

Partners in Ministry

Everywhere you look today you see the word “partner” -- on billboards advertising banking services, in newspaper ads for insurance companies, on TV programs about nursing care, not to mention the number of Internet sites touting partners in their name.

Yet in the very place where being partners is so crucial to the organization’s mission, we only talk about working together.

That organization?

The church. Our mission is “making disciples of Jesus Christ.”

How can we do that?

Only by being partners in ministry—clergy and laity together.

The partnership begins with the pastor and the lay leader; but it extends to the whole congregation. We must have a clear understanding that all baptized Christians are called into ministry.

Baptism represents the forgiveness of sin and the newness of life in Christ – you say; but have you really read the Baptismal Covenant in the United Methodist Hymnal?

“As members together with you in the body of Christ and in this congregation of the United Methodist Church,

we renew our covenant

faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church
by our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service

that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.”

When we are baptized in the United Methodist Church, we make a covenant that calls each of us into ministry.

Paul links the Holy Spirit and baptism in I Corinthians 12:13

¹³ By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.

Historically, we have emphasized the benefits received from baptism NOT on the claim of Christ on the one baptized. We forget that the Holy Spirit empowers us to give our life away in service to Christ – that's being in ministry.

We must understand, accept and live the fact that in God's design all baptized Christians are called into ministry. This means none of us can sit back and coast or let someone else minister on our behalf.

Each believer has God-given abilities to strengthen the whole body and "ministry" is what God does through the entire body – not just clergy and not just laity, but the whole body – together as PARTNERS.

Partnerships just don't happen – it takes time and effort. It may require change; but isn't the fundamental nature of the church – transformation:

- transformation for our own lives as we accept Christ as Lord and Savior
- transformation for our churches as those called discover their God-given gifts
- transformation when lay people catch the vision that ministry belongs to them, as well as to clergy.

Partners in ministry – reaching out to make disciples of Jesus Christ. That's what it is all about.

It begins with the partnership between the pastor and the lay leader.

If we are all called to be in ministry – if we are called to be partners in ministry – why is this not happening in many churches?

Tradition has created separate tasks for clergy and lay members INSTEAD of bringing them together as partner in making disciples. We have to overcome the Tradition that says:

- pastors must have all of the ideas and lead all of the major activities of the church
- lay people do not take the initiative in service/ministry – they wait to be asked

There are two inhibitors which prevent pastors and laity from becoming partners in ministry.

1. FEAR – many pastors fear the partnership because it can signify a perceived loss of power and control. But fear is not limited to pastors. Many congregations can hold a pastor hostage by inaction, distraction, or salary action.

Power and control, wherever found and however expressed are twin barriers to progressive, alive ministry.

2. **LACK OF VISION.** Now here is a gigantic barrier/inhibitor – many of our congregations are perishing because there's not even one soul among them who dares to dream.

As one Methodist lay leader puts it “a team approach is essential in forming a motivating, vital vision for ministry of the congregation and for effectively performing the work of the Gospel.”

"The time has long passed, if it was truly ever here, when one leader could chart the course, make decisions, call the tune and carry the load," he said. "Dictates from the pulpit or pew must pass away, and a renewed, cooperative spirit must be encouraged to take root."

This observation was made in the Laity Address to General Conference in 2000.

The question is: Have we heard the call to partnership in ministry and have we answered it?

When we get away from autocratic pastors and unwilling, contentious laity, we can become true partners in ministry.

Partners work together, and together, with the help of God's Holy Spirit, the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts – and the barriers seen as insurmountable are reduced or eliminated.

The key description of a partnership is SHARES.

- partners support and draw energy from each other
- partners are committed to each other
- partners are committed to find and fulfill the dreams and visions that come from God's Holy Spirit

The partnership between the pastor and the lay leader creates a more complete perspective of the congregation, its needs and strengths, and of the surrounding community.

- Different viewpoints are necessary and essential to forming the ministry of the congregation that is vital and motivational.
- Where one persons cannot adequately assess needs, the pastor/lay leader partnership allows both partners the opportunity to do what they do best in a mutually supportive way.

A partnership is deliberate and intentional – not accidental.

- the pastor/lay leader partnership is not formed because we think it should be
- the pastor/lay leader partnership is not formed by accident

- partnership require

prayer

planning

experimentation

uncomfortable moments

false starts

Look at Mark 6:7-11

⁷ Jesus called the Twelve to him, and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority and power to deal with the evil opposition.

⁸ He sent them off with these instructions: "Don't think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. You are the equipment. No special appeals for funds. Keep it simple.

⁹

¹⁰ "And no luxury inns. Get a modest place and be content there until you leave.

¹¹ "If you're not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way."

¹² Then they were on the road. They preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different;

¹³ right and left they sent the demons packing; they brought wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies, healing their spirits.

How did Jesus send out the disciples to minister?

In pairs – a partnership.

Look at Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

Why Am I Working Like a Dog?

⁷ I turned my head and saw yet another wisp of smoke on its way to nothingness:

⁸ a solitary person, completely alone—no children, no family, no friends—yet working obsessively late into the night, compulsively greedy for more and more, never bothering to ask, "Why am I working like a dog, never having any fun? And who cares?" More smoke. A bad business.

⁹ It's better to have a partner than go it alone. Share the work, share the wealth.

¹⁰ And if one falls down, the other helps, But if there's no one to help, tough!

¹¹ Two in a bed warm each other. Alone, you shiver all night.

¹² By yourself you're unprotected. With a friend you can face the worst. Can you round up a third? A three-stranded rope isn't easily snapped.

There are three characteristics of a successful pastor/lay leader partnership which become the building blocks laid on the cornerstone of God's grace that is Jesus Christ, forming the basis for ministry through pairs of committed people.

1. RESPECT

- each partner should acknowledge the other for the gifts brought to ministry
- each person provides input and advice
- differences are clarified and common ground is sought
- trust is the key factor in respect and respect is foremost in a thriving partnership

2. RESPONSIBILITY

- each person shares an appropriate portion of the task
- sometimes the leader will become the follower and sometimes the follower will become the leader, depending on what is required to complete a project
- partners take responsibility to seek new skills, new insights, and new methods
- responsibility means holding each other responsible

3. RISK

- successful partnerships require risk-taking. If the boat needs rocking, we cannot expect that that is just the pastor's role.
- risk means being willing to fail. Good risk-takers know that failure is only permanent if we let it be.
- failure is temporary if we learn from it and become knowledgeable about the situation before trying again.
- those who do not risk are those who do not dream
- partners in God's work do not sit by waiting for answers, they step out in faith

The lay leader and pastor must unite to create a vision that stretches the congregation.

- the message of salvation has not changed, but the world has changed considerably
- reaching potential disciples takes more than just opening the doors on Sunday morning and expecting folks to show up.