

# Called to God's Frontier

## Seven characteristics of vital churches – part I

*By Bishop Jane Allen Middleton*

At least seven characteristics are present in vital churches. When all of these are present the church is growing and lively, filled with the Spirit of God:

**Prayer and Passion**

**Mission, Membership and Media**

**Learning and Loving**

I was recently asked, "What would happen to a church which refuses to consider your seven signs of a vital congregation or to make any changes to implement them in their life together." I said, "The congregation will die."

Those are harsh words, but true. It may be possible for a congregation to have life while omitting one or two of these characteristics, and many churches achieve vitality through these and additional characteristics. But unless there are clear signs of strength and new life demonstrated in the fulfillment of these characteristics in the life of that church, it will die. In Acts we read, "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b).

Churches must take this seriously because the life of your congregation depends on it!

### **Prayer**

1. Constant prayer as the norm in the life of the church: open to God's activity; open to God's healing; open to God's leading.

### **Passion**

2. Welcoming and open churches committed to spreading their message of invitation.

### **Mission**

3. Sacrificial commitment individually and corporately to mission, locally and globally.

### **Membership**

4. A high bar for membership and leadership which requires weekly attendance, spiritual growth through Disciple and other Scripture study, mission engagement, and tithing.

### **Media**

5. Worship which excites, inspires, and speaks the saving message of Jesus Christ using a variety of media and music.

### **Learning**

6. A learning environment for all ages from the youngest to the oldest, grounded in

Scripture and the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit.

## **Loving**

7. A spirit of love which is immediately palpable.

We have churches of all sizes throughout this conference in which all of these characteristics are present. We have others in which some are present. If we are going to grow every church in the Central Pennsylvania Conference, we have changes to make! And all of us can make improvements.

## **I. Prayer**

**8. Constant prayer as the norm in the life of the church: open to God's activity; open to God's healing; open to God's leading.**

**The beginning point for vitality in the church must be constant prayer. Prayer must under gird all that we do in the life of the church.**

Every decision we make, every issue we face, every action we take must begin with the question, "What is God's yearning for us?" Too often, as we come to the point of discussion and subsequently of making decisions as a congregation, we start from a very different perspective for decision making. We ask such questions as, "What will it cost?" "How many people will this upset?" "Will it help us get more people into the church so they can help us out?" "Strategically, if we are going to survive, what is the best decision?" "What will cause the least disruption in the life of the church?" "How have we always done it before?" I sometimes wonder where we would be now as a people of faith if our predecessors in the faith had asked these questions first. They do not always lead us to discovering God's yearning. These questions usually have rather specific answers.

But to ask the question, "What is God's yearning for us?" we are required to listen in new ways. We can only really hear the answer from a place of deep prayer and from respectfully listening to others as the Holy Spirit reveals God's desires through them.

Asking that question, "What is God's yearning for us?" requires that we be open to answers that we may have never even thought of. God often causes us to reach far outside of our comfort zone, to take huge risks, to venture into unknown territory. The Bible is filled with stories of people who have asked that question and have had to risk everything in order to respond to the answer. When the answer comes, we must then return to our knees in order to find the courage and strength to respond to God's yearning.

Just as prayer must be at the center of our corporate life together in the church, it must also be at the center of our caring life together. The church is called to be one in which members are bathed in prayer, committed to healing prayer for one another, and receptive of the Holy Spirit's powerful presence.

Congregations which focus on intercessory prayer for their members and others through prayer requests, prayer chains, and prayer services give witness over and over to the miracle of answered prayer. Many of us can testify to the support and caring we have experienced through the prayers of the brothers and sisters in our church.

This call to prayer isn't separate from the total congregational life together. Paul urged us to "pray without ceasing." Prayer must nourish and sustain everything we do in the life of the church. Our spirits can be renewed in every part of our life together, if we will but open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit to do so. We must be attentive to the presence of God, even during thrift-shop selling or Easter-egg-making days, even at trustees meetings or teachers meetings, even at church council or witness committee meetings, even on work days or worship planning sessions. We must practice living in a spirit of prayer in all that we do.

It is this spiritual foundation upon which Christ established the church and it is when we call on this foundation that we can be the transformational people God has created us to be. We must be a people of prayer!

## **2. Passion**

### **9. Welcoming and open churches passionate about Jesus Christ and about spreading their message of invitation.**

Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We must be passionate about spreading the good news, about how Jesus can change lives!

The days are long gone when we can expect that simply because we are located at the corner of Main and Susquehanna, or because we are such good and faithful Christians, the people will come to us in droves!

There is a word which we resist because it doesn't sound very religious, but the word is "marketing." We need to spread our message beyond the walls of the church. A zip code mailing is often available for very little. The local newspaper will often print stories and articles if they are provided by the church already for publication. Local radio and television stations will sometimes make time available and will include announcements. The outside of your church can become a great "billboard." WE need to market the good news we have to share. Of course, the best advertising comes from members. "Each one bring one" Sundays are very successful. The enthusiasm you share about your faith and your church among co-workers, friends, neighbors, and family becomes the best possible "marketing."

It is also important to periodically invite a stranger to accompany you into your church so that you can see the church through their eyes. Too often there is a clutter of old church fair signs in the hall, mismatched, unsightly hangers on broken coat racks, boxes of strange objects sitting around, ancient curriculum stacked in corners. Someone not familiar with the church can help us see it through a visitor's eyes. Our building gives a message, and the message of an unkempt church building is, "These people don't care

about God's house."

I once arrived at the church to which I was appointed on a weekday in order to move some books into my office. I saw a member standing inside the door I entered and introduced myself as the new pastor. She said, "I knew you were new. You came in the wrong way!" Our church must not be a secret club with locked doors and mysterious ways of seeking entrance. The message of a church with poor signage is, "These people don't care about whether I come or not!"

I have never been in a church which self-describes itself as anything other than "friendly," but I have often observed that when I am a stranger in that church I stand alone while everyone else is very "friendly" to each other. The Igniting Ministry Campaign has developed a wonderful training program which is now available on line at [www.ignitingministry.org](http://www.ignitingministry.org) One of the principles of the training is the 3/10 rule. For the first three minutes after the worship services is over you must speak only to those persons whom you don't know or don't know well. And you must speak to everyone within ten feet of you any time you are in church..

Our message is the saving presence of Jesus Christ in the lives of people. We indeed have the good news to preach and every person in the church is an evangelist. Is your congregation inviting and welcoming?

### **3. Mission**

#### **10. Sacrificial commitment individually and corporately to mission, locally and globally.**

"You have to lose your life for my sake to find it." That statement from Jesus is among the many seemingly paradoxical sayings made by our Lord. How can it be that in losing one's life for Jesus one actually finds one's life?

Churches and individuals who have "lost their lives" in order to serve Christ through mission know exactly what Jesus is talking about! Churches which have a passion for mission, which make a sacrificial commitment individually and corporately to mission, locally and globally, are churches which are alive and vital.

When people today are considering joining a church, they are drawn to communities of faith which have a vision beyond their own survival and self-interest. People want to know that their time and treasure will make a difference in the world. They are moved by the evidence in a church's life of sacrificial commitment and they want to join in those experiences.

Churches which are turned in on them selves, anxious about survival, hoarding resources for institutional maintenance WILL NOT GROW! Churches which are willing to give themselves away in mission, in reaching out to the last, the lost, and the least will find blessings being returned to them many times over. Ask anyone who has volunteered at a soup kitchen, spent time tutoring a youngster, participated in a Volunteers in Mission trip and you will hear the same phrase repeatedly, "I received far more than I gave."

Our purpose as a church, "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of

the world,” finds its fulfillment when we reach out BEYOND the walls of the church. A part of our mission requires us not only to serve the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, but also to address the root causes which create these injustices.

As I make visits to local churches the crucial importance of enthusiastic support of missions has become increasingly obvious to me. When I ask congregations to talk about what energizes them and creates excitement in their life together, those who respond with story after story of mission engagement are churches which are full of life and, yes, are growing.

This principle is true not only for individuals and for churches, but it is also true for annual conferences. For 10 years the Central Pennsylvania Conference has paid all General United Methodist Church shares of ministry at 100 percent. Our conference is consistently one of the highest ranked in terms of giving to Advance Specials, mission giving above and beyond the financial commitment to the General UMC. We are able to expand our witness and our mission impact throughout the world by our faithfulness to these askings.

But even more than this faithfulness has been the extraordinary visionary achievement of establishing Mission Central. What a miracle of blessings this mission is providing to people everywhere.

A passion for mission is fundamental to the growth and vitality of every church.

Commitment to mission brings its own profound reward and, indeed, the church receives far more than it can ever give. Growing churches are churches with a heart for mission!

#### **4. Membership**

##### **11. A high bar for membership and leadership which requires weekly attendance, spiritual growth through Disciple and other Scripture study, mission engagement, and tithing.**

We must make it clear to those who choose to join the church, to all members of the church and certainly to those who accept leadership responsibilities that much will be required of them and that we want them to receive the blessings which committed discipleship has to offer. We want folks to participate in the life of the church fully and with a generous spirit of welcome. When they are ready to make a decision to join the church this is what is required:

- \* To attend worship weekly in order to be fed and to join their brothers and sisters in Christ in praising God, seeking spiritual sustenance, and nurturing one another in faith.

- \* To take part each year in an experience which will help you grow your faith as a disciple of Jesus Christ:  
Disciple or other Scripture study; prayer or covenant group; Sunday school, etc.

- \* To be involved in hands-on mission once a year: Volunteer in Mission trip; collecting food for a food bank;

thrift shop, shoe bank or other provision of clothing; volunteer at Mission Central, etc.

\* To make a commitment to tithe. Calculate what percentage of your income you are giving to God and make a commitment to increase that annually to achieve at least a tithe.

Some of our churches require new members to sign a covenant which includes a pledge not to gossip. When new members join, every member is asked to renew their own covenant.

To be a disciple is costly. It is a high privilege to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ. We become especially aware during Lent that we follow One who was willing to give His very life in obedience to God. Can we do less?

I invite each of you to search your own heart and your own measure of church membership. It is easy to look around and see others whose measure of discipleship may be falling short. But if the church of Jesus Christ is to truly be renewed, each of us must start with the one person for whom we can make decisions: ourselves.

If our churches are to live, this must be our commitment!

## **5. Media/Worship**

### **12. Worship which excites, inspires, and speaks the saving message of Jesus Christ using a variety of media and music.**

Worship forms the center of the life of the congregation and serves to inspire, energize, and challenge. Because worship is the first introduction to a church for most people, participation must be visitor friendly, easily accessible, and clear. Effective worship is seamless, that is, each part of the service moves smoothly into the next part. All leaders, the pastor(s) and others, must be trained and prepared.

Worship must contain the compelling and irresistible message of the saving power of Jesus Christ and the implications for living faithfully in the world today. God's presence must be sensed in every part of the worship service.

Some of us remember the first time we saw a television set, but the majority of the population do not. Television has been a part of their entire lives. Communication which was once face to face or in print has rapidly moved through audio, video, internet, DVD, iPods and a future which will surely bring possibilities which we can not even imagine. God is surely using these means to spread the gospel message. Are we as a church willing to be partners with God by using a variety of media?

Many hymns of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries are filled with wonderful, poetic expressions of faith. They speak deeply to me. But the miracle of God's creation is that we are, each of us, uniquely created. And our spirituality is as unique as our DNA. Not everyone is able to hear the profound message of salvation through these hymns. A variety of music increases the possibility that God's message will be heard by everyone.

God is calling us into exciting expressions of worship, which are solidly rooted in

Scripture, which honor our wonderful traditions as United Methodists, and which speak to current and future generations. This requires creativity, openness, flexibility, and change. I believe we not only can do it, we are doing it! Thanks be to God.

## **6. Learning**

### **13. A learning environment for all ages from the youngest to the oldest, grounded in Scripture and the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit.**

The seventh and last of my characteristics of vital congregations is: A learning environment for all ages, from the youngest to the oldest, grounded in Scripture and the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit.

Learning about faith and growing in faith becomes a life-long process which must begin at the earliest years and must continue throughout our lifetime.

Together, church families celebrate the joyous news of pregnancy, begin to embrace the family with prayer, rejoice in the birth, and receive the little one into the church through baptism. In this way we participate in what can become a life-long experience of faith development through the church.

A study done in 2002 of hundreds of worshipping congregations from all faith communities in the United States indicated that far less than ten percent of all current members of congregations had no faith experience as a child. In the United Methodist Church, fewer than eight percent of current members did not grow up in the church. This means that when someone does not have a church experience as a child, there is very little possibility that he or she will be part of a church as an adult.

This is a statistic which must cause us to sit up and take notice! It mandates that we do everything possible to reach the children and youth of our communities now. If we don't do so, it is very probable that they will never find their way into the church.

From an important secular source comes yet another mandate to us. The Commission on Children at Risk, a coalition of physicians, educators, psychiatrists, and social workers, studied the rising number of teenage and young adult suicides and the increase in diagnoses of mental illness in these age groups and concluded that what is most needed by youth is to be in relationship with "values driven communities." That is who we are, centered in Jesus Christ and committed to biblical truths. Our commitment to the spiritual formation of youth and young adults is literally a matter of life and death. They desperately need the spiritual and moral foundation which a loving congregation can provide for them.

Some of you are in churches which are clearly on the frontier of ministry to young people — through traditional youth programs, Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, Christian nursery school and child care, encouragement of participation in summer camp, sponsoring mission trips and involvement in worship and other church life. Other

churches are on another frontier: operating youth centers, ministering to at-risk youth, providing worship which includes the music and media of today's youth.

Still other churches may currently have no children. My advice is to pray for children, prepare for children, and reach out in invitation. They will come.

But our need for Christian education does not end with childhood. Growing in relationship with God is a life-long mandate. Learning and growing in faith is a journey which continues as one's life experience changes. Each phase of life, each challenge in life provides yet another opportunity to grow closer to God.

Disciple Bible studies, short-term Bible studies, prayer groups, covenant groups, Sunday school classes, UMW study circles, retreats, short-term focus groups, and many more options provide possible opportunities within the life of the church. We like to quote John Wesley who asked us, "Are you going on to perfection?" Mr. Wesley wasn't suggesting that we should be perfectionists; rather, he was challenging us to continue to grow closer to God in our understanding and in our practice of living a life of love. We cannot do that alone, but we can do that with our brothers and sisters in the faith.

The church which offers opportunities for Christian growth from the cradle to the grave is the vital congregation.

## **7. Loving**

### **14. A spirit of love which is immediately palpable.**

When we consider the signs of vital congregations it is impossible to rank them. Yet, love is an **irreplaceable** characteristic in the life of a congregation. Without love we as the church are indeed nothing; a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal!

Love must be felt by all who enter into the life of the church. People sense very quickly whether love is spoken and lived in a particular fellowship. When love is present among God's people it is palpable. It is seen in the smiles, the conversation, the respect, yes, even in the joy. It is experienced in the compassion expressed in times of sorrow as well as in the genuine celebration of good news and accomplishments of others. It is expressed in the spirit of generosity of the people of the congregation through acts of caring — both verbal and non verbal — as well as practical.

We would hope that love is always present in all of our churches. But it isn't always so. When there are folks in a church who are still squabbling about the color of the carpet or the paint for the kitchen or the design of the altar or the music or the merger, those who enter that congregation seeking a relationship with Jesus Christ and a word of hope for their lives will not find it there. They will be captured by the tension rather than wrapped in the arms of love.

Curiously, we think of love as a feeling, a warm fuzzy attitude toward one another. And

certainly that is sometimes true of love. But love is also a commandment.

Jesus had another way of talking about love. He told us that the first and second **commandments** directed us to “love God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength” and to “love your neighbor as yourself.” He further said, “I **command** you to love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus understood that we are required to do more than to respond simply to our feelings. We are required to **decide** to love. We are required to love those with whom we disagree, to love those who in our view might appear to be unlovable, to love those who are unlike us, to love everyone. The unconditional love which God lavishes upon us can be the source of our love for others.

Because faith and the expression of our faith in the life of the church is something we all care about deeply, when there are differences of opinion it is especially painful. The need to forgive one another is an ongoing requirement. We cannot do this by depending only on ourselves. We can do this only if we are open to God's forgiving and saving grace. So love is most of all **a gift of grace**.

Is love spoken and felt in your church? If not, it must begin with you! It is my prayer that it will be said of all of the churches in the Central Pennsylvania Conference: “See how they love each other.”

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