

THE POWER OF Presence

Bruce P. Blake

Presence is the prerequisite to ministry and mission of the Church in any community. This understanding is basic to understand the importance of small membership churches in the United Methodist connection. Simply stated, the Church cannot faithfully serve where it is not present.

The question is not *whether* we will be present but *how* we will be present. Many persons respond to the percentage of United Methodist churches with less than 50 in attendance as a negative characteristic of the United Methodist connection. It is my experience that it is not negative but positive. United Methodist presence in rural areas where population is declining and in urban transitional neighborhoods where population is shifting creates possibilities of servant ministry which would be lost, forgotten or ignored without these congregations.

A good illustration of the possibility of mission is when natural or human disas-

ter occurs in a community. Often because there is no "listening audience" the media ignores disasters in rural areas. Often in these communities the only institution remaining with trained leadership is the church. Schools and health care services have been consolidated and governmental units who represent few persons lack access and influence for needed services. The church is the only institutional presence having access to the resources necessary to respond.

One illustration of the church's presence in response to disaster occurred in December 2000 when an ice storm ravaged the rural southeast corner of Oklahoma. The metropolitan media covered this disaster for a day or two but they soon abandoned coverage. The United Methodist Church, including many congregations of the Oklahoma Indian Missionary Conference, became the news centers for disaster relief. Every local church and conference has access to the United Methodist Committee on Relief, as effective a disaster relief resource as exists in the world. Often responses to disasters are only possible because small membership local churches are present.

Another illustration of the possibility of mission is when small membership churches become the voice of the forgotten, often the poor, among us. Poverty in rural areas and transitional communities is the rule rather than the exception. Because the majority of a population is

poor, these areas are neglected. Who will speak for those who have no voice? The Church of Jesus Christ responds to the mandate of Christ to minister with the poor.

An illustration of ministry with the poor is the Cookson Hills Center in Cookson, Oklahoma. The mission of this agency is to live with and minister with the poor and be their voice. State representatives and senators, as well as local commissioners and board members, hear this voice. The Department of Human Services and other humanitarian agencies hear this voice. This voice is heard by local churches whose membership is middle and upper middle income persons. It is reported that Mother Teresa said, "The only hands, heart and voice that God has are my hands, heart and voice." This is true in rural and transitional set-

tings, and often a legitimate reason for a church to remain open is to be the voice of those who have no voice.

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Challenges and Opportunities

There are critical challenges and opportunities for small membership churches.

First, to be in mission. It is comfortable for any congregation, including small membership congregations, to slide into the understanding that the church exists for the sake of its members.



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The Church of Jesus Christ is not called to be comfortable. The Church of Jesus Christ exists for others. Recently a small membership church realized that there were increasing numbers of new persons in the community who were Spanish-speaking persons. A Cinco de Mayo celebration was planned. This included a United Methodist worship service. Over 100 persons attended and in a very short time several Spanish-speaking persons have joined the church on profession of faith. This congregation does not exist for itself. It has responded to the challenges of existing for others.

Second, to be certain that facility and staff expenses are kept at a level to enable a congregation to have programs of mission and ministry. Many small membership churches have learned that although having a full-time pastor seems necessary for their self-esteem, it is a barrier to mission and ministry because, along with facility upkeep, full-time staff consume all their resources. These churches have literally been reborn when they work with cabinets to share a pastor with another congregation or accept the leadership of a part-time pastor and redirect resources for ministry and mission.

Recently three congregations decided to accept less than full-time pastoral leadership. Resources were re-allocated to after school children's ministry and youth ministry. All three congregations are experiencing revival because they are no longer using all their resources for buildings and staff.

Third, to understand that the evidence of a faithful church in community is to transform community life and values rather than mirror the values of a community. Often, because of size, it is difficult for small membership churches to be counter to local culture. However, the good news of forgiveness, peace, justice and love is needed everywhere. The challenge in a rural community is to be a prophetic presence.

Three years ago a small membership church heard from the pulpit Sunday after Sunday prophetic witness concerning the injustice of discriminatory economic structures of a community. Some, not all, of the congregation became convicted. The entire congregation supported the preacher's right to proclaim the gospel. These convicted laypersons became the leaven in the lump for radical economic and social transformation in a community. This was possible

because the temptation to be a mirroring presence was rejected and the challenge of being a transforming presence was accepted.

The **fourth** and final challenge is to have pastoral leadership who is committed to God's mission through the church rather than using the small membership churches as a rung on the ladder called career. The laity know immediately when a pastor is serving them "on the road to somewhere else." It is also true that laity know immediately when a pas-

tor is serving them because of a divine call to servant leadership, never having one's life focused on where he or she will be in the future. Effective pastoral leadership does not occur when an opportunity is considered a stepping stone rather than an opportunity to wash at the feet of the disciples.

There are many reasons for the strength of the United Methodist connection. One of the primary reasons is the small membership church. □

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