

Update Report on the Process Toward Vital Congregations
West Michigan Conference

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I do not have specific goal numbers to report as requested in the Vital Congregations areas of Worship, Evangelism, Spiritual Formation, Missions and Stewardship.

I do have a report of the steady incremental progress in a process toward those goals.

Our Overall Framework of Reference:

“The mission of the UMC is the making of disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world (¶120).”

“The local congregation is the most effective arena for the making of disciples (¶201).”

“The purpose of the Annual Conference is to equip and connect the local church for ministry (¶601).”

The 2008 General Conference established 4 Foci to help guide us through 2012:

1. Developing principled Christian leaders
2. Starting new churches and transforming existing churches
3. Being in ministry with the poor
4. Creating global health initiatives to eliminate disease

Goals and Strategies (Adopted 2011 in the new Conference Plan of Organization)

The following goals and strategies express specific ways by which the West Michigan Conference seeks to live out its vision:

1. Vitality and fruitfulness will be improved as we:
 - Create a culture where discipleship means more than membership
 - Create and nurture congregations that are seeking and reaching persons of all ages, races and cultures
 - Encourage the constant development and transformation of both lay and clergy leaders
 - Intentionally develop new congregations, new worship services, and new satellite locations for congregations
2. Discipleship will be fostered through congregations who:
 - Change lives through effective, engaging and inviting worship
 - Empower and equip people to call others into a new relationship with Christ
 - Teach and model effective Christ-like service as a way of life
 - Pray for healing and wholeness, both inward and beyond

- Encourage people to identify and respond to a call of ministry and service
3. Transformation will take place as we create and nurture congregations who strive to:
- Identify and engage the needs of their communities
 - Respond to ministries beyond the local church and throughout our United Methodist connection with both money and service
 - Work for justice so that all persons experience the peace of Christ
 - Risk change to move forward in mission and ministry

Progress Update

During the past 10 years our Conference has declined in worship attendance by more than 8,000 persons.

Our Stated Intent: Alter this trend!

Various leadership positions have taken significant steps to reverse this decline. We have taken the healthy stance of addressing the processes and the systems that we believe will contribute to us setting realistic goals, while having a clear understanding of how we will achieve those goals and hold ourselves accountable along the way.

Since 2004 Bishop Keaton initiated, and there has continued, an annual event called “The Bishop’s Day on Stewardship and Evangelism.” The first single site area event had 300 persons. Since that time it has multiplied to every district, and/or has been a two district shared event, with a combined annual Michigan Area attendance ranging between 2,500 to 3,000. This is a ten-fold increase from the first effort!

As the “Drivers of Vitality” were published in the 2010 Call to Action Report, our Area Leadership was already engaged in a review and design process that would focus upon:

Five Key Vision Areas

Leadership Competency;

Developing an intentional process and clear criteria

Accountability with Support:

Developing clear criteria and ways to support clergy leadership

Congregational Development:

Implementing a process for developing strong local congregations

New Church Start Training and Support:

Enhancing the process for accomplishing this vision

Holistic Generosity:

Encouraging an “abundance” frame of reference;

Creating Interpretive Materials for distribution;

Providing Stewardship Education;

Initiating a Major Capital Campaign for endowment and specific gifts

The West Michigan conference has made significant progress in a number of ways in these five key vision areas.

That **progress includes** but is not limited to:

1. Using the days of the Annual Conference session for significant equipping and inspiration
 - a. 2009 Leadership: Dan Dick, presenter
 - i. Result: Widespread use of his book “Vital Signs” and persons understanding the components of systemic change.
 - b. 2010 New Places: three presenters from the Church for All People in Columbus, OH.
 - i. Result: Almost a dozen “free stores” have emerged across the Michigan Area.
 - c. 2011 Ministry with the Poor: Rudy Rasmus, presenter
 - i. Result: An emphasized “drive-in day” on the final day of Conference swelled attendance from 700 (during Conference) to 2,000 on that Saturday, for a day of worship, 70 training workshops, two keynote inspirational presentations and a huge picnic!
 - d. 2012 Global Health: Tony Campolo, presenter
 - i. Anticipated Result: We again have planned a massive “drive-in day”; three keynotes on “a healthy world – body, mind, spirit”; a family friendly free throw contest raising money for “Imagine No Malaria” and another huge picnic.
2. The Grand Rapids District, and its Superintendent, Rev. Laurie Haller, have led a Conference wide fundraising effort. The result is \$500,000 has been raised for construction of a retreat/study facility on the campus of Africa University.
3. MissionInsite, a demographics research provider, has been available for free to every congregation in the Conference since 2010. (The service has been paid for by funds in the budget of the New Church Development Committee.)
4. The Michigan Area has collaborated to implement the Healthy Church Initiative developed by the Missouri Conference. We have named our process the Vital Church Initiative (VCI). We have contracted with the Bishop Ruben Job Center to receive the multiple modules of training so a wide range of persons are equipped to move the VCI forward. To date we have accomplished the following in the West Michigan Conference:
 - a. 25 persons have received extensive training in the various components of the VCI
 - b. 12 congregations, from the Lansing and Albion districts have participated in “pilot implementations” of the VCI
 - c. By the Fall of 2012, we are projecting that some phase of the VCI, both larger and smaller congregational paths, will be underway on all 6 districts. This will involve between 40-50 congregations, >10% of our total congregations in the West Michigan Conference.
 - d. To date, I have made presentations about the VCI to more than 500 persons on three of the six districts.
 - e. One of congregations in the smaller path pilot of VCI, Trinity UMC in Battle Creek, has been featured in an article distributed across the denomination

titled "Dump on Us." An excellent witness of a problem becoming an opportunity for ministry with and in the community served.

5. The Conference Leadership Team, in collaboration with the Committee on New Church Development, has allocated resources and hired a new full time staff position, beginning July 1, 2012. This person will be responsible for oversight of the VCI and the starting of New Congregations.
6. The Committee on New Church Development has developed a five year strategic plan the new director will be able to begin to implement.
7. The Cabinet and Board of Ordained Ministry collaborated to establish "Criteria of Effective Ministry" as well as "Indicators of Ineffectiveness" and a process to address clergy ineffectiveness.
8. The "Characteristics of Effective Congregations", which came out of the Call to Action Report, were revised and expanded. These were then distributed to all clergy lay members of Annual conference and congregations in a variety of ways.
9. The former 63 member Conference Council on Ministries (CCOM) proposed a revised Conference structure to the 2011 Annual Conference. This sixteen member Conference Leadership Team was approved. It has had a fruitful first 9 months of existence. A number of significant steps toward accountability and alignment of resources toward the Conference vision have been taken.
10. Our Director of Communications, Mark Doyal, has worked tirelessly to improve communications, marketing and oversee the installation of "Smart Rooms" (video/tele-conference centers) on every district. This has saved thousands of dollars in travel costs and modeled new forms of electronic communications and ministry.

Summary

I look forward to the positive decisions and directions that will come out of the 2012 General Conference. Our Conference Leadership is committed to moving forward in faith toward the future God holds in store for the Church.