

**THE UMC  
VITAL CONGREGATIONS  
PLANNING GUIDE**

**A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR  
UNITED METHODIST CONGREGATIONS  
TO FULFILL THE MISSION  
OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

## INTRODUCTION & PURPOSE

The United Methodist Church is being called to join in God's plan for transforming the world by increasing the number of disciples of Jesus Christ through vital United Methodist Congregations. Based upon the findings of the 2010 Call to Action Report and through the leadership of the Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table, the entire denomination is being invited to *“redirect the flow of attention, energy, and resources to an intense concentration on fostering and sustaining an increase in the number of vital congregations effective in making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”* (Call to Action Report p. 14)

Clergy and laity leaders at all levels of the United Methodist Connection are called to work together in this opportunity to cast vision and set directive goals for our congregations. **As each congregation sets reasonable, accessible and achievable goals based upon its individual context, and is equipped and resourced to meet those goals, the congregation readies itself to receive the fruits of God's harvest. (2 Cor. 9:5-7)** We become a church united by a common vision, striving to reach the goals uniting us for the transformation of the world through God's power and grace.

**This Vital Congregations Planning Guide is a tool for helping congregations set and meet the goals needed to becoming effective and vital congregations for the Kingdom of God.**

# OUR THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

## The United Methodist Church

*Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*  
Matthew 28:18-20 –The Great Commission and Matthew 22:36-40 – The Great Commandment

### A Call to Action

*The United Methodist Church is called to be a world leader  
in developing existing churches and starting new vital congregations  
so that we make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world*

### Disciple making and world transformation occurs through vital congregations

*Vital congregations are Spirit-filled, forward-leaning communities of believers that  
welcome all people (Galatians 3:28),  
make disciples of Jesus Christ (Matthews 28:18-20), and  
serve like Christ through justice and mercy ministries (Micah 6:8; Luke 4:17-21)*

### A vital congregation has

*Inviting and inspiring worship  
Engaged disciples in mission and outreach  
Gifted, equipped and empowered lay leadership  
Effective, equipped and inspired clergy leadership  
Small groups and strong children's programs and youth ministry*

### A disciple is a changed follower of Jesus

Matthew 22:36-40 - The Great Commandment

*Disciples worship  
Disciples make new disciples  
Disciples engage in growing their faith  
Disciples engage in mission  
Disciples give to mission*

### The Call to Action

The United Methodist Church continues to be a spiritual influence in the world for the Gospel. Essential to its ministry are healthy, vital congregations. But what makes a congregation vital and what do vital congregations do? While the true testimony of a congregation lies in the stories told by those whose lives have been transformed, there is also other information that clearly shows the movement of the Spirit in vital congregations around the world. The United Methodist Council of Bishops and the Connectional Table commissioned a study to better identify the key activities of vital congregations.

The study reviewed the statistics of 33,000 churches and found that nearly 5,000 over a five-year period were growing and engaging a greater percentage of their membership in worship and ministry. They were engaging disciples in worship, in making new disciples, in growing their faith, and in giving generously. It was not only that these things were occurring, but they were evident at a significantly higher rate than in other churches and the vital congregations -- no matter what their size, location, or ethnicity -- demonstrated growth over a period of several years.

The study further examined these churches and found they shared at least 16 ministries/strategies in common. The study called them "drivers of vitality," and indicated that if churches worked on all 16, they would move toward vitality or become more vital. The 16 ministries/strategies can be grouped into four areas:

# 16 KEY - MINISTRY STRATEGIES

## Engagement of disciples in small groups and the number of ministries for children and youth

1. Vital churches have more small groups for all ages.
2. Vital churches have more programs for children.
3. Vital churches have more programs for youth.

## Lay leadership

4. Vital churches focus on increasing the effectiveness of lay leaders (understand their role and carrying these roles out effectively).
5. Vital churches have lay leaders who demonstrate a vital personal faith (regular worship, intentional spiritual growth, personal devotional life, and giving of financial resources).
6. Vital churches place an emphasis on rotating lay leadership in order to involve more people over time.
7. Vital churches call, equip, use and support more lay leaders than non-vital churches. (Twenty percent or more of their worship attendees describe themselves as current or past leaders in their church).

## Pastor

8. Vital pastors give attention to developing, coaching, and mentoring lay leadership to enable laity to increase their ability to carry out ministry.
9. Vital pastors use their influence to increase the participation of others in order to accomplish changes in the church.
10. Vital pastors motivate the congregation to set and achieve significant goals through effective leadership.
11. Vital pastors inspire the congregation through preaching.
12. Vital pastors, when they are serving effectively, stay for a longer period of time. (Short-term appointments of effective pastors decrease the vitality of a congregation).

## Worship

13. Vital churches offer a mix of contemporary (newer forms of worship style) and traditional services.
14. Vital churches have preachers who tend to use more topical sermon series in traditional services.
15. Vital churches use more contemporary music (less blended music that includes traditional tunes) in contemporary services.
16. Vital churches use more multi-media in contemporary services (Some congregations in other parts of the world may have limited access or do not use multi-media to the same extent and therefore it may not be as important as it is in some cultures.)

While the study noted that vital churches give more to mission, some have noticed that other types of mission engagement and outreach are not listed as proven “drivers.” This is because, during the past, we have not collected this data consistently across the UMC and therefore the research could not quantitatively substantiate mission engagement. But, in conversations with vital congregations, they tell us that this is an important aspect of their ministry. Directly related to the giving to mission is in all matters fostering a spirit of generosity both giving and serving in individuals and in congregations. It also should be noted that while the study alludes to spiritual vitality in the faith of the laity and the inspirational leadership of clergy, one should not see these ministries/strategies as mechanical operations. Rather, they are undergirded or enlivened by a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ.

# PURPOSE OF THE VITAL CONGREGATION

## Vital Congregations Are Spiritual Mission Stations of the Church

In the first-century church, Christ's ministry took root and grew as congregations were established. These congregations became the **body of Christ -- transforming lives and communities**. They were courageous and forward-leaning spiritual mission centers for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Courageous and forward-leaning mission congregations practice spiritual disciplines. Our vital work is a spiritual adventure based in John Wesley's *means of grace*. John Wesley taught that God's grace is unearned and that we were not to be idle waiting to experience grace but we are to engage in the *means of grace*. The *means of grace* are ways God works invisibly in disciples, hastening, strengthening and confirming faith so that God's grace pervades in and through disciples. As we look at the *means of grace* today, they can be divided into works of piety and the works of mercy.

### Works of Piety

Individual Practices – reading, meditating and studying the scriptures, prayer, fasting, regularly attending worship, healthy living, and sharing our faith with others

Communal Practices – regularly share in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (accountability to one another), and Bible study

### Works of Mercy

Individual Practices - doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others

Communal Practices – seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination (for instance Wesley challenged Methodists to end slavery), and addressing the needs of the poor

Making disciples, growing vital congregations and transforming the world is part of a spiritual adventure that is empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit as churches engage in the *means of grace*. Spiritual goals are accomplished by connecting the *means of grace* with proven vital church practices such as planning, strategic direction, prioritization, clear focus and alignment. The following material is a planning guide for congregations to set spiritual goals so that they practice the *means of grace*, increase vitality, make disciples and transform the world.

# A PROCESS FOR BECOMING A VITAL CONGREGATION

## Developing a Ministry Plan for Vitality and Fruitfulness

Vital congregations are ministries that recognize a clear calling from God and develop plans and ministries to achieve God's purposes for their congregation. The planning resource when used and evaluated consistently over several years will help a congregation become vital or become more vital. Part of the plan calls for setting goals. The Call to Action report indicated that there was a lack of measures within United Methodism and that goals or clear and recognizable fruit was essential for the health of a congregation, a conference and the denomination.

What we measure receives attention. Across the denomination, we want to give attention to, and therefore, we will measure: 1) disciples in worship (worship attendance), 2) disciples making new disciples (number of professions of faith), 3) disciples growing in their faith (number of small groups), 4) disciples engaged in mission (number of disciples doing outreach in the community and the world), and 5) disciples sharing their resources for mission (amount of money given to mission). You will note that these are for the most part not activities, but results, fruit of our ministry. Activity is not always the best measure. Measuring activity, for example: ministries done or people contacted, has some value, but it does not indicate if a congregation is achieving the desired outcomes or fruit. A congregation can be quite satisfied with its activity, but if the activity is not producing fruit, then this activity may be the wrong activity, focused internally only or may lack the power of the Holy Spirit. We are measuring the five fruits listed above for the following reasons:

1. While churches may measure different activities and results, we will have five common measurable fruits/goals so that we learn from one another and focus resourcing on achieving particular fruit. There is synergy and power when we do things together.
2. These measures are essential for the body of Christ. They were demonstrated in the Acts 2 Church (Acts 2:41-47) and they are areas of a church's life that are often described in the New Testament.
3. These measures are core to the values of United Methodism – building up the body of Christ, evangelism and engaging disciples in changing the world.

**The Ministry Planning Guide** resource will be used by United Methodist congregations around the world that are seeking to become vital, stay vital or increase vitality. The resource will help you to identify your strengths for ministry, your current challenges, and your plan to become more vital. We, as your bishops, district superintendents and denominational leaders, are ready to work with you and support you as you become more vital. There are also resources online to assist your congregation (<http://UMVitalCongregations.org>). You are asked to complete this ministry plan and share it with your district superintendent. He/she will share your congregation's commitments with your bishop, who will share this with the General Conference. We look forward to working with you.

*–The Leadership of the United Methodist Church.*

## CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRY PLAN

*I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (Jeremiah 29:11).*

God desires the best for The United Methodist Church and its congregations. God has planned a future with hope for us. God's plans flow from the Holy Spirit and therefore all involved in this process are called to immerse planning in prayer, Bible study, Christian conferencing, and testimony.

# CONGREGATIONAL PRE-PLANNING

**PRAYER:** Start with a time of prayer, praying for wisdom and discernment for the congregation and those preparing the Ministry Plan. Give time to developing the plan, gathering together on several evenings or other times which meet your congregation's needs. Look at the sections of the plan. It might be wise to set the meeting schedule in order to deal with a section at a time, allowing for prayer and discernment between meetings.

**WORSHIP:** When you meet together, spend time worshiping, praying and studying Bible passages.

**STUDY:** Take time to study the bible together. Here are some bible study suggestions that can be used as a tool for bible study together. *The Great Commission; Matthew 22:36-40, The Great Commandment; Acts 2, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church; I Corinthians 12, the healthy church is one body and it is the body of Christ; Ephesians 4:10-13, Christ has gifted the church through a variety of gifts; Galatians 3:28, all are welcome in the body of Christ; Luke 10:25-37; the parable of the Good Samaritan; Micah 6:8, righteousness and justice are the expectation for God's people; Luke 4:17-21, Jesus announces his ministry, which is a calling for the body of Christ today.* For examples of planning using the means of grace go to ([web page will be released with the official release of the document.](#))

**RESPOND:** In the midst of prayerful discernment, answer the questions on the forms below as honestly and candidly as possible in order to gain the fullest sense of where God is working in the midst of this congregation and where God might be calling this congregation in the future.

# VITAL CONGREGATION PLANNING GUIDE – INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE FORM

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participants Name:	Position in the Church:
Church Name:	Annual Conference:
Address:	Country:
Lead Pastor:	

## A. CONTEXT FOR MINISTRY – THE COMMUNITY AND PEOPLE GOD HAS CALLED YOU TO SERVE

1. **Community** - Describe the community surrounding your church – the community your congregation is called to partner with and serve.  
Who are the people (age, race, educational background, etc.)?

What are the current needs of your community?

What changes are occurring in your community that may impact your future ministry?

2. **Your Church – *the body of Christ God has formed you to be and is calling you to become***  
Which *means of grace* is your congregation most attentive to?

Which *means of grace* does your congregation need to help disciples further engage in?

What are the strengths of your church?

What are your challenges and threats? (For example: loss of key givers, needed building repairs, declining worship attendance, no or only a few new professions of faith, changing community, etc.)

What are the opportunities for ministry with children, with youth, with adults?

What does your congregation currently value as its most important ministries? Would anyone miss these ministries if your church ceased to exist?

Vital signs should be seen in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Indicate on the chart below your signs related to numerical fruit. In addition, note testimonies of what God’s spirit has done in each of these areas. Attach these testimonies to your plan, pray, giving thanks for God’s activity through your congregation (I Thessalonians 5:16). (This form will auto-fill online when submitted as an on-line response.)

<b>People and Ministry</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>2010</b>
<b>1. Disciples worship</b> Average worship attendance			
<b>2. Disciples make new disciples</b> Number of people who joined by profession of faith			
<b>3. Disciples engage in growing as a disciple</b> Number of small groups, Sunday school classes and Bible studies.			
<b>4. Disciples engage in mission</b> Number of people from the congregation engaged in local, national and international mission/outreach activities			
<b>5. Disciples give to mission</b> The total amount given by local church to other organizations for support of benevolent and charitable ministries (this amount includes apportionments paid and support for all United Methodist and non-United Methodist organizations active in work such as advocacy, education, health, justice, mercy, outreach, and welfare anywhere in the world)			

**Review what you have written so far, and summarize the emerging description of your church from this information.**

**Now write a 50-word or less description of what you feel God is leading your church to be in five years.**

## **B. BUILDING BLOCKS OF A VITAL CONGREGATION – SPIRITUAL COMMITMENTS**

### **1. Purpose**

Why does your church exist? What does Christ call you to be and do in your community at this time? Does your church have vision and mission statements? If so, what are they? When is the last time these statements were reviewed? Do they reflect your current reality?

### **2. Principles**

What values guide your congregation's decision making? You may want to turn to the 2008 Book of Discipline, pages 73-74, the General Rules. Take time to study and reflect on these. List the four to five key words or phrases that describe your values. Start each phrase with, *we value...*

### **3. Promise**

If your congregation were to cease to exist tomorrow, what would be missed from the community where you are located? What can the community consistently trust or expect from you?

### **4. People**

Who are we called by God to be passionate about reaching? Be specific for your community and your congregation.

## C. SETTING VITAL CHURCH GOALS – SPIRITUAL GUIDEPOSTS FOR YOUR FUTURE

Vital congregations engage disciples so that they 1) worship, 2) make new disciples, 3) grow as disciples, 4) serve in mission, and 5) give with a generous spirit, including giving to mission. Around the world, congregations will identify their commitment in each of these areas. **These commitments will be gathered by your annual conference and presented to General Conference as an offering from your congregation.** Reviewing the material above and identify a realistic target for each of the five areas for 2012-2015.

<b>People and Ministry</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
<b>1. Disciples worship</b> Average worship attendance				
<b>2. Disciples make new disciples</b> Number of people who will join by profession of faith				
<b>3. Disciples engage in growing as a disciple</b> Number of small groups, Sunday school classes and Bible studies.				
<b>4. Disciples engage in mission</b> Number of people from the congregation engaged in local, national and international mission/outreach				
<b>5. Disciples give to mission</b> The total amount given by your congregation to other organizations for support of benevolent and charitable ministries (this amount includes apportionments paid and support for all United Methodist and non-United Methodist organizations active in work such as advocacy, education, health, justice, mercy, outreach, and welfare anywhere in the world)				

## D. SMART ACTIONS – WHAT ACTIONS WILL YOU TAKE TO GLORIFY GOD

SMART actions are activities and strategies that help congregations reach their five goals listed above. They are SMART because they are **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant (to your purpose, mission and ministry plan), and **T**ime-framed. An example of a SMART action is: Start a new worship service so that we attract new disciples and grow worship attendance by September 1, 2012. This phrase begins with an action word (Start), describes the activity/strategy (a new worship service), a *so that* phrase that connects your activity to your purpose and goals (so that we attract new disciples and grow worship attendance), and it is time-framed (by September 1). After reviewing 16 ministry strategies on page 2, write 2-3 SMART actions following the model above for each of the vital areas of ministry. Most of your actions should relate to the 16 ministry strategies. (Be wise in your actions. It may be better to write one action for each of these areas and do it well than to write so many that it ends up being overwhelming).

### 1. *Disciples worship*

- a.
- b.
- c.

### 2. *Disciples make new disciples* (evangelism)

- a.
- b.
- c.

### 3. *Disciples engage in growing as a disciple* (small groups and children and youth ministry)

- a.
- b.
- c.

### 4. *Disciples engage in mission* (justice and mercy ministry)

- a.
- b.
- c.

### 5. *Disciples give to mission* (stewardship)

- a.
- b.
- c.

6. **Lay Leadership** (What will you do to develop laity to be effective spiritual leaders?)
- a.
  - b.
  - c.

7. **Clergy Leadership** (What will you do to support and encourage your pastor to be an effective spiritual leader? What will you do to help notice, name and nurture those in your congregation who have gifts for ordained ministry?)
- a.
  - b.
  - c.

E. **Actions, even SMART actions do not move forward unless the goals, action plans and change are linked to appropriate steps (sometimes small steps) and are connected to emotions and accomplishments (hope, aspirations, appropriate honoring of tradition, changed lives, and results).** Goals, “drivers,” and action plans move forward as they are connected to: 1) stories and testimonies of changed lives, 2) stories that link past traditions with present and future change and action, and 3) stories that communicate hope. Identify the ways you will intentionally listen for, solicit, collect, and tell the stories and hopeful signs seen as you carry out your plan.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

See Goal completion form on the next page along with how the measure will be used within the Church.

## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH VITAL CONGREGATION

### 2012-2015 GOAL-OFFERING

(This form can be filled out online at [www.UMVitalCongregations.org](http://www.UMVitalCongregations.org). The historical data will auto-fill on the online submission form. Online Information will be sent to GCFA and each Annual Conference office.)

Please complete the goal sheet and give it to your District Superintendent who will ensure your gift to God is presented at General Conference. You are welcome to share a synopsis of one or more testimonies to God's activity in your congregation.

Church Name:	Annual Conference:
Address:	Country:
Lead Pastor:	

People and Ministry	2008	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>Disciples worship</b> - Average worship attendance							
<b>Disciples make new disciples</b> - Number of people who joined by profession of faith							
<b>Disciples engage in growing their faith</b> - Number of small groups, Sunday school classes and Bible studies.							
<b>Disciples engage in mission</b> - Number of people from the congregation engaged in local, national and international mission/outreach activities							
<b>Disciples give to mission</b> - The total amount given by local church to other organizations for support of benevolent and charitable ministries (this amount includes apportionments paid and support for all United Methodist and non-United Methodist organizations active in work such as advocacy, education, health, justice, mercy, outreach, and welfare anywhere in the world)							

**THE STORIES:** Please use the space below to share any stories of growth, success, effectiveness and vitality in your congregation.

## **VITAL CONGREGATIONS PROJECT FOR THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH CONNECTION**

### **HOW VITAL CONGREGATION PLANNING AND GOALS WILL BE USED BY CONFERENCES AND THE GENERAL CHURCH**

The General Church and Annual Conferences exist to serve Jesus Christ by resourcing and supporting the local church. The General Church, Annual Conferences and local churches work together to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The goals, planning processes, and strategic visioning for vital congregations exist to enable each local church to have a vital future in disciple making. Achieving goals is not an end in itself, but rather a tool to see if what we are doing is producing fruit. The actual process of disciple making, *the means of grace*, is our main priority. Through goals we are attempting to help each local church be as strong and as vital as they have been gifted, and to vision a future of hope.

The primary use of the goals is to provide opportunities for reflection and conversation for strengthening ministry. Appropriate questions by conferences and congregations include:

1. After working on your goals and seeing your results, what have you learned?
2. From your learnings, what will you continue to do?
3. From your learnings, what will you do differently during the next six months?
4. What training and/or encouragement can the conference provide to support you in meeting your goals?

This planning guide is intended to be a tool to help congregations reach their goals and dreams for vitality. We welcome suggestions, thoughts, constructive criticism as a means for refining this tool for better effectiveness in the local church. Please feel free to email us or contact us with your feedback. [VitalCongregations@umc.org](mailto:VitalCongregations@umc.org).