

Michael Roberts and Janice Riggle Huie



# Connected in Christ

What is now a major initiative within the Arkansas Conference started as a trial and error attempt to address several critical issues. These issues, which were identified through a series of focus groups and surveys, included low clergy morale, a sense of isolation among clergy, a distrust of the larger system, a lack of spiritual vitality, an acceptance of mediocrity, as well as some alarming statistical realities regarding membership, attendance, and professions of faith. This situation could easily have left us depressed and debilitated. The first impulse might have been to engage in the proverbial work of rearranging the chairs on the

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Titanic. However, because of the leading of the Spirit, something different began to happen.

Through a long process of discernment, and more than a few heated debates, it became clear that transformation could not be accomplished using traditional “continuing education” models. There would be no quick-fix solutions. We could not simply put together some “big event,” where we bring in experts to spread their theological pixie dust, and expect everything to be different. Something more comprehensive was needed to restore spiritual vitality and missional focus to all congregations in Arkansas. Out of this vision, a movement called Connected in Christ was born.

The name “Connected in Christ” emerged for us as an inspiration because it speaks directly to what we were (and are) trying to bring to fruition. CIC is about “connecting together.” It is about

- connecting pastors to pastors in covenant relationships;
- connecting clergy and laity in partnerships to fulfill a shared mission;
- connecting the church to the true needs of the community through customized local church ministry plans, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach;
- connecting clergy and congregations to leaders in various areas of ministry who will feed us with fresh insights, ideas, and inspiration;
- most importantly, connecting us in a new way to the one who said, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” Without this connection, good fruit will not be developed.

## Covenant Community Among Clergy

While CIC involves intentional work with congregations, we also sensed a need for a strong clergy component. The assumption could be stated like this: there is an inextricable relationship between faithful, fruitful, and fulfilling ministry and covenant relationships among clergy, i.e., being connected together in Christ. We might even go so far as to say there is a direct relationship between covenant community among pastors and the future vitality of the church.

To this end, we bring clergy together in groups of from fifteen to twenty for a series of four retreats over a two-year period. These retreats are content rich, with seminars led by seminarian professors, proven practitioners, and the leaders of Connected in Christ. Together we receive knowledge and share insights in key areas of ministry, including pastoral leadership, relational dynamics, evangelism, and stewardship. We also engage in several core processes, including the development of personal ministry plans.

To a casual observer it might seem this process is little more than a series of intensive continuing education events. However, it doesn't take participants long to discover it is much more. The learning that takes place during these retreats, as important as it is, is secondary to our primary goal. The primary goal is to build covenant communi-

## Beyond Arkansas

Connected in Christ has moved beyond Arkansas.

Currently two groups have been started in the New Mexico Conference. The process has also been introduced in other conferences exploring possibilities for leadership development and congregational transformation.

For more information contact Michael Roberts at [mroberts@arumc.org](mailto:mroberts@arumc.org).

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ty among pastors and to grow in our connection to one another and to God.

This primary goal is achieved, in part, through intense times of worship and prayer where participants share their call stories and engage in times of prayer that include the laying on of hands. Over and over again we hear how meaningful this experience is. One participant characterized it as an “out-of-body” experience. By hearing how God has worked in others who do not look exactly like them, think exactly like them, or believe exactly like them, people see themselves not as individuals but as vital members of a larger body—the Body of Christ. It helps them to see a bigger God, a God who works in and through all. God even works through those who are different from us. Imagine that!

## The Conference Connection

One of our early goals was to make sure that CIC did not become another program to be protected; rather, it was intended to be a flexible strategy to help fulfill a larger vision involving the transformation of the conference. From a leadership perspective, all the dimensions of CIC, including the development of covenant relationships, are not ends in themselves but means to a greater end. It is the larger vision and mission that gives the “means” a sense of purpose beyond mere self-fulfillment. In Wesleyan terms, we could make the comparison to the Means of Grace. Holy conferencing, for example, is essential for faithful and fruitful ministry, but its purpose transcends individual fulfillment; ultimately, it is necessary for the vitality of the whole body.

Practically, this larger vision led us to organize CIC in some distinctive ways. For example, we intentionally did not organize CIC groups by like-mindedness, church size, or other affinities. We want-

ed to mix up each group with larger churches and smaller churches, seasoned pastors and newer pastors. This dynamic has helped to build a sense of covenant within the conference and has diminished the need for camps, factions, and cliques as the sole source of belonging. One participant expressed it like this: the God who is “wholly other” is revealed as we are willing to enter into relationship with people who are “other than us.” If we only hang out with our own affinity group, it is too easy to fall into the temptation of creating a God in our image.

## The Congregational Component

The clergy retreats and the development of holy friendships among the clergy are only one part of a larger comprehensive process. Clergy, on their own, cannot enroll in CIC; the congregation must enroll. Clergy are then asked to develop a leadership team within the congregation, which is involved in a series of Team Training Events. The core seminars deal with “What's Right about United Methodist Christianity,” “Relational Dynamics and Team Building,” and “Transformational Ministry Planning.” The primary purpose of these leadership teams is to lead the congregation through a process of discerning how the congregation can more faithfully and fruitfully fulfill the mission that God is giving them.

To assist in this purpose, each congregation in CIC is also given a trained coach to work with them through the two-year process. These coaches are laypersons who are uniquely gifted for this ministry. Our congregations are beginning to discover the power of an outside perspective and a fellow brother or sister from another church willing to work with them and hold them accountable.

## A Course in Conversion

In our own personal ministry plans, both of us have made a commitment to physical health and transformation of the body. One thing learned by people who make such a commitment is there is no quick fix that really works. Ads that promise it immediately by taking a pill are very misleading. It takes time, energy, and dedication to restore health and “get in shape.”

There is a parallel for the church. Transformation takes time. It requires us to run the race and navigate the course. We need a vision of the proverbial “Emerald City,” but the transformation does not happen when we arrive there. It happens along the “yellow brick road.” The “end” is found within the “means.” Along the way, there are many obstacles to face. There are forces that stand in the way and attempt to divert the direction. Systems naturally want to maintain the comfortable status quo. Nevertheless, when diverse people come together with a Spirit-led desire to move forward, great

things begin to happen.

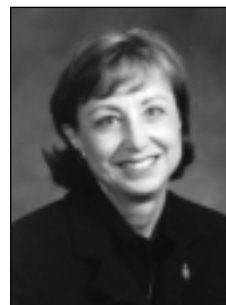
Jesus gave us the great commandment, saying: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:29-30). It is worth noting that Jesus is not talking to individuals only. He is addressing the whole community and calling this community to wholistic love. Individually, we might say that it is impossible to truly love God and our neighbor apart from a community of faith that aspires to this holistic love. It can only happen where there are mutually

supportive relationships and a variety of gifts made manifest among us. In other words, one can’t make it to the “Emerald City” alone. Transformation is found in the connections we make on the journey.

The Arkansas Conference still has a long way to go. But with the help of Connected in Christ, a new conference vision and strategic plan, a growing sense of connectedness, and under the leadership of new Bishop Charles Crutchfield, we believe the conference is moving in the right direction. Vital signs of transformation are being felt and seen along the way. □



**Michael Roberts is an elder in the Arkansas Conference and the executive director of Connected in Christ.**



**Janice Riggle Huie is the bishop of the Houston Episcopal Area. From 1996 to 2004, she was the bishop of the Arkansas Episcopal Area.**



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