

# We Need to Pray About Our Future



**Some guidance for  
congregations  
yearning for new life**

September 2004

This booklet has been approved by the Bishop and  
Cabinet of The Illinois Great Rivers Conference  
for use in local churches.

## Introduction

If you are wondering about your future as a congregation, you are not alone. In these changing times, many congregations wonder because of financial struggle. Many wonder because of shrinking membership. Some wonder because they are beginning to notice decline in their capacity for mission and ministry. Some wonder because members are aging, or because there are no children. Some wonder because they are wandering in a wilderness and have lost sight of where God is calling them to go.

The booklet is written to restore hope for the future and to offer some possibilities which need to be prayerfully explored.

This booklet assumes, however, that new life and victory always come at the price of death. There is no birth without labor; there is no growth without pain and loss; there is no dawn without the setting of the sun. To experience renewal in the life of our congregations we must be in some way, shape, or form willing to die.

This booklet, therefore, talks about death, but does so fearlessly, because Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and *"the one who believes in me, even though he or she dies, will live. And everyone who lives believing in me does not ultimately die at all."* (John 11:26)

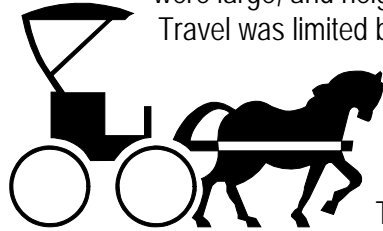
Scriptures quoted in this booklet are taken from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*

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## FIRST, A BIT OF HISTORY

Most local congregations in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference can trace their beginnings back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Of course, Illinois looked very different at that time. We were predominantly a rural culture. Family farms of fewer than a hundred acres dotted the countryside, and small, but vital communities served as social, spiritual, and economic gathering points. Families were large, and neighbors lived within a stone's throw.



Travel was limited by the mode of transportation—horses, carriages, and later, early model cars that were luxuries, not essentials. We were pretty content to stay close to home and family. There were fewer divorces and people could actually retire from the place of work where they began.

In the American Midwest, nearly every town had a Methodist, United Brethren, or Evangelical Association Church, because our spiritual fathers and mothers evangelized every wide spot in the road. Our churches, even the ones at remote rural junctions, were happening places! Many of our aging United Methodist members can remember days (probably before 1960) when pews were full and the sanctuary was bursting at the seams.

Time like an every flowing stream eventually bears all familiar things away. In the past 150 years Illinois has become far more urbanized. Advances in science have allowed our farms to grow larger and families to grow smaller. Many of our adult children have moved to urban centers. The hundreds of one-room country schools have merged into community school districts and even consolidations which straddle county lines. Divorce breaks up half of all families and our jobs are no longer secure. We are highly mobile, and improved methods of transportation mean that most don't think twice about driving to larger cities for groceries, doctors, and even church. Nearly every small town in Illinois has at least a few shuttered stores—signs of

the population shift. We've watched with grief as even church buildings of many denominations are shuttered and sold.

Add to these socio-economic factors some generational realities. Beginning in the 60's, young adults (Baby-Boomers) began falling away from the church in search of other ways to fill the void within. Many of the Baby-Boomer's children, "Survivors," and their children, "Millennials," have never stepped foot in a church. Today these three generations are represented sporadically, if not sparsely, in many of our United Methodist Churches.

Most United Methodist Churches in the United States can trace the beginning of membership and attendance decline to the mid-60's, so we've been living with the reality of shrinking numbers for 40 years! If you are reading this booklet, it may just be that your church has declined in membership and attendance enough to be wondering whether or not it has a future as a congregation in its present location.

This booklet is written to help you sort and pray through the issues and options and to offer some conversation starters. Your district superintendent will be happy to sit down and talk about these matters with you.

*This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next, Papa?" God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance! We go through exactly what Christ goes through. If we go through the hard times with him, then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him! (Romans 8:15-17)*

## THOUGHTS ON DEATH AND DYING

In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice converses with a gnat about the insects in the Looking Glass world:

*"Crawling at your feet," said the Gnat (Alice drew her feet back in some alarm), "you may observe a Bread-and-butter-fly. Its wings are thin slices of bread-and-butter, its body is a crust, and its head is a lump of sugar."*

*"And what does it live on?"*

*"Weak tea with cream in it."*

*A new difficulty came into Alice's head. "Supposing it couldn't find any?" she suggested.*

*"Then it would die, of course."*

*"But that must happen very often," Alice remarked thoughtfully.*

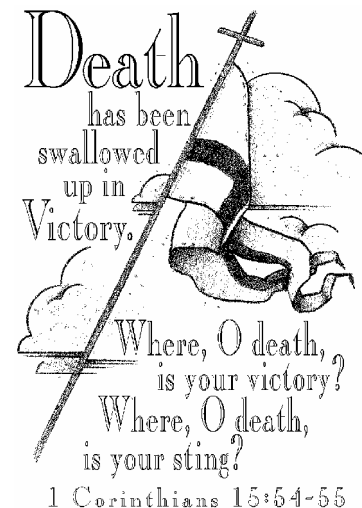
*"It always happens," said the Gnat.*

"It always happens." Death always happens wherever there is life. What keeps this unalterable fact of existence from being tragic news for the Christian is the cross of Jesus Christ— a symbol of our conviction that God triumphs over death to bring new life. Death is not the end; it's just another beginning.

We know about death; it's all around us. Loved ones pass away. Marriages end. Pets run away. Businesses go belly up. Dreams are dashed. On a daily basis, cells in our bodies succumb and fall away to make room for growth and new life.

Congregations have lifecycles, too—times of planting, growing, maturing, dying, reorganizing, and then bursting back to life in new ways. For the faithful the question is, therefore, not *if* we shall die, but rather *how* our dying can bring honor to God and be used by God to bring new life to us and to others.

In most cases churches have a choice about how they reorganize-- how they die. The problem is that we often don't see the options as *choices*, because they aren't our *first* choice. To be truthful, we'd be happiest if we could turn the clock back to the days when the pews were full. In our more thoughtful moments, however, we know that is impossible. The good news is that with God's help, we can have a hand in shaping the future.



Lord, your world is constantly changing. Every day is new and different. We can't stop the change, and really, for the most part, we wouldn't want to. What we do need is the assurance that we're not alone or forgotten when life gets confusing, chaotic, and filled with difficult choices. We need assurance, too, that you always bring order out of chaos and that you want us to be partners with you in the creation of that new order. Let us not be afraid of the future, but let us instead boldly step out in faith, confident in your power to give grace, light, and life. Amen.

## What Makes a Church a Church In the United Methodist Tradition?

All congregations, including those which are thriving, need to continually reflect on and respond to our denominational convictions about what makes a church a church.

The Preamble of our United Methodist Constitution states, "*The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship in which the Word of God is preached by persons divinely called, and the sacraments are duly administered according to Christ's own appointment. Under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the church seeks to provide for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers, and the redemption of the world.*"



Notice that "church" is *not* a building. Deep down inside we know this-- that the church is really about people—but we often forget it because over the years the building in which we worship has framed the loveliest, most joyful, and even most bittersweet events of our lives. It's hard to detach ourselves from this building, even when we know that the building is now consuming all the time, energy, and resources that we used to pour into making disciples of Jesus Christ. While it is quite natural and appropriate to love our buildings, we cannot call ourselves "true believers" and love them more than our Lord or our Lord's call upon our lives. Sometimes we have to make difficult choices.

Paragraph 216 of the *2000 Book of Discipline*, describes true believers as those who commit to:

1. Growth in Faithful Discipleship. We are expected to continually grow in our personal faith and to deepen our commitment to the will and grace of God. Personal growth and faithfulness are

fostered through prayer, worship, sacraments, study, Christian action, giving, and holy disciplines.

2. Mutual Responsibility. We are expected to participate in the corporate life of the local congregation through our presence, our prayers, our gifts, and our service. (It is also expected that we participate in the *global congregation* through apportioned giving, as well as through our connectional participation, prayers, and service).
3. The Call to Ministry of All the Baptized: Each believer is called to serve Christ in mission in the local and worldwide community and witness for Christ in the world.
4. Accountability: All believers are willing to be held accountable for faithfulness to their covenant and vows with God and the other members of the Church.

## It's Time to Do Some Soul Searching

Certain developments in the life of a congregation need to serve as signals to the congregation that some very deep change is needed. These include (but are not limited to):

- ✓ The congregation no longer has a positive vision for the future.
- ✓ Members are focusing on money, worship attendance, and/or "keeping the doors of the church open," and not on Jesus Christ and his mission to the world.
- ✓ The congregation ceases efforts related to mission, witness, and outreach in their community and beyond.
- ✓ The congregation ceases full participation in the mission, ministry, and polity of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference by paying less than 100% of its apportioned, fair-share giving.
- ✓ The church cannot afford or refuses to be connected with the global church through an appointed pastor or a supplied lay speaker.

- ✓ The church is putting more money into building and staff than it is into ministering to a physically and spiritual hungry world.

Congregations which are struggling to be the church as defined by our United Methodist Discipline and heritage will want to reflect on the following options commonly considered by others who struggle to find life in the midst of anticipated or actual decline.

*Forgiving God, we confess to you that it's not easy to be your church. We often lose sight of what we're about—making disciples of all nations. We have become comfortable and rather sleepy within our buildings, thinking that your mission is only about us and not about those who have not yet come. We confess that we have not fully committed ourselves to you or to those disciplines which increase our capacity for love and good works. Neither have we opened ourselves to brothers and sisters who are to hold us accountable to the promises we have made. Forgive us for our sleepiness, our indifference, our fear, and our struggle to trust you. Help us to courageously and honestly face ourselves and the reality in which we live, so that your healing might begin in us. In the name of our Redeemer we pray, Amen.*

## OPTION ONE

### The “C” Word: “Change”

There is a saying that goes, “If you do what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always gotten.” In other words, the only way to get different results (in our case, a congregation that is no longer declining) is to do things differently. This almost always means dying to some former ideas, expectations, behaviors, organizational habits, and even treasured traditions.

A congregational self-study is the best way for members to learn about themselves and their community and to engage in honest conversation with one another about the future. A self-study serves no useful purpose, however, unless it is followed by a second step-- reflecting and praying about what God wants the congregation to be and do—and a third step-- the “C” word: change.

The kinds of changes congregations will need to undergo vary from community to community. Here are some ways most members will need to change and grow:

1. Focusing on the redemptive power and love of Christ (the Resurrection and the Life), and not on things that worry us.
2. Praying without ceasing.
3. Understanding that the mission of the church is *not* to maintain its members, but to disciple and serve the un-served.
4. Accepting the fact that church membership is not the same thing as faithful discipleship.
5. Committing to growth in discipleship through the regular practice of spiritual disciplines including a) prayer, b) scripture reading, c) Holy Communion, d) communal gatherings for worship, study, prayer, discernment, and conversation, e) fasting (exercising the spiritual muscle of self-denial), and f) personal and communal participation in acts of mercy and compassion.
6. Committing to continual learning through small group participation and through listening to those who are presently un-served by our churches.

7. Developing and employing our unique spiritual gifts for the good of the church and the spiritually and physically hungry people the church is called to serve.
8. Growing in our practice of hospitality, particularly to those who are different from us.
9. Taking thoughtful risks; stepping out in faith to try new things; expecting failures among the successes.
10. Learning to reflect critically on the ways the congregation is falling short of being a "life-saving station" for the world, eliminating activities that are not related to our mission, and initiating missions and ministries that are specifically designed to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

The UPSIDE	The DOWNSIDE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ A congregation may be able to continue in its present location.</li> <li>◆ Members will experience the thrill, joy, and value of stepping out in faith as they risk change and take leadership in their own situation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Some members may drift away because they don't like change.</li> <li>◆ Critical self-study is hard work, and meaningful change is an adventure upon which some are not willing to embark.</li> </ul>

It's important to remember that no pastor, program, or burst of energy or understanding can "save" a church. It is God and God's spirit working in and through the lives of disciplined, faithful, transformed, and transforming members of a congregation that makes new life possible.

## OPTION TWO Do Nothing

If there is a way for a congregation to die without dignity, "Do Nothing" may be it. Oddly, it seems to be the most popular option with struggling churches, probably because tough decisions are postponed and other people and circumstances can be blamed for the church's struggle and inevitable demise.

The UPSIDE	The DOWNSIDE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Members feel safe staying in a familiar location.</li> <li>◆ Members do not experience immediate or sudden loss.</li> <li>◆ Most members will avoid difficult decision-making around the church's future.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Worries about property, assets, and income continue and multiply.</li> <li>◆ Members eventually scatter (nursing homes, assisted living) and die.</li> <li>◆ The member(s) who stay healthiest the longest eventually bear the burden of deciding to discontinue the congregation and doing the leg work associated with discontinuance.</li> <li>◆ Members do not experience the personal and spiritual growth that comes with risk-taking and taking leadership in difficult situations</li> </ul>

One grief-stricken member of a struggling congregation asked, "Can't we just fade away?" Conference leaders are not inclined to let this happen because issues inevitably arise around the safety of members and visitors, stewardship of the building, liability, and United Methodist identity. Here's a true story to consider:

Small Town UMC (not its real name) decided not to decide (do nothing). Over time, nearly all members became disabled by age—legally blind, confused, and unable to move around with agility and

safety. The youngest member, a 62 year old, literally held the church together by tending to the safety of the congregants, making sure the meager offering wasn't accidentally pilfered by a man suffering from undiagnosed Alzheimer's Disease, and paying bills in a timely way.

One Sunday, when the 62 year old was not there, two precocious little girls plotted to be left behind and locked in the church. When everyone was gone, the girls proceeded to play with candles, burning a large hole in the sanctuary carpet, and also, creating a slippery skating rink by squirting dish detergent on the basement floor.

While the girls escaped bodily harm, the potential for a terrible tragedy became apparent. The 62-year old finally had to decide, for the sake of everyone's safety, to work with a denominational official to discontinue the congregation and to sell the church building. It was an enormous amount of work for one person to do. In addition, few of the regular members were lucid enough to understand the decision, which added to the tragedy of it all, not to mention the guilt of the one member who had the misfortune of being the healthiest person at the end.

*Not to decide....  
.... is to decide*

## OPTION THREE Dissolve and Reconnect

This option is chosen when members agree by charge conference action to discontinue their congregation and transfer their memberships to other congregations.

<b>The UPSIDE</b>	<b>The DOWNSIDE</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Members agree to dispose of their building and assets and offer proceeds to charities or other churches of their own choosing. (Individual members are not considered charities!)</li> <li>◆ Members avoid a fair amount of stress associated with continuing to support a struggling congregation.</li> <li>◆ All members share in difficult decision-making.</li> <li>◆ Financial worries are resolved.</li> <li>◆ Congregational life goes on in a new form, as each member contributes to his/her new church.</li> <li>◆ Members find renewal in having trusted God to bring new life out of death.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ The congregation in its present form scatters; members temporarily lose identity and comfort of familiar surroundings.</li> <li>◆ The congregation will have some legal work to do around disposition of real and personal property.</li> </ul>

In some cases, the remaining members of the congregation decide to transfer their memberships en masse to the same new congregation. When Wesley Chapel (Martinsville, IL) discontinued, for instance, the remaining members decided to join St. Paul UMC. The

Wesley Chapel building was sold, and assets went with the members to St. Paul.

## OPTION FOUR Merge

This fourth option is worth considering when neighboring churches find themselves in aging buildings which are no longer practical, safe, or sensible investments. Each congregation votes to discontinue and then to form a brand new congregation. Creating new space for worship and community gatherings is usually a part of the merger plan.

Congregations interested in pursuing this option for the sake of making disciples of Jesus Christ are likely to find support and help from the Illinois Great Rivers Conference Office of Congregational Development.

<p>assets freed up to put toward the creation of a new entity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Congregational life goes on in new form as a new congregation comes into being.</li> <li>◆ Members will experience spiritual renewal in having trusted God to bring new life out of death.</li> <li>◆ Merged congregation may be eligible for a grant from Congregational Development.</li> </ul>	<p>church.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ The congregation will have some legal work to do around disposition of real and personal property.</li> </ul>
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Examples of churches choosing this option include the former Glenarm and New City UMCs, which became Sugar Creek United Methodist Church in the fall of 1994. More recently, Buffalo, Dawson, and Mechanicsburg United Methodist Churches voted to discontinue and form a new congregation, which they now call Fountain of Life UMC.

<b>The UPSIDE</b>	<b>The DOWNSIDE</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ All members share in difficult decision-making.</li> <li>◆ Merging creates the critical mass which has the potential to strengthen mission and ministry.</li> <li>◆ Members may capitalize on the “new start” identity, which has the potential of attracting new people.</li> <li>◆ Members will engage in a congregational self-study which enhances self-understanding and understanding of their unique calling in mission and ministry.</li> <li>◆ An aging building is sold and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ The congregation temporarily loses identity and in most cases, the comfort of familiar surroundings.</li> <li>◆ Leaders may experience a loss of power and sense of displacement as a new leadership team emerges.</li> <li>◆ Some members may opt to leave the merger because it represents change.</li> <li>◆ Unless the merged congregations intentionally integrate new people, new ideas, and new vision at the outset, they will merely be an amalgam of struggling congregations, not a new</li> </ul>

## OPTION FIVE Share a Facility

Picture your congregation moving its worship service to the chapel of a larger UM church. You have the same order of worship, same people sitting next to you, same hymnbooks, same traditions, and even your own pastor. Your congregation is freed from the burden of maintaining their present building and is positioned to carry out not only the missions and ministries of their own congregation, but to benefit, also, from the nurture, outreach, and witness ministries of the host church.

<p>of integrating at its own pace into the host congregation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Congregation will experience spiritual renewal in having trusted God to bring new life out of death.</li> <li>◆ Churches may be eligible for a grant from Congregational Development</li> </ul>	<p>leave because of attachment to the old building and because a shared facility represents change.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Members will still have facility costs, although at a greatly reduced cost.</li> </ul>
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This option has been used successfully by congregations of ethnic United Methodists in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference who do not presently have the resources to support a building. The Jesus Loves Korean Fellowship shares a building with Wesley UMC in Urbana, and Macomb Wesley provides space to the Macomb Korean Fellowship.

The UPSIDE	The DOWNSIDE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ All members share in difficult decision-making.</li> <li>◆ The congregation maintains its identity while sharing facility costs with another congregation.</li> <li>◆ The building may be sold and assets freed up to put toward new, revitalizing mission and ministry.</li> <li>◆ Members may negotiate with the host congregation to use host's communication systems (newsletters, ads, etc), as well a janitorial and secretarial services.</li> <li>◆ Members would have opportunities to connect with the missions, ministries, and nurture of the other church.</li> <li>◆ Congregational life goes on in new form, with the option</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Members need to find a church willing to provide space and to negotiate how they will relate.</li> <li>◆ Members need to work through fear of being "swallowed up" by the host congregation</li> <li>◆ The congregation will have some legal work to do around disposition of real and personal property.</li> <li>◆ Members temporarily struggle with identity as they move from familiar surroundings.</li> <li>◆ Leaders will need to develop communication systems with the host church; there will be some loss of control over surroundings.</li> <li>◆ Some members may opt to</li> </ul>

## OPTION SIX Move to Another Setting

This option also involves moving the worshipping community to new space in order to be freed from the burden of maintaining a costly building, but uses less costly or even free space, such as a motel's conference room or a member's living room.

UPSIDE	DOWNSIDE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ All members share in difficult decision-making about the congregation's future.</li> <li>◆ The congregation in its present form retains its identity.</li> <li>◆ The congregation is released from heavy financial burdens and is able to invest financial resources (and proceeds from sale of church building) in mission and ministry.</li> <li>◆ Change is minimized, especially in relation to relationships between people and worship style.</li> <li>◆ The congregation may find renewal in having trusted God to bring new life out of death.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Congregation experiences loss of familiar surroundings.</li> <li>◆ The congregation will have some legal work to do around disposition of real and personal property.</li> <li>◆ There may still be facility costs.</li> <li>◆ Without intentional strategies for mission and ministry, the congregation will have the same eventual outcome as if they remained where they presently are—scattering and death.</li> </ul>

## SOME FACTS ABOUT OWNERSHIP OF LOCAL CHURCH PROPERTY

Your local congregation is in all likelihood the owner of your local church building(s). When the church building was constructed or purchased, duly elected trustees of the church signed the property deed. It became the congregation's to tend and maintain for the purposes of worship, nurturing and equipping believers, and going forth to serve the world.

The deed also contains a **trust clause** which promises that the building will be used, kept, and maintained for United Methodist mission and ministry according to the Discipline of The United Methodist Church. This is to ensure that a local church planted by the denomination (as yours was many years ago), remains a United Methodist congregation and has facilities which serve as a home base for the appointment of a pastor and the launching of mission and ministry.

Because of the trust clause, the denomination has an interest and liability related to local church ownership. The denomination, therefore, enters into conversation with the local church whenever property is purchased, improved in a significant way, demolished, or sold.

It is only when the church is abandoned *before* property decisions are made that the Conference Trustees step in to make decisions for the local congregation. It is the policy of our Annual Conference that all proceeds from the sale of abandoned church property go to new church starts or revitalization of existing churches.

## DISCIPLINARY PROCESS FOR DISCONTINUING A LOCAL CHURCH

The United Methodist Book of Discipline provides a process for decision-making around the discontinuation of a local church. Below is a summary of ¶2548.2:

1. Observing decline in a local congregation, the DS or congregation initiates conversation about the congregation's potential. The DS may appoint a task force (according to ¶213) to do an extensive study.
2. If it is determined that the church needs to be discontinued, the DS obtains legal counsel to determine if there are any restrictions on the property deed.
3. The local church makes recommendations as to the future use of the property and where the membership and the title to all the real and personal, tangible, and intangible property of the local church shall be transferred.
4. The District Board of Church Location and Building, the Bishop, and majority of Superintendents agree to the discontinuation, and present it to Annual Conference for a vote.
5. Prior to actually disbanding, local church trustees dispose of property as the charge conference recommends. If the congregation disbands or abandons the church *prior* to disposition of the property, Conference Trustees assume the task of local church trustees. Any proceeds from abandoned churches are used by the IGRC to plant new United Methodist Churches or revitalize existing ones.
6. Churches may be considered to be abandoned when local church property is no longer used, kept, or maintained by its membership as a place of divine worship or when a local church no longer serves the purpose for which it was organized and incorporated.

## WE'RE AFRAID THEY WILL COME AND CLOSE OUR CHURCH

Some aging, struggling congregations are nagged by the fear that "They" (usually meaning the district superintendent, cabinet, or conference) will swoop in and close their church.

This fear is usually based on stories they hear from members of churches who felt forced by the denomination to close the doors of their church. What usually isn't part of their story is that somewhere along the way the congregation decided not to decide. In the face of decline they chose the "Do Nothing" (a.k.a. "Can't We Just Fade Away?") option. When a congregation chooses to do nothing, the job of making decisions inevitably falls to the denomination. Denominational officials, by the way, get no enjoyment from this intervention whatsoever.

The Cabinet and Conference have no reason to close congregations which are fulfilling their responsibilities and vows as United Methodist Churches, no matter what size they are. One congregation of two members, for example, continued to fulfill its vows and closed only after one of the two members died. We believe that being the Body of Christ has less to do with numbers than with the maturity of faith within and the expression of caring without.

Points at which a denominational official is likely to press a congregation to bring closure to their ministry include any one or combination of the following:

- ✓ Safety issues (members are in an unsafe building or are dangerous to one another and to those who visit).
- ✓ The inability to pay (or refusal to accept) an ordained, licensed, or certified spiritual leader approved by the Annual Conference. The inability or unwillingness to pay the full amount promised to the spiritual leader is also considered.

- ✓ The inability or unwillingness of members to support their church by their presence, prayers, gifts, and service. (If there is a pattern of no one showing up for worship several Sundays in a row – excluding cancellations related to weather— there is reason, for example, to believe that members are not taking their vows seriously or are unable to sustain a local congregation).
- ✓ The inability or unwillingness of members to pay or to grow in the direction of paying 100% of their conference apportionments. (Membership in the United Methodist Church is [by the member's own vow] membership in a *global* church, of which the local congregation is one expression. It is expected that United Methodist members and congregations will take their United Methodist membership vows and responsibilities seriously).
- ✓ The unwillingness of members to be a United Methodist Church in other ways—including flagrant violation of the Discipline of The United Methodist Church and membership vows. (In our membership vows, for instance, we confess that the church is open “to people of all ages, nations, and races.” The practice of discrimination is contrary to this vow, and a congregation's unwillingness to grow into new behaviors around this issue might initiate conversations around closing.)

## SO, NOW WHAT?

Discuss this booklet with leaders and members of your congregation. Pray and listen to God's leading. Call your District Superintendent. He or she needs to be involved in your congregation's discernment process.

The District Superintendent can:

- ✓ Help you fully understand these options and explore other options you may have to offer.
- ✓ Help you take actions in ways that are spiritually, communally, and legally responsible.
- ✓ Help connect you with needed resources.
- ✓ Support you with presence and prayer in difficult transitions and in change.

*“What I'm trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God's giving. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don't be afraid of missing out. You're my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very kingdom itself. Matthew 12:29-31*

*Sovereign God, let us be able to stand before your throne of grace and judgment confident that we have been faithful and true, for the sake of Christ. Amen.*

*Creative God, help us to trust you to provide and to make all things new. Amen.*



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