

Heather Peck Stahl

5 Pastors Assess **TRENDS**

We open this issue of *Circuit Rider* with the voices of five United Methodist pastors serving local churches.

They illustrate the diversity of environments, and therefore challenges, of ministry across the UM connection.

Though each pastor is experiencing different challenges unique to his or her context, there are also similarities which are apparent.

For example, all five say the events of September 11th have influenced their future plans, and all agree that vital worship remains a primary goal. Three of the pastors mention the growing Hispanic population as people they hope to reach in the future.

“I had to learn to think and act more like a missionary than a local church pastor.” — *Jorge Acevedo*



In his sixth year at Grace United Methodist Church in Cape Coral, Florida, the **Rev. Jorge Acevedo** says his predominately white, middle class and blue collar congregation is serving a “fast-growing county” with a rising Hispanic population.

When asked how the past has affected his ministry, Acevedo says he has struggled to change his community’s misperception that the church is “irrelevant, boring and out of touch.” Six years ago, Acevedo

preached two traditional services for a declining church membership of 380. He quickly noticed that “the church didn’t have a sense of mission,” and that the language and images in the Sunday morning services were not meeting the needs of most churchgoers. “I had to learn to think and act more like a missionary than a local church pastor,” he says.

In response, Acevedo says he helped the congregation adopt a clear vision for ministry and offer five weekend services: two contemporary, one traditional, one Hispanic, and one Christ-centered 12-step recovery. Today, the 1,300-member church has an average weekend worship attendance of 1,450 and provides a children’s worship service on Sunday mornings.

Grace Church has a “strong and emerging small-group ministry” apart from Sunday school groups, Acevedo says. And, the church has stopped searching outside of the church walls to hire new staff. Instead, all new staff comes directly from the church pews.

When asked about the future, Acevedo says he and the congregation are “dogged about vision” but “flexible and fluid about specific plans.” He says, “As our community changes, we change the details of what and how we’d like to do.” And to learn about such community trends, he says he reads books, newspapers and magazines; listens to the radio; speaks with Christian-following men and women; and learns from “thriving local churches.”

Some recent findings affecting Acevedo’s ministries include the feelings of lost security and peace after September 11th. He says the church’s message and values have since shifted toward helping people accept that “Jesus is our peace, help, and hope.”

Another trend he’s noticed is the powerful impact popular media can have in our lives. He uses themes or messages from media such as television, music and movies in his sermons to illustrate Christian lessons. Use of such media “is appealing to our congregation in that it’s a way they can understand and be engaged.”

Acevedo notes that we live in “an addictive culture” and must address this problem in the church. He explains that many in our society are addicted to something, whether it’s drugs, alcohol, computers, codependency, or food. As a result, he hopes to continue and expand Grace Church’s 12-step recovery ministry to reach more in his community.

For three and a half years, the **Rev. Samuel Yun** has served Ascension Ministry, which is one of two autonomous Korean congregations worshipping in the Los Angeles Korean United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, California. Ascension Ministry members are primarily professional, upper middle class, English-speaking, second-generation Korean.

Situated near the Los Angeles airport, the church’s neighborhood consists of a mix of Anglo, Hispanic, and Black with few to none participating in worship. Instead, the congregation has an average attendance of 120 adults and 80 youth children, commuting from as far as an hour away.

Such lack of local involvement causes the church “difficulty in impacting the community,” he says. To address this challenge, one of the things the congregation has done is to partner with the local school district in a tutoring and literacy program. Church members also sponsor an annual free health fair for the local community.

When asked about recent challenges, Yun says he has had to shift his mindset from being a “do-everything-pastor” to a pastor who empowers others to serve in the church “according to their spiritual gifts.” He also has readjusted his ministry’s focus from supporting young, 20-something career men and women toward nurturing children and families, since most of his church members are now in their early 30s with small children.

Another change, says Yun, has been to address the world’s uncertainty after the events of September 11th. He has led his congregation to “not wait to see how the world will affect us, but instead find out what we can do in the community that can affect the world.”

When planning for the future, Yun says he “keeps his eyes, heart, and ears open to hear God.” He also browses the Internet to learn such things as what is working and impacting people’s lives in other growing Korean-American churches, what people are reading, and what values are emerging in our society. He also watches to see what is popular in entertainment and speaks to congregation members—in person and through e-mail—to learn their needs.



“As society has become ‘more mobile,’ Willie Jackson has begun offering more flexible ministries to serve those members who must travel, those who serve at the nearby Air Force base, and those are temporarily staying in the area.”

Trends that are shaping the way Yun plans for the future include the fact that we “live in a sound-bite society.” In response, Yun says he is searching for ways to provide “instant and sound-bite” Christian lessons through which people can begin the slow process of experiencing their faith more fully.

Since Yun has learned that the use of multi-media increases the ability of his congregation to retain information, he uses audio, outlines, movie clips, Power Point, and pictures during his sermons to reinforce each idea and lesson.

Yun hopes to encourage parents to be as involved in their children’s spiritual lives as they are in their children’s academic education. To help them do this, Yun plans to develop a comprehensive curriculum in which all ages are learning a similar lesson each Sunday morning.



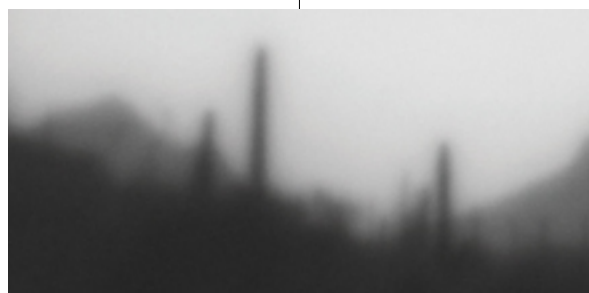
In June 2001, the **Rev. Cherie Parker** was appointed to Watkins United Methodist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, after serving Bellevue (Tenn.) United Methodist Church for 10 years. A predominately white, middle class congregation, Watkins Church serves a growing suburban area and an area with an increasing Hispanic population. The 500-member church is made up of mainly young families and older adults with few middle-aged adults

attending.

Recent changes that have affected Parker’s ministry at Watkins Church include the fact that most lay volunteers and financial supporters are retired, older adults. She has found that many younger adults are either unable or have not yet learned the value of serving in the church and tithing. Therefore, she seeks to find ways to educate and cultivate the younger adults so that they can fill the shoes of those who are aging.

Differing opinions in worship styles has also become a struggle, says Parker. Currently both Sunday morning services are traditional and distinctively United Methodist. However, Parker says her congregation has several members coming from other denominational backgrounds or worship styles, causing them to seek services that are more contemporary or less denomination-specific.

The events of September 11th and the “worldwide escalation in violence” have caused her congregation to develop “a low-grade anxiety.” In response, Watkins Church includes global issues during prayer time in Sunday worship and provides, in small-group settings, opportunities for people to discuss their fears and faith in a “safe” atmosphere.



When planning for the future, Parker says she primarily considers suggestions from her covenant group of clergy women and men, other clergy peers, and lay members. She also follows the news in local and national newspapers, several religious journals, and National Public Radio to learn new trends in ministry and local and national concerns affecting her congregation.

She hopes to invite and encourage young adult members to actively participate in church leadership, planning, and activities. Parker also intends to include more people with differing viewpoints in planning for Sunday worship each week, “so that each service offers something for everyone each week.”

Parker says she intends to lead her congregation in serving their community. Plans include exploring a ministry for the growing Hispanic community, visiting the lonely and isolated through congregational care, increased involvement in the local community ministries association, and helping the “forgotten and unseen” poor and impoverished. Watkins Church will also continue to share its facilities with local groups.

Having served for eight years at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana, the **Rev. Kent Millard** says his suburban, middle-class, predominately white congregation is serving a “rapidly growing community.” When asked what recent changes have affected his ministry, Millard says, “People seek options in worship experiences, just as people seek variety when shopping at a mall.”



Eight years ago, the church averaged 1,800 in worship during its three traditional Sunday morning services. Today, the church averages 3,100 in worship during its 10 services each weekend—three lively traditional services, three contemporary services at an off-site dinner theater, one singles service, one service for the deaf and hearing impaired, and one

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informal evening service led by a former nightclub singer turned minister. In addition, the 5,000-member congregation offers a Wednesday night church service and a weekend youth coffee house; and they are considering adding a second satellite service at a restaurant “where people could get music, message, and a meal,” Millard says.

A more recent change, Millard adds, is the need to overcome fear, understand different religions, and reprioritize one’s life in response to the events of September 11, 2001. Therefore, the church has offered a series of specialized sermons related to these issues as well as panels with leaders from other religious traditions.

When considering the future, Millard says he reads secular books and newspapers, talks with key community and national leaders, spends time alone with God, and reads and listens to other forms of popular spirituality.

One trend he’s noticed is “the polarization of liberals and conservatives.” To address this, St. Luke’s now openly invites traditionally conservative groups (i.e. Promise Keepers) and traditionally liberal groups (i.e. gay and lesbians) to meet and participate in the congregation. Also, the five pastors serving the congregation intentionally affirm both positions when dealing with a controversial topic, emphasizing that “we are all made in the image of God.”

Other trends he’s noticed are racial segregation in churches and increased drug use and street violence. As a result, Millard’s congregation partners with three predominately black churches. In addition to joint ministries, St. Luke’s joins them in walking area “violent” streets each weekend to help decrease drug use and violence.

Lastly, Millard says that he’s found that people want hands-on mission work “to experience and not just hear about ministry,” and that the use of drama and music can have a profound effect on people’s spiritual lives.

The **Rev. Willie Jackson** has been serving Fairfield United Methodist Church, Shreveport, Louisiana, since 1986 and Faith United Methodist Church, Shreveport, since 1989. Both congregations are predominately African American, poor and working class. Fairfield Church has 114 members, mostly older adults, with an average attendance of 60 to 70. Faith Church has 250 members, mostly young adults and Baby Boomers, with an average attendance of 80 to 100.

He notes that as society has become “more mobile,” he has begun offering more flexible ministries to serve those members who must travel, those who serve at the nearby Air Force base, and those are temporarily staying in the area.

The work schedules of many of his members range from morning to night shifts. Therefore, Jackson says his churches offer alternative times for ministry such as evening Bible studies and mid-week worship services. He also provides specialized ministries for children and youth, “to keep them in church.” Such ministries include “praise dance” (liturgical dance) and “drill teams” (Bible studies to “drill” scripture.)

A more recent change he’s begun addressing is the need to reassure church members of God’s faithfulness as they fear global violence, such as the events of September 11, and local violence due to gang activity and drug abuse.

As Jackson looks toward the future, he says he listens to clergy peers and learns from newspapers and broadcast news about local issues affecting his congregation and community.

Jackson has found that music and technology have a positive and powerful affect on his congregations. Therefore, he now uses “high tech and high energy” contemporary, gospel, and praise music in addition to traditional hymns. He also is expanding his use of the computer for the church newsletter and hopes to begin using a video projector in worship.

Jackson also says that as society has become “more tolerant of lower standards,” he has had to adjust and increase the number of ministries addressing a higher number of teenage pregnancies, single-parent homes, and people abusing drugs and alcohol.

In the near future, he hopes to provide single parents a church-based day care center, a teenage pregnancy crisis center, a mentoring program, and an expanded babysitting ministry. Jackson plans to also help the poor in his community by expanding the food and clothing outreach ministry and their academic tutoring and computer lab programs for children and adults. In addition, he hopes to establish “equipping ministries” instead of “band-aid ministries” to help drug and alcohol abusers recover from their addictions.

The goal of Jackson’s sermons and his ministry is to help his congregations “seek to understand themselves” and “develop more meaningful relationships with God.” □

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