

Small Church Vitality is Not an Oxymoron!

The Story of the New Sharon Congregational Church

~ Rev. Darren L. Morgan, Associate Conference Minister

“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.” ~ Matthew 5:15 NRSV

Vitality is defined as the capacity for survival or for the continuation of a meaningful or purposeful existence. Much has been written about church vitality. Many denominations are responding to the steady decline in church membership by focusing on vitality – even the term “vital” has become a buzzword in the denomination’s efforts to reverse decades of decline. There are varied opinions as to why membership numbers are down. The New Dimensions Team, with the assistance of consultant Dick Hamm, talked a lot about statistics and trends during the development of the *Moving Forward Together* strategic plan.

Many people want to judge vitality based on numbers: the sign of a vital church is having more people in the pews and more dollars in the collection plate! But is vitality really all about having a large number? While larger numbers are good (except when it involves the bathroom scale or our waistlines!), people and money do not always capture whether a church is truly doing the vital work for the ministry of Jesus Christ. Don’t get me wrong, growth in worship attendance and having financial resources are important, but one must consider other factors beyond what the Sunday morning numbers tell us.



We are a Conference of small churches and while many cannot boast having high attendance with overflowing collection plates, they are vital nonetheless. Let me tell you about the New Sharon Congregational Church. With the help of the Small Church Ministry Team during the years 2005-2009, the New Sharon Congregational Church became a *Parish of Promise*, which was a program designed to revitalize small churches by identifying ways in which congregations can become more actively engaged in their communities. The process is predicated on the belief that as a church establishes itself as a valuable community resource, it will attract greater community participation and support, thereby strengthening the congregation.

Through their work with the Small Church Ministry Team, the New Sharon Congregational Church may not have grown in number, but they identified a ministry focus that continues to sustain them even now – years later as they serve their community without a pastor. How is it possible for a congregation to operate without a pastor? Simple, the lay leaders know their mission and their ministry, and they are called and committed to do this work.

When I met with the church leadership in 2013 following the departure of their pastor whom they could no longer afford to pay, I laid out for them various options to consider for their future: calling a ¼ time pastor, raising someone from within the congregation to serve them, sharing a pastor with an area church, merging with another church, or closing. Given the numbers at the time of our discussion – both membership and financial – I thought realistically the church only had one option – to close. It is never easy facing the reality of death, especially for a church.

As I talked with the church leadership about their pastoral needs and their ministry, a sense of passionate energy and mission-focus emerged. It immediately became apparent that the church had a missional focus that did not require a pastor. As a result of the earlier *Parish of Promise* program, the church had created a “Tuesday’s Child” after-school Christian Education program for the youth in the



community. While participation was very high when they first began many years ago, the population of the community has shrunk and so did the number of youth participating in their after-school program. But the attendance continues to be strong enough and the church is committed to this ministry, so there was no question that this work had to continue – not having a pastor would not pose a problem because there was sufficient leadership to run this ministry. In addition, there was a take-out meal program that continued to be a vital outreach mission for the community – and

this too did not require a pastor to continue because there was sufficient leadership to oversee this work. Finally, they operate monthly concerts part of the year that provide a venue for young people from the wider community to perform – and you guessed it, does not require a pastor because leadership is committed to being a visible Spiritual presence in the community.

The work of the Holy Spirit continues to lead this congregation of less than twenty members. Lay leaders rotate responsibilities of heading a diverse offering of informal Sunday morning worship services, including a Bible study. Area UCC clergy provide emergency pastoral care and offer quarterly communion. And the church has contracted with an authorized minister to serve as a Ministry Resource Partner, meeting with them twice a year to evaluate their ministry. The New Sharon Congregational Church is involved in innovative “out of the box” thinking about ministry, and while they may not entirely fit the description of a “church 3.0” described in the recent book by John Dorhauer,¹ they are invested in birthing a new way of being church.

The words of David Ray resonate with the church leaders: “God does not call the church to grow or be successful. God calls the church to be faithful and effective. A church that is faithful and effective will pursue fitting and intentional ways of sharing its and God’s good news.”² The Good News coming from the New Sharon Congregational Church is that they are bringing the light of Jesus Christ to their community. They are committed to educational, missional, and outreach efforts that – although small in numbers – are mighty in their efforts of changing lives. They have established a deep and lasting relationship with those they serve, and they continue to help people maintain their relationship with God. In my book, the New Sharon Congregational Church is a vital congregation that some of the bigger churches in our Conference can learn a thing or two from!

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?” ~ Isaiah 43:18-19 NRSV

¹ John Dorhauer, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World*, (Chicago, IL: Exploration Press, 2015).

² David Ray, *The Indispensable Guide to Smaller Churches*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), p 217.