



Dreaming Together

Intergenerational Partnership Reaches Outside the Church's Walls

***Circuit Rider* recently sat down with two pastors of Florence United Methodist Church in Florence, Kentucky. Florence is a well-established congregation—167 years old, 475 in worship each Sunday—but it has reached out beyond the typical church crowd, thanks to the partnership of Senior Pastor Gary Gibson, 48, and D.G. Hollums, 31, who is not your average Associate Pastor.**

***CR:* D.G., your official title is “Cultural Architect.” What does that mean, and how does it fit into the mission of Florence UMC?**

D.G.: Well, I ‘borrowed’ the title from Erwin McManus. When I first heard the term I knew that it was the business that I was in. I feel called to allow God to bring about the Kingdom of God in the lives and communities around me. We all should be cultural architects in the world, living lives of sacrifice that allow God to work through us to assist the Kingdom to come here just as it is in heaven. This whole idea of being a cultural architect fits into the mission of Florence because this new kingdom culture must be formed both inside and outside the walls of the church simultaneously.

My primary responsibility at Florence is for an “outside the walls” ministry called Th3 Waters, an Experimental United Methodist Network of Organic Gatherings. Groups of seven to fifteen people meet weekly in coffee shops, pubs, bookstores, etc. to follow a modified form of *Lectio Divina*, and answer one question, “What is up with your life?” As each person shares what’s new with them, others in the group ask themselves, “What are we going to do about it?” or “How can we help?” There is some prayer thrown in there along with a time for telling how they have intentionally blessed at least three people the previous week. It is still a work in progress, and we are trying to fail often

so we can succeed sooner. One thing is for sure: people’s lives are being radically changed and they are experiencing community like they have never experienced. And this goes for those who are beyond the walls of the traditional church as well as those who have been in a local church their entire lives. It is transforming old and young alike!

***CR:* Gary, Florence seems to be a fairly traditional United Methodist church. What led you to bring D.G. on for such a unique ministry?**

Gary: Florence is traditional in many ways. It was established in 1842. However, the church relocated in 1997. The relocation brought significant growth and excitement to the congregation. Even though we are traditional in many ways, the growth and excitement allowed us to be innovative. D.G. came on staff as a partnership with our Annual Conference New Church and Congregational Development Team. Our responsibility in the partnership was to be the parent congregation to establish a satellite congregation in a rapidly growing area of our community.

Once D.G. was onsite, we felt God leading in a new direction. I have no doubt that with D.G.’s passion and personality he could have attracted a crowd for worship. However, we weren’t interested in attracting people who were dissatisfied with the current church. We wanted to reach normal people who weren’t going to go to any church for Sunday morning worship. We realized to reach them meant going where they were.

D.G.: Some of the people we are developing relationships with have been hurt by the church as well, and they are our ultimate

focus. Yet there is a tension, because at the same time we are called to be investing in the people currently attending Florence, with the dream that they too realize they have a role building momentum in this movement of Christ's Kingdom.

CR: Are the long-time members of Florence supportive of Th3 Waters?

Gary: We don't have 100% support, but do you ever? There are always those who are just interested in themselves and doing church the way they have always done it. However, for those who are kingdom-minded and understand what it means to do mission in their context, we have overwhelming support. They support Th3 Waters financially, by being actively involved, offering encouragement, and attempting to help others understand the importance of this mission in our community.

D.G.: At first it took a while to learn the importance of terminology for members of Florence. We found that the term "organic gatherings" seemed foreign and even scary to them. I guess they thought it was just going to be all natural and much more expensive! (Just kidding.) But, when we talked about "life gatherings," the early adopters were interested and willing to test it out. Their support continues to grow over time, especially when we explain to them that even though my title is "Cultural Architect," they need to see me as a "local missionary in residence." These terms promote discussion, and discussion promotes community, and in community we are finding a greater willingness to think differently.

CR: How would you describe your working relationship? Is there a balance of empowerment and accountability that needs to be struck?

D.G.: We are co-workers in the Kingdom. I realize that the relationship I have with Gary is not a common one, especially in the UMC, but the church should be working out how to make these partnerships more possible in the future for the sake of the church. This partnership really enables us to dream together, rather than me trying to fit some idea or mold that Gary has for the church. We can create a new mold together. This requires great humility from both sides, but especially on Gary's part. Neither one of us feels like we have all the answers, but through healthy relationship we can take on problems that are way beyond each of us individually and come up with creative, new, and unique ways of living out the kingdom together and through the church.

Gary: D.G. and I both are Elders with a calling from God to be in ministry, so I simply see him as a peer. Most people would look at us as Senior Pastor and Associate Pastor, but I see us as partners. This kind of relationship allows for more give and take. I have tried to create an environment where D.G. feels free to voice different opinions and doesn't feel like he has to do what I say because I'm the "boss." I think my willingness to see D.G. as a peer and not a subordinate empowers him to attempt some unique ways of doing ministry. The accountability piece runs equally in both directions. I hold him accountable and he returns the favor.

D.G.: And I must say that if we start to see each other not as persons in a hierarchy, but as fellow Christians, it promotes a shared desire to follow Christ rather than a polity that defines "who is in charge." I think that this respectful way of thinking could even affect the way the ordination process in the UMC works. Instead of it being an evaluation process, it could be looked at as a time for relational growth between the currently ordained and those desiring to follow a calling for those places of servanthood.

An emphasis on relationships between generations might be more than just a band aid on the slow bleed of younger leaders, because they would feel like they have allies and friends, who do not merely 'listen' to them, but who dream with them.

CR: What advice do you have for pastors of different generations working together?

D.G.: If I had just one thing to say to older clergy as a young clergyperson, I would say: please allow us to dream with you. Our goal is not to challenge or usurp your authority. We truly have a passion for the kingdom of Christ and for others, and I truly believe that we have the same dream.

And to the younger clergy I would say: the only way to bring about the kingdom within the culture and within the UMC is to be able to love those who think differently than you do. I know way too many young clergy who have left the UMC because they hit the wall of polity or egos or expected status and have taken the easier route to go do what God has called them to outside of the UMC.

The United Methodist Church needs us to fight for the church that we love, yet at the same time love those who might be on the opposite side of the aisle. Developing difficult and potentially frustrating relationships with those who might think differently from you might be the only way to bring about change and renewal.

Gary: I would say to the clergy in my generation and older: don't be afraid to allow younger clergy to live out their passion and calling. We must give the younger generation permission to experiment and the freedom to fail. The most important thing is to put aside our egos so that we can give younger clergy the credit when they succeed and take the heat when they mess up. Whether younger clergy stay in the UMC or not will depend in large part how we partner with them—whether we stifle them or give them wings.

To the younger clergy I say: don't allow anyone to squelch your passion. If your "Senior Pastor" doesn't understand you, don't give up. It's all about relationship, take them to lunch (they might pay), let them see and hear your passion, let them see your willingness to sacrifice for the kingdom. If all else fails, have your "Senior Pastor" call me. □

Gary Gibson is an Elder in The United Methodist Church and is currently the pastor of Florence United Methodist Church in Florence, KY. D.G. Hollums is an ordained Elder in The United Methodist Church and birthed Th3 Waters out of the Florence UMC congregation. Gary (with D.G.) have recently spoken together at conferences on "The Emerging Church for the Existing Church" and "emerging umc: a gathering." They share a passion for helping congregations make the fundamental shift necessary to be effective in the 21st century.