



# **CHURCH COUNCIL**

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*Connecting vision and ministry in  
your church*

*By Dan R. Dick  
General Board of Discipleship*

## CHURCH COUNCIL

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# Our Identity, Call, and Mission

**Y**ou are so important to the life of the Christian church! You have consented to be among a great and long line of people who have shared the faith and led others in the work of Jesus Christ. We have the church only because over the millennia people like you have caught the vision of God’s kingdom and have claimed a place in the faith community to extend God’s love to others. You have been called and have committed your unique passions, gifts, and abilities in a position of leadership, and this guide will help you understand some of the elements of that ministry and how it fits within the mission of your church and of The United Methodist Church.

“The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs” (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004*, ¶120). The church is not only local but also global, and it is for everyone. Our church has an organizational structure through which we work, but it is a living organism as well. Each person is called to ministry by virtue of his or her baptism, and that ministry takes place in all aspects of daily life, not just within the walls of the church. Our *Book of Discipline* describes our mission to proclaim the gospel and to welcome people into the body of Christ, to lead people to a commitment to God through Jesus Christ, to nurture them in Christian living by various means of grace, and to send them into the world as agents of Jesus Christ (¶121). Thus, through you—and many other Christians—this very relational mission continues. (The *Discipline* explains the ministry of all Christians and the essence of servant ministry and leadership in ¶¶125–137.)

## **Essential Leadership Functions**

Five functions of leadership are essential to strengthen and support the ministry of the church: identifying and supporting leaders as spiritual leaders, discovering current reality, naming shared vision, developing action plans, and monitoring the journey. This Guideline will help you identify these elements and set a course for ministry.

### **Lead in the Spirit**

Each leader is a spiritual leader and has the opportunity to model spiritual maturity and discipline. John Wesley referred to the disciplines that cultivate a relationship with God as the “means of grace” and suggested several means: prayer, Bible study, fasting, public and private worship, Christian conversation, and acts of mercy. Local church leaders are strongly encouraged to identify their own spiritual practices, cultivate new ones as they grow in their own faith, and model and encourage these practices among their ministry team participants.

### **Discover Current Reality**

“The way things are” is your current reality. How you organize, who does what, how bills get paid and plans get made are all building blocks of your current reality. Spend time with people who have been in this ministry and with your committee members to assess their view of how things are. Use “Christian conversation,” one of the means of grace, not only to talk to others openly about their understanding of current reality but also to listen for the voice of God regarding your area of ministry.

### **Name Shared Vision**

“The way things are” is only a prelude to “the way you want things to be.” When the church is truly of God, it is the way God would envision it to be. Spend time with your committee and with other leaders in the church to discern the best and most faithful future you can imagine. How can you together identify your role and place in a faithful community that extends itself in its fourfold mission of reaching out and receiving people in the name of God, relating people to God, nurturing them in Christ and Christian living, and sending them forth as ministers into the world? Examine your committee’s role and its place in that big picture and try to see yourselves as God’s agents of grace and love.

### **Develop Action Plans**

How do you get from here (your current reality) to there (your shared vision)? As a leader, one of your tasks is to hold in view both what is and what is hoped for so that you can build bridges to the future. These bridges are the interim goals and the action plans needed to accomplish the goals that will make your vision a reality. Remember that God may open up many (or different) avenues to that future, so be flexible and open to setting new goals and accepting new challenges. Action plans that describe how to meet interim goals should be specific, measurable, and attainable. While it is faithful to allow for the wondrous work of God in setting out bold plans, balance that boldness with realism. You and your committee will find information and tips here on developing and implementing the shared vision, the goals toward that vision, and the specific action plans that will accomplish the goals.

### **Monitor the Journey**

A fifth responsibility of leaders is to keep an eye on how things are going. Setbacks will surely occur, but effective leaders keep moving toward their envisioned future. Not only will you monitor the progress of your committee’s action plans to a faithful future but you will also be called to evaluate them in light of the ministry of the rest of the church. Immerse yourself and your plans in God’s love and care. Voices from the congregation (both pro and con) may be the nudging of God to shift direction, rethink or plan, or move ahead boldly and without fear. Faithful leaders are attentive to the discernment of the congregation and to the heart of God in fulfilling the mission of the church.

# The Church Council

The church council shall provide for planning and implementing a program of nurture, outreach, witness, and resources in the local church. It shall also provide for the administration of its organization and temporal life. It shall envision, plan, implement, and annually evaluate the mission and ministry of the church. The church council shall be amenable to and function as the administrative agency of the charge conference (§244),” (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*). Thus begins the description of the central leadership body of the local congregation. Though there are many more functions and responsibilities of the church council; §252.1 lays the foundation for this critical work.

The purpose of the church council is to plan a program of nurture, outreach, and witness; implement the plan; provide an administrative infrastructure; align the plan with the mission of the church; evaluate the effectiveness of the plan; act as the administrative agency of the charge conference.

This Guideline is addressed to the church council chairperson. The other booklets in the Guidelines series address the responsibilities of the other members of the council. It is helpful if the council chairperson has a working knowledge of the other leaders’ ministry areas, so consider having a complete set of Guidelines available for your own reference. At-large members on the council may gain important insight by reading this Guideline and recognizing that the leadership role is particularly for the chairperson.

## **A Biblical/Theological Grounding**

The church council model reflects and continues a historic tradition within the Church. Jesus called twelve disciples to be together in the leadership of the early Christian movement (Luke 5:1-11, 27-32; 6:12-16). Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, leaders of “the Way” often convened in groups to make decisions and to support each other in the work of mission and disciple-making. Acts 15 describes the Council formed at Jerusalem. Throughout the letters of Paul, especially in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, leadership in the congregation is described as the shared work of spiritually graced men and women—the body of Christ. A church council is greater than the sum of its parts. Gifted individuals—knit together in faith, love, and commitment and empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit—can accomplish much more than any individual. We honor and glorify God best when we become the body of Christ together.

## **Seven Purposes of the Council**

### **Plan a Program of Nurture, Outreach, and Witness**

The church council exists to create a strategic plan for a local congregation. Therefore, its primary work is one of leadership rather than management. This is an important distinction to make. Leadership is the visionary, “big picture” work that assesses critically where the congregation is at the present moment, where God is calling it to be in the future, and what resources will be required to move from the current reality into the desired reality. Management is the essential “detail work” that must be accomplished on a daily basis to make the congregation effective.

One tendency in the church is to confuse management with leadership. Both are essential, both are of great value, and both require specialized talents and knowledge, but they are not the same thing. Often church councils become “report centers” where various working groups within the church provide an update on where things stand, what resources are needed, and what the short-term goals are—management meetings. In such cases, congregations might carve out an annual meeting or retreat to “look to the future.” However, most of the best planning gets lost when the council reconvenes to deal with more immediate concerns, and leadership is lost to the management needs of a current program. One of the critical functions of the church council chairperson is to clarify the different leadership and management functions and to make sure that they remain well balanced. Planning is first and foremost a leadership function, and effective congregations make the long-term planning process a top priority.

### **Implement the Plan**

Regardless of the brilliance of a plan, unless it moves from concept to reality it is little more than wasted time. Plans must yield results. As the church council discerns together God’s vision for the congregation, it must create clear, concise goals and objectives for the short- and long-term. For the purpose of planning, *a goal is a guiding purpose*—the reason we need to do something—and *objectives are those specific things we can accomplish to achieve the goal*. One example is to say that our goal is to create “a biblically-literate community of faith.” Objectives in support of this goal might be “to offer four Bible study classes each quarter or to encourage personal reading of the Bible each week at the conclusion of worship. The goal is a large, not-easily-completed priority of the congregation, while the objectives are easily measurable activities that promote the goal. Effective church councils will establish goals, identify objectives, then recruit the appropriate people to manage the various activities.

### **Basics of Implementing a Plan**

Once the **goals** of a congregation are identified and prioritized, it is important to create measurable, achievable **objectives**—discreet activities that will help the congregation achieve its goals. Once goals and objectives are clear, the church council can identify which gifts, skills, and experience will be needed to meet the objectives. In addition, the church council can establish a time frame for accomplishing goals and objectives, standards for evaluating effectiveness of the activities, what resources will be needed, and how the congregation can build upon the work in the future.[]

### **Provide an Administrative Infrastructure**

Traditionally, The United Methodist Church has been a “structure-based” church, rather than a “ministry-based” church. This means that most congregations put a structure in place, establish a set of programs and ministries, follow set policies and procedures, and elect people into predetermined leadership roles on an annual (or class) basis. In this model, the structure drives the program. Ministry based churches consistently evaluate the needs of the community—both internal and external to the congregation—as well as the gifts, passions, and growth of congregational leaders. Matching gifts and passions to people’s needs yields a vision for ministry. Structures are fluid and flexible to accommodate changing needs, always grounded in the enduring work of God.

There is no one, right model for organizing the congregation’s administrative structure. Legal and administrative decisions may be handled by the board of trustees; personnel issues are dealt with by the staff/pastor-parish relations committee (S/PPRC), and the financial concerns are dealt with by finance committees and trustees. Aligning the program ministries of the local congregation with the mission of the church is the primary focus of the council.

### **Align the Plan With the Mission of the Church**

According to the *Book of Discipline*, the mission of our church is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ” (§120). Within this mission, every congregation must generate a *vision* for its ministry will look like. The church council plays an important role both in generating the vision as well as in aligning the ongoing work with the mission. Every decision of the council should reflect the ways in which it supports and promotes the work of “making disciples.” Only a few congregations—those with limitless gifts and resources—can do everything well. The majority of congregations must establish priorities. The church council strives to engage in those ministries that most effectively form Christian disciples. This underscores the importance of a good strategic plan for ministry. The church council must have:

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- clarity around the mission of the church
- concise, measurable objectives and goals for ministry
- adequate human and material resources to accomplish the goals and objectives
- appropriate structures and processes for effective ministry.

### **Evaluate the Plan**

Successful planning does not simply entail achieving goals and objectives but evaluating the impact and effectiveness as well. The church is engaged in transforming lives and forming Christian disciples. The measures of success have nothing to do with numbers (it is not enough to know that 200 people attend worship) but with qualitative change (how those 200 people are positively transformed by worship).

An important role of the church council is to monitor and evaluate the impact of the ministry on people's lives. How is the ministry of the congregation changing the way people think and behave? What practices of spiritual formation and devotion are people experiencing? What are the outward and visible fruits of the individual and corporate life of faith? Unless we can answer these questions, we cannot plan adequately for the future and improve the current situation.

Many congregations forego the evaluation process because they are too busy planning and implementing program. Often church leaders are oblivious to the impact on people's lives of what they do in worship, Sunday school, and Bible study. It is not enough just to offer the programs without measuring their value to the spiritual formation of the participants. Without evaluation, a church's ministry and program may not offer a truly transforming effect.

### **Act as the Administrative Agency of the Congregation**

The ultimate authority for directing the mission and ministry of a local congregation is the charge conference. Charge conferences (§§246-251) are called—at least once each year—to formalize the planning and decision making of the congregation. In the *Book of Discipline*, the church council is designated to be the primary administrative agency for the charge conference. The charge conference is conducted by a district superintendent—or duly appointed presiding elder—to approve plans for ministry and to elect the leadership to the respective working groups, boards, teams, and committees. The entire church council is part of the charge conference, emphasizing once more the essential nature of the council's work.

### **Other Functions of the Church Council**

An effective system for ministry depends on appropriate leadership.

Working together with the committee on lay leadership (§259.1) and the staff/pastor-parish relations committee (§259.2), the church council needs to develop a plan for leadership recruitment, training, and support and to be open to modifications in the ongoing ministry plans of the church. In a church setting especially, one important aspect of leadership is modeling learning and growth. Congregational leaders should engage in regular prayer, study of Scripture, small group activities, and missional service. Our growth and learning plan as Christian leaders is an example of Christian discipleship formation.

### **Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations**

The church council also makes recommendations to the charge conference concerning the pastoral and staff salaries and acts on recommendations from the S/PPRC on pastoral housing and other pastoral support needs (§252.4.d). The relationship of staff and ministry is critical to the health and vitality of the congregation. The chair of the S/PPRC and the church council may want to schedule regular meetings to see how the two groups can support and strengthen each other throughout the year.

### **Trustees**

The church council works to provide for financial support, physical facilities, and the legal obligations of the congregation in partnership with other leadership groups. There are two other administrative committees required in the local church. One is the board of trustees. All of the members of the board of trustees are elected by the charge conference. The chair of trustees—elected from within the board—is a member of the church council. The board of trustees is vested with the authority to manage the property and facilities of the congregation. This includes the routine maintenance of building and grounds, including making it a safe and barrier-free environment. It also may include authority for equipment or building modification that does not exceed 10 percent of the total value of the property.

Along with the church council, the board of trustees has the legal obligation to see that the congregation operates within local codes and state laws governing such entities as churches. The board of trustees is required to monitor and manage the insurance requirements of the congregation in the areas of fire, theft, public liability, and fidelity, among others. It is important that the church be insured to cover staff and volunteers in the event of legal actions. The trustees are authorized to receive gifts, subject to direction by the charge conference. The board of trustees serves as consultant to the church council on legal matters, insurance, and anything otherwise related to the physical property of the church and is required to submit an annual report to charge conference. Trustees are also responsible for a yearly church accessi-

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bility audit. For more information, consult the *Discipline* (§§259.3, 2524-2551), *Trustees* Guideline, your conference office, or the General Council on Finance and Administration.

### **Finance**

Another key administrative group is the committee on finance. The chair of this committee, the church treasurer, and the financial secretary are members of the church council. This committee is responsible for creating a budget for the ministry of the congregation and for developing a plan to raise adequate funds in support of the congregation's needs, both routine and special. Income to the church is recorded by the financial secretary, while disbursements are made and recorded by the treasurer. Periodic reports are prepared by the treasurer and submitted to the church council for approval. The finance committee serves as the consultant to the church council on financial matters. For more information, consult the *Book of Discipline* (§259.4), *Finance* (in the Guidelines series), your conference office, or the General Council on Finance and Administration.

### **District, Annual Conference, Denomination**

One other important function of the church council is to relate to the larger connectional church—the district, annual conference, and denomination. The primary task of the annual conference is to recruit and develop leaders for the local congregations. General agencies develop resources for local congregations (for example, this document is the result of collaboration between The United Methodist Publishing House and the General Board of Discipleship) and carry out other responsibilities that support local churches (for example, the General Board of Global Ministries manages our mission efforts here and abroad, and General Board of Church and Society carries out General Conference mandates in the areas of peace, justice, and social concerns). Many districts provide programs and support to local churches as well. Local churches may establish a “sister” or “partner” relationship with specific missionaries, projects, Advance Special ministries, or congregations or institutions in the Central Conferences (outside the United States).

One further way in which we support the connectional ministry of The United Methodist Church is through a system of financial apportionments. It is an important function of the church council to see that these obligations are fulfilled. Another way to support the general church is through local church members who serve agencies and the conference through committees and other activities. A final way in which we can support our connectional relationships is by supporting conference or district learning opportunities and other special events.

# The Role of the Chairperson

As the nature of leadership in The United Methodist Church changes, so do the roles of the key leaders. A generation ago, the chairperson of the administrative council or council on ministries acted primarily as an administrative chief operations officer, attending to the ongoing program of the congregation. Organizing and conducting monthly or quarterly meetings was at the heart of the task. In today's complex task of creating centers for spiritual formation, the role of the council chairperson is much larger and much more important.

As the church council chairperson, you are a partner in ministry with your pastoral leadership and the lay leader of your congregation. In concert, pastors, lay leader, and council chairperson oversee the nurture, outreach, witness, and administrative work of the church. The council chairperson holds the “big picture” view of the work and life of the congregation. As such, the council chairperson is fundamentally the “chief ministries officer” of the congregation. (This description is also appropriate for administrative board and council on ministry chairpersons in alternative structures.)

What does this new role actually look like? What are the requirements and expectations of the council chairperson? This short list is a beginning point for defining the work of the church council chairperson. In each setting, the demands will be unique, but these nine responsibilities lay a sound foundation for your task.

1. Be a spiritual leader—focus on ministry rather than administration.
2. Stay focused on the primary task—keep the council focused on the primary task and vision of the congregation.
3. Actively guide the work of the council—preparing agendas, conducting meetings, communicating with members, and monitoring the progress of the members.
4. Lead the visioning and strategic planning process within the church.
5. Actively participate in developing learning/training experiences for the council.
6. Conduct an annual mid-range planning meeting with the council.
7. Maintain a close and intentional working relationship with the pastor(s) and lay leader of the congregation.
8. Provide accountable leadership to the charge conference.
9. Understand the polity and doctrine of The United Methodist Church; become familiar with its resources and organization.

## **Nine Foundational Responsibilities**

### **Be a Spiritual Leader**

**Focus on ministry rather than administration.** At one time in our Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren history, it was understood that the work we did in committee or council should be as inspiring, edifying, and meaningful as any worship service or Bible study. Work that did not feed the soul and lift the spirit was viewed as work not worthy to be done.

Leaders in today's church often reflect that council and committee work is not spiritually uplifting. Too many meetings, too many tasks, and too much to do with too few resources leave people feeling frustrated and burned-out. Often, agendas for meetings are created with a short time for devotions slated as the first item on a long list. *Instead of our business meetings being something into which we impose a ten-minute devotion, we need to create ninety-minute devotional settings where we deal with the business of the church.* As the chairperson, you have the opportunity to make each meeting time an experience of faithful discipleship. Draw on prayer, Scripture, and tradition to provide a foundation for the work you do. No one but the council chairperson can set that kind of tone.

*As council chairperson, you are first and foremost a spiritual leader.* You have the critical task of reminding everyone that the work of the church is holy, worshipful work. When everyone comes to the table with their personal agendas, you will need to clarify that it is the work of the group to seek and perform God's will rather than its own will. The work of the church is to honor and glorify God by creating settings where men, women, and children can enter into a life-changing relationship with God.

A critical criterion, then, is to ensure that you are actively engaged in a discipline of spiritual growth and devotion. A simple age-old truth holds that you cannot lead where you have not been. The church needs faithful leaders who continuously pursue their own spiritual development. The ability to stay focused on the critical work of the church demands a healthy relationship with God. Daily prayer, reflection, reading of Scripture, regular attendance in worship, fellowship, study, and active sharing of faith in word and deed (what John Wesley referred to as the means of grace) are necessary qualities of the effective spiritual leader. Council chairpersons need to exemplify the kind of faith that builds and strengthens the entire community.

How deep is the well from which you draw? Are you able to help others understand the importance of strong spiritual discipline for the creation of effective faith forming communities? When the ministry of the church council is deeply rooted in the practice of the means of grace, then your focus is on the will of God and your community becomes a center for renewal and growth.

## **Stay Focused on the Primary Task**

**Keep the council focused on the primary task and vision of the congregation.** Paragraph 121 in the *Book of Discipline* lays out for us the process of our primary task as The United Methodist Church. The primary task of the church is what it must do in order to fulfill its mission. The work of reaching out and receiving people in the name of Jesus Christ, leading people to a relationship with God in Jesus Christ, nurturing and strengthening them in their faith, and sending people out into the world to live transformed and transforming lives defines who we are. All of our work—our program, our worship, our service, and our fellowship—needs to align to this primary task.

As council chairperson, you sit in a unique position to view how the work of the council aligns with the primary task. You ask the critical question of every other church leader on the council: “How do your ministries support our primary task?” For too long, our churches have dealt with the primary task as parts without understanding the whole. Formerly, many churches viewed evangelism as the work of reaching out and receiving. Worship related people to God. Education and fellowship nurtured and strengthened people in their faith, and mission work moved us into the world in service to others.

In the past, church leaders viewed the four dynamic aspects of the primary task as separate functional areas and worked accordingly. *Viewing our congregations as organic systems helps us to see that all four aspects are interconnected, and effective ministry requires that we fulfill all four aspects in every work we do.* As this shift in understanding occurs, you have the important office and duty to help the council members and congregation see how each thing we do embraces all four aspects of the primary task.

Evangelism is not just reaching out and receiving. You are in a position to clarify how evangelism reaches and receives, relates to God, nurtures and strengthens, and transforms lives. The same is true of worship, education, missions, stewardship, finance, membership, or any other work that we engage in as the church. In this way you do not merely manage; you lead. It becomes imperative that you work to be a systems thinker—someone who keeps the entire organization of the church in mind and helps others see how each part connects to every other.

Each congregation holds some vision for ministry. Many people may share this vision, or just a few. It may be clear and compelling, or it may be fuzzy and confused. Vision may be a statement on a wall or a message emblazoned in hearts and minds. The nature and content of the vision is not the important point here. What is important is that as chairperson *you* clearly hold the vision and that you communicate the vision on a regular basis. Vision is our picture of what the primary task will look like lived out in our

unique context. Vision is a complex and wonderful way to help people find their place in the community of faith and the work of God. Along with the pastor(s) and lay leader, you will articulate the vision of the congregation and ensure that the vision aligns closely to the primary task. Together, the council then plans the most effective way to realize the vision at any given time.

### **Actively Guide the Work of the Council**

**Prepare agendas, conduct meetings, communicate with members, and monitor the progress of the members.** There will always be a management and coordination function to your work as chairperson. It is inescapable, but it is not the most important role. However, the council functions less effectively any time that the administrative function of the task supersedes the spiritual function. It is important to remember that the coordination function can be a spiritual function, when it is approached that way.

A woman in Cleveland, Ohio, told me that she served as her administrative council chairperson for six years. She labored over the agenda and the meetings, and she eventually burned out. She took two years off, during which time she developed a deep spirituality and practiced the means of grace. She returned to leadership when her church adopted a church council design. She now says that her agenda and meeting plan are part of her prayer and devotion time. She will not bring anything to the meeting that she has not spent time reflecting on in prayer. She reports that the effect is transforming.

She looks forward to council meetings because she feels that what she is doing is important and honors God. She also reports that the meetings are less contentious, tense, boring, and long-winded—and without her having to lift a finger. As she tells it, “The meetings changed because I changed. These are God’s meetings now.” How does your thinking change when you shift your perspective from viewing meetings as your burden to bear to having the privilege of leading God’s meeting?

Design a plan, practice it, and stick to it. Figure out the best way to stay in touch with your council members, gather information for the agenda, create the agenda, conduct meetings, and communicate the results of meetings. Establish a meeting covenant with council members so that everyone knows what to expect. Set specific start and ending times, schedule agenda items in blocks of time, plan a break, and then stick to the covenant. If people know that the meeting will start when it is scheduled, then they will learn to be on time. If the meeting ends exactly on time, people will not dread coming to the meeting. If people know that they will be given a break, they will give

better attention. Remember, people's productive endurance level, especially in the evening, is approximately ninety minutes. Whatever cannot be accomplished in ninety minutes is probably not worth accomplishing. Wherever possible, meetings should not exceed two hours, including time to socialize and for refreshments. Frequent short meetings with fewer people are more effective than a few long meetings with too many people.

It is also very important to clarify *exactly* what work the council must do. Much council time is taken up sharing information and ideas that could be communicated in different ways at other times. Minutes or notes from each meeting should be distributed within one to two weeks to allow time to receive questions and make corrections without having to deal with them at the next meeting. The church council meeting is the arena to make decisions, take action, and give instructions that cannot be handled any other way. This allows time for the truly important visionary and planning work to be done during meetings.

### **Lead the Planning Process**

#### **Lead the visioning and strategic planning process within the church.**

The bulk of the important work in the church council is not in the management of our current reality but in the future—where we need to be in three, five, or seven years. However, too often our culture is “bottom line” driven. We want tangible results. We want to do more than just talk about what needs to be done—we want our time together to yield something concrete. This mindset is going to hurt the church as we move along in the twenty-first century. How will we move into the future? What do we need to learn to be more effective? Who are the people we will need to be ready to serve?

Unless the church council stays focused on the future, you will continue to do only what you have done in the past. As our world changes, the church must seek new, appropriate ways to fulfill our mission faithfully. Create meeting settings where you do not merely report on what *is* and what *was* vitally important. The most effective church councils deal both with the “now” and the “not yet.” It is crucial to give adequate time in every meeting to attend to the “fuzzy” brainwork that envisions a future as well as to the ongoing “concrete” work of program, money, and maintenance.

**Keep the long-term in mind.** Think for a moment: When the house needs painting and the lawn needs mowing, which do you do first? Most people mow the lawn. Why? Because it's easier, less time consuming, less costly, and the painting can wait. The lawn will keep growing faster than the house will deteriorate. The problem is, the grass continues to grow, and it demands



regular attention. If all we ever do is attend to the immediate need of the grass, eventually the house will deteriorate past a critical point. Immediate demands often cause us to ignore long-term needs until it is too late. Typically the short-term needs consume the limited resources of time, energy, and money.

The ongoing, day-to-day work of the church demands so much time and effort that we sometimes neglect the larger, long-term issues. There is a growing awareness, however, that we neglect the long-term in favor of the short-term at our own peril. The future of our congregations is as pressing a concern for our churches as anything in the present. The fundamental problem is that we have so filled the time of our church councils with short-term issues that there is no time for visioning and strategic planning. Maintenance and administration absorb the valuable resources needed for planning and working toward a new future.

One disastrous result of this reality has been the formation of visioning or planning teams separate from the church council. Why is this a bad idea? A number of reasons will make clear the pitfalls to such a practice.

1. Visioning and strategic planning need to be done by those in leadership positions. Managers adopt the plans made for them by others.
2. Those who create the vision need to have the power and authority to act on their vision. A team that is creating a vision for the church council does not have the authority to make anything happen.
3. Visioning and planning will remain secondary to the primary work of the existing council structure. If visioning and planning is not the top priority now, it will not become the top priority based on someone else's work.
4. Visioning and planning cannot be done in isolation from the ongoing processes of leadership. Teams are effective at completing projects. Visioning and planning are processes, not projects. Visioning and strategic planning need to be central to the work of the ongoing organizational groups who make decisions, implement plans, and control direction.

This list could be much longer, but these few reasons illustrate a basic truth: *The primary work of the church council is visioning and strategic planning.* It belongs nowhere else, and all other council work is secondary. Individual committee chairpersons and team leaders are responsible for the management of what already exists. As chairperson of the council, your task is to focus the group beyond the immediate work to the “vision horizon” where the potential for new ministries and work will appear.

*Remember, it is not your responsibility to do the visioning but to ensure that the visioning occurs.* In cases where the chairperson is not the best person to lead a visioning process, it is still his or her responsibility to make sure that the right person is in place.

Scripture reminds us that vision comes from God and that good stewardship is managing wisely and well that which God has given. The role of the church council is to attend to the vision that God gives all the people in the community of faith, then to manage our resources to make God's vision a reality.

### **Gifts**

God's people are all uniquely and wonderfully gifted. The Apostle Paul defines the church in terms of the gifts of its members. When writing to the churches in Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus, Paul identifies different lists of gifts that describe very different churches. (See Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1—14:19; Ephesians 4:11-16.)

Today's church is as varied and gifted now as it was in the time of Paul. God grants specific gifts to communities in the same way that God grants gifts to individuals. Not every church will be gifted to perform every ministry. For this reason, the discovery and development of spiritual gifts is critical work in our congregations. Decisions concerning who is best to offer what service, how to link people together for effective ministry, what areas to maximize, and what areas to avoid all depend on a clear understanding of the gifts of the leadership in the church. *As council chairperson, you can take the lead in encouraging the council to explore the spiritual giftedness of its members, and in encouraging the church to examine and develop spiritual gifts within the congregation.*

### **Develop Learning and Training Experiences**

**Actively participate in developing learning and training experiences for the council.** One poor assumption plaguing church leadership is that people can perform their tasks effectively without specialized training. Everyone can learn—in fact, *needs to learn*—in order to grow. People need training not only in specialized areas of ministry but also in basic team-work, leadership, communication, and conflict management. Knowing how to lead a meeting, create an agenda, brainstorm, prioritize work, arrive at consensus, and do a host of other practical tasks can greatly improve the leadership effectiveness of a local church. As council chair, you have an obligation to help other church leaders receive the training and support they require to be effective.

Learning can happen at almost any time, almost anywhere, but it happens best when it is intentional. You may not have the spiritual gift of teaching, but you can—perhaps with the help of others—find good teachers. Making sure that people have the gifts and knowledge to bring learning to the council should be one of your top priorities. Developing a plan and vision for learning is something that the entire council can work on together. In fact, if the council members generate the list of ideas for learning opportunities, they will be more committed to learning as it is offered.

*Leadership is no longer defined as knowing more than everyone else. Effective leaders are learning leaders.* As you view the work of the church council as ministry rather than administration, it becomes clear that this is an occasion for the spiritual growth and development of the people who have agreed to lead others. Learning has a ripple effect. As leaders learn, they teach others. As they teach, they are inspired to learn. Learning generates its own momentum. As council chairperson, you have the opportunity to energize this process and maintain the momentum that will lead to greater effectiveness, deeper faith, and stronger ministry.

### **Conduct Mid-Range Planning**

**In the midst of maintaining balance of the current work (short-term) and visioning for the future work (long-term) is the practical need to plan for the coming year (mid-range).** The church council has the responsibility to live in one year while planning for the next year (as well as looking three and five years down the road). At some point each year, the question of what our plan will be for *next* year takes primacy. While there are many different ways to handle this process, too often churches do not give it the time it needs to be done effectively. A well-designed retreat—usually of one or two days—is needed to cover the entire ministry plan of a local congregation.

The mid-range planning process needs to include five simple ingredients.

1. What is our current reality—what are we doing now that needs to continue into next year?
2. What new program needs to be developed to meet arising needs?
3. What are the key areas for growth and improvement?
4. How much will this cost?
5. Who are the appropriate people to make it happen?

For too often in many churches, planning consists only of numbers 1 and 4, ignoring 2, 3, and 5. We continue our program from one year to the next and develop a budget to support it. While both of these functions are impor-

tant, they are inadequate to create an environment for growth, development, and improvement. We need to seek new ways to fulfill our mission through our primary task. We need to improve continuously what we do—even the things we do quite well.

We also need to be asking ourselves constantly who else we can include in the work of the church. Interestingly, many church councils fail to even include number 5 in their planning since they believe that is the work of the committee on lay leadership (formerly nominations and personnel). You do have the right as a council to make recommendations to nominations, and in fact, most committees on lay leadership are delighted to receive such suggestions—since it makes their job that much easier.

A well-designed council planning retreat can accomplish in one day what many churches struggle with all year. Done in the late spring or early summer, it allows all the other committees—finance, lay leadership, the board of trustees—time enough to do the work they need to do to support the plan. Also, the benefit of doing the work mid-year helps to gain a “reality check” on current conditions and helps the visioning process for a long-range plan.

### **Develop Working Relationships**

**Maintain a close and intentional working relationship with the pastor(s) and lay leader of the congregation.** One May morning, I watched a woman walk out of church during the opening announcements. As the pastor presented a new program that the church would launch later in the week, this woman stormed out the back doors. I saw her later and asked what was wrong. She told me that she was the council chairperson of her church and that the first she heard of the new program was from the pulpit that morning. It angered her that as the leader of the council she had no clue what was happening. I asked if the matter had been discussed at the church council meeting. She replied that the council hadn’t met yet (remember, this was May) and that she hadn’t discussed the church program with the pastor since her election at the last charge conference!

There is no doubt about it—communication is hard. It takes work, commitment, and flexibility, but without it nothing good can happen. Be intentional in establishing close communication with the pastor, the lay leader, and any other key leaders of your congregation. Your position makes it imperative that you know what is going on in the church. As the church council chairperson, you are entitled to attend the meetings of all boards and committees (unless a closed meeting is specially called) as well as attend annual conference (*Discipline*, ¶251.3). Your knowledge of the entire congregational sys-

tem should be second only to the pastor's. Waiting for others to tell you what is happening won't work. "Seek, knock, ask" were good instructions from Jesus to the disciples 2000 years ago, and they are equally valuable to you as church council chairperson.

Set regular times to meet with the pastor(s) and lay leader(s) of your congregation. Use this as a time to listen to the thinking of these key leaders, and then share your understanding of where things stand with the council. Be sure that you share a common understanding of the current reality, the desired reality, and the short-term and long-term processes in place for performing the mission and ministry of the church.

Also, remember to make this time holy—a time to pray and reflect on the work that God has entrusted into your care. Be diligent to create a strong feeling of partnership with the pastor(s) and lay leader(s). Stay focused on the fact that you are *spiritual* leaders. By proactively pursuing an open relationship with the clergy and laity leaders of the congregation, you create a wonderful working environment and model effective leadership for the entire council. This style of leadership brings everything out into the open and avoids a great deal of stress and frustration along the way.

### **Provide Accountable Leadership**

**Provide accountable leadership to the charge conference.** According to the *Book of Discipline*, all of the members of the church council are members of the charge conference. Each representative reports to, and through, the charge conference the progress in ministry for the prior year and the plan for ministry in the year to come. Coordinating this gathering of information and synthesizing it into a cohesive picture is the function of the church council chairperson. As part of its accountability to the charge conference, the church council reviews the membership of the local church, establishes the budget on recommendation of the committee on finance, makes recommendations for the sponsorship of new congregations, proposes salaries for pastor(s) and staff on recommendation from the committee on staff/pastor-parish relations, and fills vacancies as needed among the lay officers of the church. It is the responsibility of the council chairperson to ensure that all necessary information is provided to the charge conference.

### **Understand Polity and Doctrine**

**Understand the polity and doctrine of the United Methodist church and become familiar with its resources and organization.** As council chair, remember: *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* is your friend. As silly as this sounds, the *Discipline* is full of information that you

need to know to lead the church. Parts I-IV provide a historical, theological, and doctrinal context for our identity as United Methodists. The *Book of Discipline* defines our core beliefs and practices and explains our understanding of what it means to be a Christian disciple. Our mission and purpose is defined, as well as a full explanation of our primary task.

Chapter 1 of Part V is essential reading for the council chairperson. These critical paragraphs define the structure and organization of the local church. Throughout the remainder of the *Discipline* is important information that will help you lead the congregation effectively in its program ministries. There is a listing of helpful resources at the back of this Guideline that will help you understand The United Methodist Church and where to turn when you need assistance.

## Getting Started

**A**t first, you may be overwhelmed by how much you *don't* know. That's okay. In fact, it is much better than thinking you know it all. The more groundwork you lay in the first few weeks as the new church council chairperson, the more effective you will be later on. There is nothing difficult or profound in these recommendations. They are simple, common-sense activities that will yield substantial results later on.

1. Read and reflect on these Guidelines.
2. Convene an orientation meeting of the church council to establish a working covenant.
3. Talk to your predecessors in the position or council chairs of neighboring congregations for insights into their experience.
4. Have conversations with people in the church who can help you better understand the current reality of the congregation.
5. Examine the current program structure of the church—noting where you are clear on the way things work and where you are unclear about the way things work.
6. Participate in learning and training events offered by your annual conference, district, general church agency, or para-church organizations.
7. As a “bonus,” hone a few related skills.

## **Seven Beginning Activities**

### **Prepare**

**Read and reflect on these guidelines.** These Guidelines are designed to help you get organized to provide quality leadership for your congregation. They are not meant to be prescriptive but to inspire creative thinking on your part. How might you use these Guidelines to fashion your leadership? What new

and provocative ideas do you find here? What new ideas are triggered in your mind for things you might do with your congregation? As you read through these Guidelines, make notes on the things you want to try.

Set the Guidelines aside for a few days then come back to them for a second reading. This will offer confirmation for some of your thinking, clarify questions you may have, and reveal ideas that you may have missed the first time through. When you read through the second time, note any questions you still have.

Some leaders find it helpful to include the Guidelines in their devotional time. Not that the Guidelines are devotional, but reflecting on the content in an attitude of prayer, meditation, and biblical study helps to read them in a deeper way.

Your work is interconnected to the work of many other boards, committees, teams, and working groups. It is advisable to familiarize yourself with some of the other Guidelines, especially those of the board of trustees. With the ever-changing nature of legal obligation in our church and the fundamental partnership between the board of trustees and the charge conference concerning legal matters, familiarity with the *Trustees* Guidelines and the trustee codes and laws for your state is wise. An excellent resource is Mary Logan's *The Buck Stops Here* (see Resources). It is also well worth the cost to purchase an entire set of Guidelines to have on hand in the church office or library. Spend time leafing through the set and highlighting helpful information from each.

### **Orient the Council**

**Convene an orientation meeting of the church council to establish a working covenant.** Early in the year, before any planning is done or agendas are created, convene an informal gathering of the church council members. This is a time to get acquainted at a personal level, not a time to engage in any specific tasks or other business of the church. During this time together—which is often best experienced away from the church building—everyone should have opportunities to share their hopes and dreams, both personally and for the church. This is a time to find out what people like best about their church—and what they like least. This is a time to talk about personal passions. It may be a time to ask, “Why did you say ‘yes’ when you were asked to serve the church?” It is a good time to ask people what they are expecting the church council experience to be for the coming year.

As the conversation unfolds, you will begin to better understand the people who form the council. This may be an appropriate time to begin to fashion an operating covenant with the church leaders—to discuss how long meetings will last, when they will start and end, and whether you will use *Robert's Rules of Order* or a consensus or discernment approach to decision making. You may begin to share what you expect from the council as you hear what the council

expects from you. The important thing to remember about this orientation meeting: *It is more blessed to listen than to speak.* This is the time to hear from your council. They will have plenty of time later on to hear from you.

At the first meeting of the new council, it will be important for you to come back to the members and restate what you heard from them at the orientation. The more clearly you can articulate their hopes and dreams for the church, their expectations for the council, and their understanding of why they have been asked to serve, the better everyone will be able to work together in the ensuing months.

Repeating one cautionary word: Do not allow the orientation to become a “business meeting.” Don’t do planning, don’t make programmatic decisions, don’t talk budget, and don’t print an agenda. Instead, set a devotional tone. Help to communicate that the work of the council will be worshipful work centered in Christian discipleship.

#### **A Tool for the Church Council Orientation**

Often, church council chairpersons will request a tool or process to help think about the larger issues of mission and meaning in The United Methodist Church. Turn to “Mission and Meaning: The Ultimate Concern of Christian Community” on pages 30-31 for a Scripture study that many church councils have found helpful. In addition, an orientation workshop is included free with the full set of Guidelines as one way to help church leaders understand their roles and responsibilities.

#### **Seek the Voice of Experience**

**Talk to your predecessors in the position or council chairs of neighboring congregations for insights into their experience.** Although every experience is unique, there is immense benefit in talking to others who have walked your path before you. Too often, exiting leaders disappear without a trace, taking with them experience, wisdom, and knowledge that could be invaluable to the new leader. Often former leaders don’t want to interfere, so they keep their thinking to themselves. However, they are often more than willing to share their insights when asked.

Traditionally, we have not done a good job of building mentoring relationships into our organizational designs. Having former leaders mentor new leaders can be a wonderful way to bridge the gaps within a congregation and provide a consistency and momentum to the ministry of the church. Where mentoring is not feasible or possible, the responsibility for seeking guidance and counsel will fall to you. Former council chairpersons within



your congregation and current council chairpersons in neighboring congregations are good resources as you find your own leadership style in the church. By talking with and observing others, you will learn both what you want to do and what you want to avoid. Talking with others also helps to build a network that may result in ongoing nurture and support.

### **Examine Your Current Reality**

**Have conversations with people in the church who can help you better understand the current reality of the congregation.** You would be amazed by what people know. There is only one sure way to find out, and that is to talk to them. In our churches, we often become ingrown—only listening to one another in leadership. The reality is that most truly innovative ideas come from outside. The most incisive insights into our processes and procedures often arrive from objective third parties.

Knowledge about the history of the congregation and surrounding community is widespread throughout the people who sit in the pews. Neighbors to the church property can provide another essential perspective. Many church council chairpersons find that the most important work they do in their first few weeks is to wander through the community and ask people what they know about the church. A basic lesson to remember is: Before you can plan to move toward a new destination, you have to know your starting point. Conversations with pastors, lay leaders, volunteers, people in the pews, and in the community provide a necessary view of current reality. *Much of your thinking about how to proceed with the church council will emerge from the first few weeks when you talk to people to get a clear picture of the current reality.*

*A second part of the listening process is to ask people in the congregation and community what their dreams are for the future.* Questions like, “What do you want more than anything else in the world?” may give you images of the desired reality for the congregation—ways that your church can help people realize their deepest desires as they come to know God in Christ. Don’t worry about planning or organizing your thinking at this point. Allow your first month as council chairperson to be spent in “sponge-mode,” soaking up as much information and insight as you possibly can.

### **Check Out the Church Structure**

**Examine the current program structure of the church, noting where you are clear on the way things work and where you are unclear about the way things work.** If your church is like most, there is a paper trail ten miles long that will tell you what you need to know about your current program and structure. Charge conference booklets, annual reports, meeting minutes, newsletters, and

even old bulletins can help you understand “the way things work.” Don’t be intimidated. Approach it the way a prospector approaches a stream—sift through a lot of silt to find a few nuggets of gold.

Although it may not feel this way, nothing is set in stone. Just because something was done one way in the past doesn’t mean it must be done that way in the future. But before you can decide how you want to proceed, it is wise to know how things work in the current reality. Gain as much insight into the current workings of the church as you can. Be clear about what you know, but be every bit as clear about what you don’t know. Then ask questions. The mark of a good leader is not to always have the right answer but to be able to ask the right question.

When investigating a program, ministry, or committee, ask:

- What is this work area or ministry’s primary purpose?
- Why is it done?
- How is it done?
- Who does it?
- What is the group’s biblical/theological understanding of why this work is done? (If they don’t know, that leads to a host of other questions!)

Just gaining insight into these questions will provide a good base from which to share leadership with others. If this seems like a lot of work, it is. You have agreed to provide leadership in one of the pivotal positions in your church.

### **Learn as Much as You Can**

**Participate in learning and training events offered by your annual conference, district, general church agency, or para-church organizations.** If your church is extremely lucky, you are perfect, fully formed, knowledgeable about everything in the church, and equipped to handle every situation. If your church is normal, then you probably have some very strong gifts but could improve your talents in some way. Short of Jesus Christ, the church has yet to find perfect leaders. That is not to say that the church does not have very good leaders. The best leaders are those who constantly hone their talents and engage in a wide variety of learning experiences.

As council chairperson, there are four spheres of knowledge that influence the work you do: technical knowledge, spiritual knowledge, process knowledge, and people knowledge.

- **Technical knowledge** is knowledge about how the church works; what the committees, teams, and other leaders do; and your own personal expertise.
- **Spiritual knowledge** is your knowledge of God and Jesus Christ and your faith commitment. Your spiritual journey and life of discipleship are grounded in your spiritual knowledge.

- **Process knowledge** is your knowledge of how to get things done—how to lead meetings, organize resources, engage in visioning and planning processes, and monitor the “big picture.”
- **People knowledge** involves working with others, resolving conflict, motivating co-leaders, and sharing what you know with others.

As the chairperson of the church council, you will be drawing constantly on all four spheres of knowledge. Improvement as a leader requires a balanced approach to learning in all four spheres. Learning around the functional ministries of the church—worship, stewardship, evangelism, education, and so on—will increase your ability to coordinate the whole. Spiritual learning through Bible study and Christian conversation will broaden your base for creating a worshipful work environment. Learning in leadership, systems thinking, continuous improvement, visioning, and planning will provide a stronger structure for the council. Finally, learning the dynamics of people skills—motivation, conflict resolution, spiritual gifts, and leading styles—will help you create better working relationships.

Take advantage of the many learning opportunities offered within your annual conference and the general church or in your immediate area. Enroll in a variety of non-church—related seminars and find ways to use that information in your congregation. Commit to learning something new every quarter of the year to improve the leadership you provide for your church.

### **Hone Extra Skills**

**A few other helpful skills and interests will add to your leadership abilities and enhance your ministry with the council.**

- **Listening:** Learn to listen deeply, especially to people you don’t understand or agree with. Don’t assume you know what other people are thinking. If you’re not sure what someone means, ask him or her to help you. Listening is your most valuable tool.
- **Knowledge of The United Methodist Church:** What makes a United Methodist a United Methodist? Until you can answer that question, you will have a hard time leading in the church. Find out who we are, what we believe, and what difference we make in our world.
- **Looking Outside:** The chairs of the various committees need to stay focused on what the church is doing—they look inward. Take time to look outward—know the community and culture in which your church is located. Walk around. Get the outsiders’ view. You may find out what people are looking for.

# What Kind of Council?

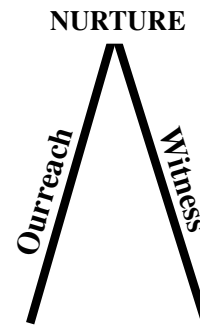
One of the most common misconceptions about the church council format is that there is one best way to organize. The answers to questions like, “How large should the council be? Who should be included? How often should we meet? How do we make decisions? How do we communicate decisions to the congregation?” are all dependent upon the larger question, “What is it we want to accomplish?”

The *Discipline* answers some of these questions but gives the local church considerable flexibility. Every congregation is involved in ministries of nurture, outreach, and witness. In just about every case, congregations are strongest in one of the three areas, with the other two in support: therefore, we might refer to congregations as predominantly nurturing congregations, outreaching congregations, or witnessing congregations. Each has unique areas of concentration and focus, and therefore each is best suited to different organizational forms.

## **Nurturing Congregations**

*Nurturing congregations place heavy emphasis on worship, Christian education, and fellowship. Much of the program and ministry of the church is dedicated to existing audiences.*

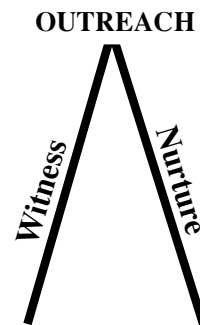
Generally, church councils in nurturing congregations tend to be clearing houses for ongoing work, and meetings are filled with reports from leaders of various ministry areas and subgroups. The driving question for nurturing congregations is, “What do we need in order to maintain and improve the level of mission and ministry of our congregation?” and a secondary question is, “How can we be open and inviting to newcomers to our congregation and community?” For this reason, church councils in nurturing congregations tend to be larger and involve more people at the planning and decision making level.



## **Outreaching Congregations**

*Outreaching congregations focus on missions, Christian service, and healing or care-giving ministries. Much of the program and ministry of the church is dedicated to external audiences.*

Generally, church councils in outreaching congrega-



tions are smaller in size and serve the prioritization and planning function for the congregation. Specific ministries are delegated to smaller teams of individuals with specific skills and gifts. The driving question for outreaching congregations is, “Where do we need to go in order to serve the needs of God’s people?” and a secondary question is, “How can we serve the needs of our community with the gifts and resources at our disposal?” While the council itself is small, outreaching congregations tend to mobilize large numbers of members in leadership and service positions in smaller project groups.

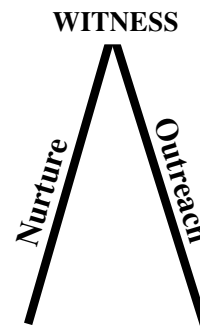
## **Witnessing Congregations**

*Witnessing congregations are characterized by ministry in small groups, spiritual formation, faith sharing, and evangelism. Much of the program and ministry of the church is dedicated to emerging audiences.*

Church councils in witnessing congregations tend to stay focused on the ministry plan for the entire congregation, setting priorities and developing short-term project teams to carry out specific programs and tasks.

While leadership in nurturing congregations may serve one- to three-year terms as a committee chair or member, often leadership in witnessing congregations may serve a half-dozen different functions in any given year. There is a fluid flexibility to witnessing councils. The driving question for witnessing congregations is, “What ministries and programs will offer the best opportunity for spiritual formation and transformation to participants in our congregation and community?” and a secondary question is, “Who else might benefit from what we have to offer?” For this reason, church councils in witnessing congregations tend to be smaller, with the bulk of administrative and day-to-day decision making done by small groups and project teams.

Church councils are wise to follow the “form follows function” rule. Clarity about what needs to be accomplished and what God calls us to do is the best guideline for what kind of council we need.



# Tools for Church Council Orientation

Use the model for orientation below or follow the workshop outline that is included in the slipcase for the full set of Guidelines

## **Mission and Meaning: The Ultimate Concern of Christian Community**

*Reflections on Selections From Matthew 28, Luke 24,  
Revelation 2 & 3, and Matthew 9*

### **Listen to the reading of Matthew 28:16-20.**

- What words, phrases, and concepts make an impression? What do you believe these passages are calling for?

### **The mission of The United Methodist Church, as defined in the *Book of Discipline*, is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ.”**

- In small groups of four to five members, discuss the following questions:
  1. What are the essential qualities of a “Christian disciple?”
  2. How do we participate with God in the process of “making disciples?”
  3. What are the basic elements of disciple making?
  4. What is the purpose of making disciples? (What do we do with disciples once they are formed?)
  5. What is the ongoing responsibility of the community of faith to those we baptize and develop as Christian disciples?
  6. In what ways is this function of disciple making different than it was 2000 years ago in another (pre-modern) culture? In what ways is it the same?

### **Listen to the reading of Luke 24:44-49.**

- What words, phrases, and concepts make an impression? What do you believe these passages are calling for?
- In small groups of four to five members, discuss the following questions:
  1. How does the instruction in Luke differ from that in Matthew? What is gained? What is lost?
  2. What are the common elements between Matthew 28:16-20 and Luke 24:44-49?
  3. How do these passages define the purpose of a local congregation?

### **Listen to the reading of Revelation 2:1-7.**

- What words, phrases, and concepts make an impression? Make a list of the key points in this passage.

**Listen to the reading of Revelation 3:1-6.**

- What words, phrases, and concepts make an impression? Make a list of the key points in this passage.

**Listen to the reading of Revelation 3:14-22.**

What words, phrases, and concepts make an impression? Make a list of the key points in this passage

- In small groups of four to five members, discuss the following questions:
  1. Looking at the list of key points, what is the message through time to our congregation in the early twenty-first century?
  2. How has our thinking about the mission of the church been challenged by these theological reflections?

**Reflections on “New Wine”—Matthew 9:14-17**

As we learn and grow as Christian disciples, we receive “new wine.” Often we think about newcomers to the faith when we think about becoming faithful disciples, but even life-long Christians have room to grow. Don’t assume that because long-time church members have no room for growth and spiritual development.

As you think about your congregation’s life together, keep the following points in mind.

- Don’t assume people are spiritually grounded.
- Small groups help people grow in faithfulness.
- Spiritual disciplines grow faith.
- Christians need to balance inward belief with outward practice.
- “Form follows function.” What we do emerges from who we understand ourselves to be.
- Ministry is not what people do in church; ministry is what the church does in the world.
- Faithful discipleship depends on lifelong learning.
- Each congregation is strengthened by its spiritual diversity. It is not healthy to expect everyone to agree on everything.
- True soul work requires us to talk to one another about our faith.
- The church is not the place we attend but who we are as we live our lives in the world.

# Resources

- *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000. ISBN 0687031419).
- *The Buck Stops Here*, by Mary Logan (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000. ISBN 0-88177-306-9.)
- *The Courage to Teach*, by Parker J. Palmer (Jossey-Bass, 1998. ISBN 0787910589).
- *Equipped for Every Good Work*, by Dan R. Dick and Barbara Miller (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2000. ISBN 0-88177-352-2).
- *The Faith-Sharing Congregation*, by Roger K. Swanson and Shirley F. Clement (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996. ISBN 0-88177-153-8).
- *Faith Quest: A Journey Toward Congregational Transformation* by Dan R. Dick (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1998, 2002. ISBN 0-88177-399-9).
- *Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation: 2005-2008*, Cokesbury, 2004.
- *Lay Speaking Ministries: Basic Course*, by John P. Gilbert and Nancy C. Zoller (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1997. ISBN 0-88177-319-0).
- *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders*, by Gilbert R. Rendle (Alban Institute, 1998. ISBN 1566991870).
- *The Learning Congregation: A New Vision of Leadership*, by Thomas R. Hawkins (Westminster-John Knox, 1997. ISBN 0664256996).
- *A Ministry of Caring*, by Duane A. Ewers (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1999. ISBN 0-88177-290-9; Workbook 0-88177-289-5).
- *Partners in Ministry: Clergy and Laity*, by Roy W. Trueblood and Jackie B. Trueblood (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999. ISBN 0-687-08123-8).
- *Revolutionizing Christian Stewardship for the 21st Century: Lessons from Copernicus*, by Dan R. Dick (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1997. ISBN 0-88177-212-7).
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