted to act quickly to define elaborate structures and invent quick, comfortable solutions.

Instead, Transition Team members have paused to listen, to see what shapes emerge from growing understanding of God’s calling. The team found itself holding back from naming all specifics in order to find enduring principles that will guide the way we organize ministry in the Nebraska Conference.

What follows are recommendations (some are specific, some are broad concepts) for continuing transition and change. As the team moves forward and continues to focus on implementing the “Conference Discipleship Plan” they have come to learn much about the work of affecting change and transition; and understand that we have even more to learn.

TRANSITION TEAM MEMBERS

Membership of the Transition Team includes people who served on the DiscipleMakers Task Force, individuals who expressed interest in serving and those invited by the Bishop. In addition, district superintendents and conference staff all helped as resource people and facilitators. Transition Team members are:

Marilyn Moore, Darrell Stock, Rev. Steve Griffith, Rev. Harold Backus, Rev. David Lux, Rev. Kelly Karges, Rev. Nancy Flader, Rev. Jeanette Fagerberg, Rev. Ebb Munden, Rev. Theta Dame, Rev. Jim Wallasky, Melody Adams, Anita Hall, Rev. Marvin Koelling, Virginia Piper, Lavina Schwaninger, Jim Cook, Clark Gress, Charlene Adden, Tom Watson, Rev. Lance Clay, Rev. Doug Griger, Rev. Bill Ritter, Rev. Steve Todd, Rev. Russ Tompkins, Sam Fisher, Rev. Mel Luetchens, Jeff Ahl, Marilyn Zehring, Rev. Charlotte Abram, Lloyd Ambrosius, Rev. Alan Davis, Rev. Pauletta Lehn, Rev. Nancy Leonard, Rev. Charles Spence, Meghan Poulas, Joanna Lynch, Rev. Michael Patzloff and Lisa Maupin.

District Superintendent contributors: Randall Sailors, Carol Roettmer Brewer, Keith Johnson, Gary Main, Secundino Morales and Brian Kottas. Staff contributors: Rev. Steve Flader, Robin Kilgore, Rev. Nita Hinds-Park, Kathryn Witte, John Jones and Rev. Carol Windrum.

Signs of Discipleship Transition Team recommendations

The Conference’s mission, “Making Disciples Making a Difference,” has been stated again and again. Even so, we know that the place where disciples are formed is in the local congregation. The Conference has a responsibility to identify, train and nurture clergy leaders who can proclaim the Gospel and help congregations in their mission. The Conference can provide resources and opportunities for developing vital lay leadership.

THE LOCAL CHURCH IS THE CENTER FOR FORMING DISCIPLES

In the Conference Discipleship Plan of 2006 we identified Six Signs of Discipleship that mark vital congregations. We asked every congregation to write their own unique Discipleship Plan, basing their ministries and congregational life on these six signs. The plan is as critical as forming faithful disciples and vital leaders. This is not an exercise in filling in the required blanks in order to complete a report. It really is a process of forming the congregation into the living body of Christ. As Paul wrote in I Corinthians 12:20, “As it is, there are many members, yet one body.”

Our churches are developing discipleship plans in the year since we adopted the Conference Discipleship Plan. This is not a one-time exercise, but a continuing process. A congregation’s life and ministry is always in motion, not static but constantly learning and adapting to new circumstances in the environment. This means that we must always be revisiting our plan, disrupting our assumptions, renewing our commitments, and looking for new opportunities to be “Christ’s representatives in the world.” (From The Baptismal Covenant, “The United Methodist Hymnal,” p. 34.)

We are developing resources that will help congregations in this process. One resource in development is a booklet (also made available on the Web site). Content being considered for the booklet includes a glossary of terms, a “Six Signs of Discipleship Worksheet,” “Common Steps in Developing a Discipleship Plan” (see pages 7-8 for examples), plus such listings as:

- Where to find information about our community
- Where to find good Sunday School and adult study materials in the Wesleyan tradition
- Where to find resources for prayer and spiritual growth
- Where to find information on issues in our community, nation and world
- Where to learn leadership skills

•A series of DVDs to be used by each local church addressing a variety of areas including the Six Signs of Discipleship.

We invite churches to turn to these anew as sources for forming the congregation and renewing its mission and ministry.

Lay Leadership Transition Team Recommendations

We want to change the relationship between the conference and the local church so that the conference puts an emphasis on how it can support the local church in its mission of disciple making.

We recommend the Nebraska Conference organization chart start with the local church, with the conference staff districts and committees supporting that church. We urge each church's Committee on Lay Leadership to work through the year as described in the "Book of Discipline," ¶ 259. "The charge of this committee is to identify, develop, deploy, evaluate and monitor Christian spiritual leadership for the local congregation. ...The committee shall engage in biblical and theological reflections on the mission of the church, the primary task, and ministries of the local church. It shall provide a means of identifying the spiritual gifts and abilities of the membership."

Our emphasis as a conference is "Making Disciples, Making a Difference." We have stressed the importance of reaching beyond those already in our pews to those outside who are looking for guidance and meaning in their hectic, complex lives. In particular, one such group that has been missing from our churches is young adults. In addition to developing worship and ministries that will attract people in their 20s and 30s, congregations and the Conference must help them become active, involved leaders. We urge congregations to seek out young adults who have the spiritual gifts, talents and passions for significant leadership positions in the church. The Committee on Lay Leadership has a special responsibility for giving Christians of every age the opportunity to succeed and grow as disciples and bringing them into the decision-making processes of the church.

In order to assist churches in accomplishing this, the conference and districts will implement a leadership development program we call UM/Leadership Nebraska-Laity. UM/Leadership Nebraska-Laity will serve as a clearinghouse for laity leadership development resources offered in a series of Academies.

Academy/Academies

Academies include a variety of resources such as DVDs, events and gatherings, consultations, online web conferences, downloadable resources, podcasts, and supportive relationships with other churches, pastors and lay people. A person, group or congregation could make use of one resource, attend a single event, or take advantage of several or all of the resources offered, either in a single Academy or drawing from several. These Academies are centers of excellence, tools for individuals and congregations to grow in discipleship and live in covenant together.

We recommend the academy components of UM/Leadership Nebraska-Laity include:

LAITY AND DISCIPLESHIP ACADEMY

•Spiritual Formation—Moving individuals from membership to ministry is rooted in faith formation. United Methodist 101, an online course from United Methodist Communications, is just one source to help equip local churches to discover basic United Methodist beliefs. We recommend local churches start with very basic education on what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, what it means to be a United Methodist. Disciple Bible Study, Certified Lay Speaking Ministry courses and other resources are available for this fundamental faith formation work.

Churches should recognize that different people are in different places in their faith development. The church needs to recognize these differences and work to help everyone grow.

•Use technology wherever it enhances spiritual learning and involvement. For example DVDs and Web site downloads would be made available to local churches packaged with various content. Short segments for worship, slightly longer versions for small groups and committee training, and still longer format pieces for workshops and seminars included in the academy. For example content could focus on the Six Signs of Discipleship.

•Reinvent Laity Convocation—Rename and reformat to better utilize this program. Consider making it a multi-track event, with multiple locations where attendees could "cherry pick" sessions of interest to them. For example, a partial-day registration would be made available as well as one day events. Content would focus on elements of the Conference Discipleship Plan. Sessions could be recorded and made available on DVD.

•L3 (Loving, Learning, Leading) Leadership Incubator—The Board of Laity and Discipleship has already invested in this small-group driven leadership development tool. By fall 2008, pastors will begin implementing incubators with their leadership teams in local churches. These community-based groups are flexible and are meant to incorporate the best leadership developing learnings available from the church as well as other sources, including local civic organizations in the local church community.

•Certified Lay Speaking Ministries—as a component of Leadership Nebraska, we recommend the Lay Speaking Ministries be renamed Lay Leadership Academy, which is a better description of what it does. The current perception is that it is just filling in for the pastor or speaking in public. It is much more, including components for youth.

•Enhanced Spiritual Gifts and Talent Surveys—we recommend that churches do spiritual gifts and talent surveys to learn how an individual's gifts can best be used by following their passion and developing their God-given ministry.

•Assess Conference Commitment to Children and Youth—we recommend a true examination of children's and youth ministries in the conference over the next six months. The resulting findings should direct the future education and spiritual formation activities of the conference around children and youth. We believe a more organized program is of paramount importance.

•Young Adult Leadership Development—Since our ongoing vibrancy as a worshipping community depends in part on our ability to engage young adults as worshipers and leaders, we recommend intentional targeting of young adults in the strategic disciple leadership plans. For example, the conference could sponsor

five or more seminary interns who would practice a model of prayer, study and action around one of the Six Signs of Discipleship. Interns would be placed across Nebraska to interact with local churches and enhance our connection and commitment to living out the signs of our ministry.

DISCIPLESHIP SUPPORT AND RESOURCE ACADEMY

Create and use a database using the Conference database to make local church information more widely available and to help connect people. For example more local church positions could be listed so that leadership of one church could identify their counterparts of another church. An individual should be able to request or access, for example, information about churches in a particular district with a particular membership. Local churches and district personnel would be responsible to ensure that the conference database has the most current leadership information. Meeting attendees could also be tracked so that individual interest patterns could be maintained.

MISSION AND JUSTICE ACADEMY

Drawing heavily from the Transforming the World Transition Team recommendations, provide resources to teach laity about mission and justice. Included in this academy is inclusiveness training that focuses on gender and racial/ethnic equity, as well as inclusiveness of all people.

CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACADEMY

We recommend a leadership program parallel to the clergy congregational development academy be created. It would include welcoming ministry training using United Methodist Communications Igniting Ministry materials and resources.

LAY LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

We believe these strategies will help to bring conference resources to the local church, instead of the church members always having to travel to a conference meeting/presentation, often at great distance and expense. It is important to overcome Nebraska's expansive geography so that more people have the opportunity to grow their spirituality and to grow their capacity to lead. Implementation of these strategies will assist and guide the local church in carrying out the Six Signs of Discipleship.

The accountability for lay leadership development also resides in the local church. The lay leader in the congregation, working closely with the pastor, facilitates the development of the "Lay Leadership Committee." The local church is accountable to the district superintendent and district lay leaders who are also available as a resource to help in the leadership development components.

CLERGY LEADERSHIP TRANSITION TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective clergy leadership is the primary driver for making disciples that make a difference. The Seven Signs of Vital Clergy outlined in the Conference Discipleship Plan offer clergy an exciting opportunity to focus their ministry, both personally and as a plan of work with their congregation. We recommend clergy move from good to great. We expect accountability for our fruitfulness, as well as our faithfulness (see diagram on page 6). Our plan is to invigorate clergy development in the Nebraska Conference including recruiting pastors who share a vision for making disciples, making a difference. The best way to maintain consistency in the direction and vision of the church, resides in our-pastors in the local church.

The Clergy Leadership Transition Team working with the Board of Ordained Ministry, Bishop Sherer, district superintendents, other Transition Team subgroups, and with input from others in the conference, resulted a concept called UM/Leadership Nebraska-Clergy. A parallel leadership concept to the laity leadership development concept. UM/Leadership Nebraska-Clergy would act as a clearing house for clergy leadership development and would be delivered through a series of Academies. The recommended academies and their components include:

THE BOARD OF ORDAINED MINISTRY (BOOM) AND BOOM ACADEMY

Vital clergy leadership is a critical component of our Conference Discipleship Plan. The primary responsibility for recruiting clergy is placed on the Board of Ordained Ministry. Their overriding duty is to enlist women and men of all races and ethnic origins for the ordained ministry and guide these ministers-in-formation in the process of education, training and ordination. In this work they collaborate with the local church, districts, the Bishop, the Order of Deacon and Order of Elder. They also provide support services for the ordained ministers' career development, personal and career counseling, continuing education, formation in servant leadership, continued spiritual growth in Christ, preparation for retirement and clergy morale.

Adapted from "The Book of Discipline 2004," ¶1634

- **Spiritual Formation**—In his book, "The Second Coming of the Church," George Barna, well known church growth expert and sociologist, "an urgent plea for people of God to stop dabbling in religion and to grow in spiritual maturity. This is a call for us to stop playing church and to start being the church by demonstrating the transformation that has occurred within us as the result of an absolute, paramount commitment to Jesus. As clergy we are called to develop our spiritual capacity in order to lead others in the same."

Every pastor is asked to take part in spiritual retreats such as Five Day Academy, Walk to Emmaus and other local, regional and global formation opportunities.

- **Clergy Recruitment and Enlistment**— Train the staff parish relations committee of local churches on the local church's role in identifying young men and women interested in full-time Christian service. Other methods of identifying and cultivating potential clergy are camping, Conference Council on Youth Ministries, United Methodist Higher Education, the Board of Ordained Ministry and local church youth ministries; realizing that the main thrust must be from the local church staff parish relations committee.

We must strengthen our relationships with United Methodist seminaries, along with creating a team (representatives from the cabinet, BOOM plus two young, energetic clergy) to visit seminaries. The goal is to offer a larger pool of spiritual talent to help local churches in their mission through appointment and through district and conference boards and committees. A special program has been developed for new church pastors.

- Covenant Groups— A spiritually healthy, growing, vital pastor helps create a spiritually engaged church. Supporting and assisting our clergy leadership helps keep the focus on the mission and ministry of the local church and helps foster the idea that “clergy and laity are in this together.” The groups are intended to be nurturing to pastors, offering a “safe-haven” to discuss the spiritual, personal and global issues of the day. Church renewal begins with clergy renewal. Congregations that model the signs of discipleship most likely are led by a clergy person who models those signs.

HEALTHY INDEPENDENCE ACADEMY

Pastors need healthy independence to effectively serve in ministry. Family systems theory is taught through many sources in the church, providing clergy the tools needed to keep themselves independently healthy and detached from troubling situations and challenges in which they may find themselves. The goal is to maintain clergy in ministry. The ultimate goal is for each participant to become a more well-differentiated leader, someone who has clarity about his or her own goals, and therefore someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes that naturally occur in ministry.

MISSION AND JUSTICE ACADEMY

Drawing heavily from the Transforming the World Transition Team recommendations, provide resources to teach clergy about mission and justice. Included in this academy is inclusiveness training that focuses on issues of gender, race, ethnicity, economics and peace.

CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACADEMY

The Nebraska Congregational Development Committee already assists pastors in discerning if they are called to be a church planting pastor and educates pastors in a variety of models and methods for starting new congregations. Invited participants attend the South Central Jurisdiction New Church Leadership Institute at Mt. Sequoyah, the annual School of Congregational Development, plus various workshops and seminars in Nebraska and other conferences. Each pastor also receives ongoing support and resources from the Nebraska Congregational Development Committee and director.

There is also a component for revitalizing churches as well as welcoming ministry training using United Methodist Communications Igniting Ministry materials and resources.

OTHER CLERGY LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS (SECTION REFERRED TO TRANSITION TEAM FOR CLARITY)

- We recommend that local churches increase funding for continuing education to \$1000 to support vital clergy leadership. These funds would be administered through the Education Committee of BOOM to support vital, clergy leadership.
- Fund or reorganize conference staff personnel to coordinate UM/Leadership Nebraska-Clergy and Laity, including acting as BOOM registrar, tracking Boundaries and Safe Sanctuary training, oversee background checks, continuing education and covenant group tracking. The delivery system for leadership development must be as direct as possible.

Clergy accountability is achieved through the church Staff Parish Relations Committee, BOOM, district superintendents and covenant groups weighing heavily against the success of the church’s discipleship plan. In this model, the work of the staff parish relations committee is crucial.

Clergy success will be marked by joyful leadership resulting in a growing, spirit-filled congregation that welcomes people, involves people in mission and justice work, and is connected to the larger church. Mutual accountability is an important aspect of making the pastor/congregation dynamic effective.

Transforming the World Transition Team recommendations

Our discipleship would not be complete without putting our faith into action and practice being the Body of Christ in the world. Scripture reminds us of our call to be risk-takers and justice workers with a heart for peace in our discipleship. United Methodists have long been faithful to that call.

We were inspired when we reflected upon Jesus claiming the words of the prophet Isaiah to frame his public ministry, announcing, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). We affirm the Spirit of God is indeed upon us—the Church—the Body of Christ in the world—because God through Jesus Christ has anointed us to these same ministries.

There is much room to grow in areas of risk-taking mission and justice work. While typical mission work, or compassion/charitable ministries, can be extremely valuable expressions of faith, we think these are better understood as forms of “gracious generosity.” “Risk-taking” mission has to do with challenging ourselves and others to take risks leading to faithful action. And “justice work” has to do with striving to eliminate systems of oppression.

Under the umbrella of the “Mission and Justice Academy” risk-taking mission and justice work will be supported by training and resource support on a district level. Following are recommended components for the Mission and Justice Academy. Our hope is that these concepts will integrate into other academies as we learn more about what it means to do risk-taking mission and justice work.

MISSION AND JUSTICE WORK INTEGRATION

- We recommend every ministry of the conference incorporate practices of risk-taking mission and justice work into the life of the church, including the other Signs of Discipleship. We recommend each church realize its connectional strength – that in doing ministry together, we are emboldened by the Spirit to do our work and transform the world in ways unimaginable than if we attempted it on our own.
- We recommend every UM/Leadership Nebraska Academy have resources and be equipped in order to pursue bold discipleship plans.
- We recommend a district-based “academy organizer” to serve as a catalyst for achieving risk-taking mission and justice work in the local, national, and global community. By reorganizing or adding staff as appropriate, we believe it is important to deliver information and education as direct as possible to the local church. The goal is to create a local ministry web where academy organizers would “ride the circuit” of the districts.

One goal is to improve the local church's capacity to understand and support the historical asset of the United Methodist connection at the local level. Another is to encourage, equip, and strengthen the local church for local, national and global witness. Each congregation or body of ministry should tailor their risk-taking mission and justice work according to their unique context.

- We recommend churches adopt the following strategies to effectively transform the world from the vantage point of their local church.
 - Know ourselves and claim our prophetic call.
 - Know the context of the community in which you do ministry.
 - Utilize community organizing methods.
 - Address risk-taking mission and justice work comprehensively and connectionally.
 - Provide interactive media for sharing connectional witness and resources.
- We recommend “academy organizers” serve as a catalyst for realizing and carrying out these strategies. They will function like a spider on the web—their job is to assist in seeing the broader picture, identifying where the web could be stronger, and spinning connections where it makes sense—thereby strengthening the whole web.
- We recommend each church know the context for ministry and incorporate it into its discipleship plan. It's the responsibility of each body of ministry (congregation) in the conference to know what's happening in their community, discern possible ministry opportunities, connect with national and global issues of mutual concern, and then organize involvement in the process of transformation.
- We recommend all efforts address the systemic issues as outlined in “The United Methodist Social Principles” and “The Book of Resolutions” based upon a broader community assessment. We've identified primary risk-taking mission and justice work areas of opportunity in Nebraska that should be considered: hunger issues, economic justice, immigration issues, health issues, children's issues, racism, leadership development and hands-on participation.
- We recommend each church/ministry entity within the conference develop its own intentional method of community organizing and empowerment. We recommend training a significant number of people to have refined skills for one-on-one conversations, house meetings and community organizing according to the chosen model. The “academy organizer” would facilitate this training.
- Offer a framework to support each congregation in pursuing risk-taking mission and justice work. Provide resources with common definitions of mission and risk-taking mission, justice work and community organizing. Terms and work are often misinterpreted or misunderstood due to uncommon terms and language.
- Building upon the Bishops' Initiative of Children and Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals, we invite congregations to consider participating in a conference-wide connectional ministry emphasis for 2008-2010 on “Children and Poverty.” We invite each ministry body within the conference to tailor part of their expression of risk-taking mission and justice work toward children and poverty as mapped out in the document. This document serves as an example of how to implement the strategic planning framework with local, national and global communities in mind.
- We recommend a Web site for sharing connectional witness and resources including celebrations of existing projects, discussion forums, links, and announcements of leadership training opportunities. Create a blog for sharing risk-taking mission and justice work that demonstrate all the signs of discipleship.

Accountability

A congregation's concrete benchmarking goals will be evident in its discipleship plan as academy workers provide support in forms of training leaders, offering strategy techniques and resources to achieve the discipleship plan goals. The conference can track the amount of times members within local ministry give and read ministry anecdotes, download resources and use connectional links. We can compare these hard numbers with how individual ministries are achieving goals set out in their discipleship plans.

We will know we are successful when we start to see risk-taking mission and justice work tangibly integrated into the life of our congregations. Examples of how to track measurable goals include:

- How has your church participated in connectional risk-taking mission/justice work within the district/conference/general board?
- Is at least one sermon a month prophetic in nature, that is, moving people beyond charity to justice work, e.g. use “The Social Principles” to challenge the status quo and unnerve complacency?
- Compare demographics of surrounding community to demographics of the congregation. Identify who's sitting at the table and who's not. Examine how to welcome and cultivate relationships with your neighbors. A congregation can track embodying “Open Hearts, Minds, Open Doors” through ways mapped out in Igniting Ministry tool kits, including mystery guest evaluations.
- Has the church incorporated social holiness heritage as it relates to vital faith formation, risk-taking mission, and justice work into the curriculum requirements of the confirmation group?
- One way quality can be measured is by tracking the number or percent of congregants involved in writing letters to legislators or forms of advocacy in the public arena, amount of budgeted money, or amount of special offering money to a specific risk-taking mission or justice work.

Assessment tools and other ministry tools would be accessible online or via the district office. Each academy organizer could fulfill the role of the conference resource person at the local level, working with the church and matching appropriate resources with local ministry. The connectional ministry organizer for the district could assist the congregation and offer a broader social assessment based on other district churches/ministries assessments. The process itself requires a local ministry to cultivate relationship with the local community and connectional community beyond the local church.

Structure and Resource Transition Team recommendation

We have studied how other conferences have organized, and have gathered many helpful ideas from their work. We have heard suggestions from many of our own conference members. We have discussed several different approaches to structuring the Nebraska Conference boards and staff. We have diagrams to illustrate our work. All these have been beneficial.

The focus of “Making Disciples, Making a Difference” is on local churches, where new members join the Christian community and grow in their faith and discipleship. Local churches in The United Methodist Church are connected through clusters, districts, annual conferences, jurisdictions and the worldwide general

church. "The United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline" defines the annual conference's purpose in this connection. Paragraph 601 (p. 351) states: "The purpose of the annual conference is to make disciples for Jesus Christ by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church; all to the glory of God."

Consistent with this purpose, the plan for "Making Disciples, Making a Difference" challenges the Nebraska Annual Conference to fulfill its twofold task of equipping local churches for ministry and connecting them for ministry and mission in the world.

We developed ideas and plans (1) to facilitate coordination among conference leaders in the various areas of ministry and mission, financial resources and property management in order to achieve the conference's purpose, and (2) to enable districts to help equip churches for ministry in their local communities and beyond. We started reviewing job descriptions, beginning with the cabinet's new job description for district superintendents. The Transition Team as a whole decided, however, to postpone decisions about structure for another year until the other four subgroups (or whoever succeeds them next year to continue the transition process) have made further progress in their work. Our recommendations are therefore not included in this report, leaving for a later time all decisions about whether to maintain existing conference boards, councils, commissions, and committees, to reorganize them, or to eliminate them, and also whether to recommend new ways for districts to implement "Making Disciples, Making a Difference."

Summary

So here we are at this point on our journey: still walking in the desert with Moses, deep in the wilderness, wanting to have it all figured out but knowing that we are still being formed. There is more work to be done, both this year and in the years to come. This transition from membership to discipleship—from a life of spiritual comfort to a life of giving ourselves away in mission and ministry—is a journey longer than we might wish. But we're on the journey together, and the promise to Moses and the Israelites is also God's promise for us: "I will be with you. I will guide you. I will sustain you."

As The Water's Edge pastor Craig Finnestad always signs his e-mails, "The best is yet to be."

Common Steps in Creating a Discipleship Plan

Step One Assembling the Discipleship Team Using a Group Process

This could be accomplished by using an existing group in the church such as a committee or administrative/church council or creating a special task force for this purpose. What should be stressed is that the creating of the plan needs to be a team effort and not done by any one person alone.

Step Two..... Educating the Discipleship Team

Education is defined as using district, conference and denominational resources to establish unified understandings of commonly used terminology in the process of creating the discipleship plan. Some examples of such terminology could include: demographics—what are the various kinds, how to get the data, how to interpret data, how to apply the conclusions drawn from the interpretations to the particular situation of the local church; mission and vision statement. What is the difference between vision and mission? What are the purposes of these statements? Church Vitality Indicator (CVI)— what this tool is and how it is used? How does a church derive long -range goals using the CVI? What terms are expected to be used in the discipleship plan? The establishment of common understandings of terms between the local church, district and conference would be helpful in assessing the discipleship plan. Although each plan will be unique to each local church, the terminology should be common among all plans and evaluative assessments.

Step Three Creating the Discipleship Plan

Utilizing the "Discipleship Plan for 2007" distributed by the district superintendents, the results of the CVI, the worksheet on "The Six Signs of Discipleship," and local church documents such as mission/vision statements, the Discipleship Team will create the plan. It is important to create benchmarks that follow the basic rule of SMART goals —goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-based (see further explanation in "Six Signs of Discipleship" Worksheet)

Step Four..... Assessing the Discipleship Plan Results

The discipleship plan should be approved prior to the start of the next calendar year and an assessment should be made during the year to make any necessary adjustments to the implementation of the plan. For example a church creates and approves the new plan in the fall of year one, to begin implementation on January 1, of year two. Assess the benchmark goals six months later and redevelop the plan in the fall of the second year, to be implemented in year three, and so on.

"Six Signs of Discipleship" Worksheet

Explanation: This document could be used by local churches to assist them in creating their Discipleship Plan. By discussing the answers to the questions below and agreeing on benchmark goals (using SMART goal statements) the Discipleship Team for the local church should be able to create a plan that is both unique to the local church as well as connecting to the conference discipleship plan as outlined in the document "Making Disciples, Making a Difference" pages 10-12

SMART Goals: These benchmark goals are defined as follows:

S—This stands for "specific" meaning that the goal set is as specific and focused as feasible. Vague and general goals are much more difficult to measure.

M—The goal should be "measurable". The primary measuring stick may be quantifiable but one can also measure the quality of goals. Anecdotal stories as well as empirical data can be used to measure success.

A—The goal should be "achievable" within the time frame listed. The trick is to have a balance between goals that can be achieved easily and those more difficult to achieve and require much more effort. The achieving of goals needs to have intentional times of celebration which will help bond the group.

R—The goal needs to be “realistic”. If the goal is so difficult to achieve or can only be accomplished under ideal conditions then the goal should be re-written as to be realistically possible to achieve.

T—Each goal should have an element of being “time based” in that a specific time frame is built into the goal. Some goals may be short term (within 1-2 years) whereas other goals may be longer term. For those goals longer than one year it may be wise to have other related benchmarks to be used in assessing the progress made towards the longer term goal.

Worksheet Questions for Discussion

1. RADICAL HOSPITALITY

- What does your church do to create an atmosphere that is welcoming, warm, and inviting?
- Discuss the discipleship process a person can participate in once they have decided to become a part of your community of faith. What are the various levels provided to educate and enrich the spiritual life of the person?
- Using demographic information, what is the diversity of the community of the local church? Does the church reflect this same diversity? What are some ways to intentionally include others in the life of the church?
- What programs are offered for children and youth?
- Discuss the use of intentional prayer for the un-churched in your community. What will your church do to specifically invite the un-churched to worship or to another church event?
- Church growth can be measured in many ways. Numerical growth is one way to measure as well as expansion of programs and groups, outreach to the community, and spiritual formation. What has been the growth trend for your church in the last five years? What would be a realistic goal for growth for next year?
- What is your church doing to support new churches and new ethnic faith communities?
- What is your church doing in addressing social justice concerns both locally and globally?
- What are the possibilities of either starting a new service or congregation in your local area or becoming a part of a new community of faith? How can you be a part of a new church start?
- How does your church ensure that United Methodist core values and beliefs are known and practiced by those in your community of faith?
- How does your church stay connected to other United Methodists in your district, conference, and around the world?
- What would be your SMART goals for this area in your church?
- What challenges are limiting you from achieving our goal?

2. HEARTWARMING WORSHIP

- Discuss how your worship experience is:
 - Culturally relevant:
 - Theologically sound:
 - Life transforming:
- How does your worship experience invigorate, inspire, encourage, and challenge the participants?
- What are the varied forms of worship your church employs?
- What was your average worship attendance for the last 5 years? What will you do to increase that number for next year? What will your worship attendance average goal be for next year? What will your worship attendance average goal be for ten years from now?
- What is the average worship attendance of the following age groups in your church:
 - Birth to age 12
 - 12 to 18 years old
 - 18 to 35 years old
 - 35 to 50 years old
 - 50 and over
- How will you specifically target younger generations to worship with you?
- What would be your SMART goals for this area in your church?
- What challenges are limiting you from achieving our goal?

3. RISK-TAKING MISSION AND JUSTICE MINISTRIES

Mission and justice work are natural manifestations of a deep faith in Christ that is expressed in acts of mercy and acts of justice. Mission work and advocacy efforts will address the systemic issues as outlined in The United Methodist Social Principles. Risk-taking mission and justice ministries evidence themselves in the church in the following ways.

- Every church/congregation will have local and global mission and justice components in its discipleship plan.
- Greater focus on teaching and living out The United Methodist Social Principles and the teachings of John Wesley on social holiness.
- Nebraska congregations will increase acts of justice while sustaining acts of mercy.
- Nebraska churches/congregations realize significant increases in people engaged in hands-on-mission and justice projects.

4. SYSTEMATIC FAITH DEVELOPMENT

• Make a listing of all the small group opportunities your church offers – either on-going or short term. Discuss the primary intent for each group such as: service oriented, designed for faith formation, social or relational bonding, or for some other purpose. Looking over your list would you say that you offer small group opportunities that help people grow intellectually, spiritually, physically, and relationally? Do you offer a balance of offerings?

- What is your intentional plan to invite people outside your congregation to participate in small groups?
- What opportunities does your church offer to assist people in regular daily prayer and quiet time?
- Discuss how your congregation participates in college and young adult ministries (18-30 year olds).
- Discuss how your congregation participates in campus ministry as well as retreat and camping ministries.
- Discuss the vitality of your children's ministries including mission opportunities, Christian Education, and camping.
- Discuss the vitality of your youth ministries including mission opportunities, Christian Education, camping, fellowship, and small groups.
- Reviewing the demographic data of your community; what small group opportunities do you offer that focus on racial and ethnic communities?
- What is the average Sunday church school attendance of the following age groups in your church:
 - Birth to Age 12
 - 12 to 18 years old
 - 18 to 35 years old
 - 35 to 50 years old
 - 50 and over
- What was your average Sunday church school attendance for the last 5 years? What will you do to increase that number for next year? What will your Sunday church school attendance average goal be for next year? What will your Sunday church school attendance average goal be for ten years from now?
- What was the average attendance in your adult small group classes for last year? What will be your goal for next year?
- What would be your SMART goals for this area in your church?
- What challenges are limiting you from achieving our goal?

5. GRACIOUS GENEROSITY

- Does your congregation have a formalized stewardship program and policies for both immediate church needs and the need for future generations? How is that plan implemented and assessed for adjustments and changes?
- What is the per capita giving per member of your congregation? What is your per capita goal for next year? How will you promote this goal in your congregation?
- What do you do to celebrate the gracious generosity of your church folks?
- Discuss the biblical references to giving and tithing. How can you emphasize the biblical rationale for giving and tithing?
- Discuss the importance of the congregation leaders making every effort to be leaders in gracious generosity. What goals can you set in this area?
- What would be your SMART goals for this area in your church?
- What challenges are limiting you from achieving our goal?

6. CONNECTIONAL JOY AND COMMITMENT

- In what ways are your church and/or participants involved in the community it serves?
- What would inspire and motivate a person in the congregation to be in mission and ministry beyond the local church? How can this be improved for next year?
- Discuss how your congregation celebrates the differences and diversity in both your community and how your congregation reaches out to people who are not similar to us – both locally and globally.
- Discuss how well your congregation participates in local, district, conference, jurisdictional, and general conference events. How involved is your congregation in connecting to other United Methodists through polity and legislation activities?
- What has been your church's historic percentage of apportionments paid? What will be your goal next year? How can you challenge your congregation to go beyond the amount required, to do extra mile giving, or to give in a timely fashion?
- How will the congregation covenant with each other to develop, adopt and implement this plan for achieving the Six Signs of Discipleship?
- What would be your SMART goals for this area in your church?
- What challenges are limiting you from achieving our goal?