



# WANTED!

## More Circuit Riders Fewer Circuits

**W**hen the congregation held its last service on Father's Day in June, average worship attendance had dwindled to under 12. The church was part of a two-point charge, formed to provide a part-time appointment for a student pastor or retired clergyman. Ironically, this church had received district funding (from another church closing!) not long ago in order to provide new central heating and cooling and vinyl siding. So the building looked good, but that wasn't enough. Now the building and its assets are being sold.

This story has been repeated many times in communities all across our nation.

While some believe any rescue efforts directed toward the small church are a waste of personnel and energy, I believe there are creative avenues for renewing the vitality of small congregations.

Our most frequent pattern for dealing with small churches has been to place them on a circuit with other small congregations, sharing a single pastor. In this way the church is provided the pastoral leadership of an ordained elder, who is in turn provided at least minimum salary. While some circuits function well, often their connection is purely administrative. If the individual congregations do not have a close affinity with one another, they may each expect to have competing programs. The smaller churches may become discouraged if they perceive that a stronger congregation on the circuit receives more pastoral attention. If one of the churches

becomes strong enough to go "station," then the circuit falls apart and must be realigned. Or, if one of the churches on the circuit eventually becomes too weak to "carry its weight," then it is closed and the circuit is rearranged.

How well has this "administrative circuit" model worked? While there have been exceptions, membership statistics tracked over 25 years have shown a marked decrease in membership when a church is placed on a circuit. Is there another way for us to do ministry in the small church?

### Alternative Models

The *Cooperative Parish* is one alternative model. Here small congregations combine their efforts in a formal arrangement to share ministry. This model works best when each congregation sees itself as an integral part of the parish, bringing specific gifts and assets to the larger ministry. Committed clergy and lay leadership are required to provide the necessary stability and guidance for this kind of partnership to work. One example of a strong cooperative is the Frankfort Parish, an urban cooperative in Philadelphia. Pastor Robin Hynicka believes the presence of the church in transitional communities is a necessity, not a luxury. He and his staff work with children, youth, adults, and families in a cooperative that is transforming lives.

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**Julia Kuhn Wallace**

Another approach is to *merge smaller churches into one larger congregation*. This can be an arduous process, requiring several churches to move through the grief of losing what they have been to see new possibilities. Mergers work best when a new church site is selected rather than one or more congregations moving in to another's building. In West Virginia, for example, nine congregations, each with fewer than 22 members, have joined efforts. Rather than simply watching their eventual demise, they chose to be proactive. Together they are birthing a new ministry called "Daybreak," to be housed at a new site.

A *Regional Mission* is a newer model for energizing small congregations. In this approach, a district divides itself into mission areas. Churches and their staffs are clustered, coming together in each area to explore what needs to be accomplished there in Christ's name. Rather than being assigned to individual congregations, pastors are assigned to a specific Regional Mission Area. In Australia, the Mitchell Presbytery of the Uniting Church divided itself into five such areas. The pastors work together to mentor lay leadership, and to supply all of the pulpits. Each church has pastoral leadership and is connected with the others in a larger mission. United Methodist clergyman Lloyd Vidler helped pioneer this approach, which has been sustained long after he retired. This model requires patience in working together with laity and appointed clergy, but it helps small churches face

their challenges by seeking new options for ministry.

Another exciting approach is to *train laypersons for team ministry* within a local congregation. In New Zealand, Pastor Dave Mullens saw that the church he was serving could accomplish much more in ministry if it was not hampered by the cost of his salary. In preparation for his retirement in four years, he arranged for his salary to be cut back by one-fourth each year. During that same time he identified and trained four lay pastors, who now provide primary spiritual leadership to the congregation. Today the church has a retreat center ministry and funds services in the community with the money that used to go to a salary.

A variation on this approach can be found in McGregor, Minnesota. Roy Venderwerf is an ordained elder who works as a mentor with four lay speakers, each of whom serves a different congregation. "Without their leadership, the churches would be closed by now!" Vanderwerf says. Similarly, in Iowa the Conference is training laity for pastoral responsibilities through their Lay Academy. Realizing they were facing a shortage of appointable elders to smaller churches, conference leaders proactively asked, "What if laity were trained and empowered to serve in our smaller churches?"

Sharing ministry can have a powerful effect on both the churches and community involved. For example, Peggy Egbert directs a district-wide Shared Ministry in Iowa called "MUMMS" (Mobile United Methodist Missionaries) that goes into communities and offers ministries like VBS and children's camps in town facilities. This effort is so successful that it is growing to other areas proving you don't truly need a church building to be the church. Another example is The Urban Mission Ministries, Inc. in Steubenville, Ohio. It is the largest charity in the Upper Ohio Valley, serving Christ in the community through food distribution services, Hutton homeless shelters, soup kitchen, volunteer workers, summer programs for children, and the Neighborhood Community Development Corporation led by Sharon Kirtdoll, an African-American community developer.

### Asking the Right Questions

The key is not simply to look at someone else's answers, but to begin asking the right questions: What is the unique mission we need to be fulfilling here? What

kind of leadership and resources are necessary to accomplish this? What kind of training do we need to provide for both clergy and laity?

The original strength of our itinerant system was that pastors were sent where they were needed to provide leadership for fulfilling the church's mission. This model was so successful that the image of the Circuit Rider remains central to our United Methodist identity. **But the Circuit Rider was a means to an end, and that end was to provide spiritual leadership for ministry in every place. Now that end must once again become our primary focus.** Today we need fewer circuits, and more Circuit Riders!

True, the new Circuit Riders won't look like the old ones. We can no longer fulfill our mission by sending a pastor on a pony to every community. Today's Circuit Riders may be bi-vocational local pastors, or teams of mentoring elders and

trained laity. Most importantly, they will be spiritual leaders charged with helping congregations be in mission in their communities. Our small churches can be places where vital ministry happens only if we will begin to ask the right questions at every level of our denomination. □



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## Questions To Consider

### Local Church Leaders

- What realities need to be faced in order to help your church see the need for change?
- How can clergy and laity partner with one another to make ministry happen?
- What would it take to begin seeing shared ministry as a model for success, rather than a sign of your failure as a church?

### District

- How does your District help churches honestly face their ministry realities and make necessary transitions?
- How does your District train church leaders (lay and clergy) to work together in ministry?
- What is the District's role in defining mission areas and working to support ministry in these settings?

### Conference

- How does your Conference develop and deploy spiritual leaders for small congregations for longer tenure, including ministry teams,

intentional interims, mentoring elders and trained laity?

- How is your Conference developing an intentional strategy for the ministry of the small church that builds toward a faithful future, rather than viewing it as a problem?

### General Agency Staff

- What resources are you providing for small membership churches that foster shared and regional approaches to ministry?
- How are you in partnership with Annual Conferences to envision new models for ministry among smaller congregations?
- How are you cooperating with other General Boards and Agencies (even ecumenically) to resource small membership churches?

### Seminaries

- How are you training pastors and laity for ministry in smaller churches?
- What courses are you offering that prepare pastors to work in a team or regional setting?

—JKW