

# Jim's Tool Box

## Out of Death, Resurrection Comes

We are now in the post Easter season. As followers of the Risen Christ, we know the story of Jesus' death on the Friday we call "Good Friday." And three days later, on the first day of the week, God raised Jesus to new life. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to our faith: out of death comes the resurrection. Good Friday is not the end of the story.

So perhaps it is appropriate to think about what new life might mean for dying congregations. I have been writing for the last few months in the Tool Box about the life cycle of congregations. I have discussed both what happens in the decline and in the renewal of congregations. I also included an article by church consultant Dick Hamm about characteristics of growing mainline congregations. If you want to check out any of those articles, you can find an archive for the Tool Box articles by clicking [HERE](#).

Well, believe it or not, we, as United Methodists, are not the only denomination dealing with dying congregations. I came across a series of articles published by the Associated Baptist Press on how the Baptists are dealing with this issue. So in this Tool Box, I thought I would share some insights from one of those articles.

The title of the article is "A Time to Die: When churches die, can they live again?". The author of the article is Jim White who is the editor of the Virginia Baptist *Religious Herald*. He points out that every denomination in the United States has scores of churches that expect to die within a decade. No one can prevent the cultural shifts that leave behind churches unable or unwilling to adapt."

The article notes that **58 percent of the time**, a congregation chooses to do nothing when facing its demise. Such a result guarantees what White calls "an inglorious in" (death). The other option is for a congregation to choose to celebrate the life that the church has known, consider its options and prepare for a death that "honors Christ and leaves a Kingdom legacy" (resurrection).

White then shares some of those options that a congregation might choose and illustrates them from examples of Baptist congregations that chose those paths. Here are some examples:

- ✓ **Let old dreams die and envision something new.** White describes the Weatherford Community Memorial Baptist Church in south Richmond, VA. The congregation had experienced terrible decline. Finally the members decided they could not continue. The dying church embraced an extraordinary dream. They church voted to donate its \$2 million dollar facility to St. Paul's Baptist Church, a rapidly growing African-American congregation in another part of the city. In this way, St. Paul's gained a satellite site. In the three years since Weatherford Memorial became St. Paul's South, Sunday attendance has grown to over 500.

- ✓ **Remain, but develop a community consciousness that creates ministry opportunities.** Like many urban congregations, First Baptist Church of Clarendon, now called The Church at Clarendon in Arlington VA, experienced stagnation and decline. Over the last 30 years, membership dropped from 871 to 236. The church is located just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. Property values in the area soared in recent years making it impossible for mid level professionals to live near where they worked. The Church at Clarendon decided to leverage the value of its property, tear down its aging facilities except for its landmark portico and steeple, and build a ten story structure. The church will occupy the two bottom floors while the upper eight stories will provide affordable apartments with rent based on income levels.
- ✓ **Change as the community changes.** The Bon Air Baptist Church, a growing congregation in Richmond, chose to use its size and strength to change as the community changes. The pastor of the church is leading the congregation to reflect the racial and cultural makeup of the communities around its primary campus as well as its three other locations.
- ✓ **Remain as a central location while establishing other sites for worship and ministry.** The Fairview Baptist Church is located in an older area of Fredericksburg, VA, but the congregation established another site called Fairview at River Club. The River Club site has grown to an average attendance of 550.
- ✓ **Remain, but share the use of facilities with other churches or organizations.** Glenn Akins of the Baptist Mission Board points out that although shared use often has a community ministry component, the motivation most often is financial. For that reason this option postpones rather than prevents further decline.
- ✓ **Refocus.** Exercising invention and adaptability, some congregations change the type of ministry they offer – shifting from a neighborhood church to a specialized ministry. Click [HERE](#) to read about an example of a ministry in the Florida Annual Conference that is helping some congregations to transition from a traditional worshipping congregation to becoming ministry centers.
- ✓ **Relocate.** Anytime a church moves, it requires church members to abandon a sacred place. Rarely can churches relocate without experiencing disunity according to Glenn Akins.
- ✓ **Merge with another congregation.** Congregational mergers often create one slightly larger, weak church from two smaller, weak churches, Akins says. **The exception to that might be if there is enough energy in one or more of the existing congregations, and the churches are able to relocate and build a new facility and repurpose the mission of the church. Then growth can occur.** That is what happened at the Cornerstone UMC in Portsmouth.
- ✓ **Re-church.** In this case, the established church “goes out of business” then reopens after reorganizing and retraining. The challenge is that many of the people who remain are the

same, and they may take their old assumptions that failed before into the new congregation.

Fair-Park Baptist Church in Alexandria, VA could see the end approaching and chose to become a different kind of church. To avoid the attitudes and practices that led them into decline, the church turned over decision-making to a group of trustees who brought expertise from outside the congregation. The trustees constituted the Convergence Church specializing in ministry to Alexandria's sizeable arts community. The church is now gaining numbers and vitality.

This is also similar to what happens in our United Methodist system when a congregation agrees to be "taken over" by a larger, more effective congregation that brings in a new approach to ministry for the congregation. The older members in essence give up control of their congregation so that effective ministry can take place that will reach the persons in the neighborhood/community around the church.

✓ **Close.**

Glenn Akins of the Baptist Mission Board offers some advice that United Methodist congregational leaders need to heed, also. He challenges churches to engage in ongoing assessment of their success within their cultural setting. He points out that every church faces many internal and external circumstances beyond its control. Church members die or move away. Businesses shut down, neighborhoods change and buildings age. *But churches can control the way they live out their faith, their worship styles and their responses to circumstances that lie beyond their control.*

**How is your church responding to its cultural setting? What are you doing to keep the mission and ministry of your congregation vital?** If your church is in decline, which of the options above should your church be considering. *If you want to talk about this, give me a call (614-222-0600) or email me ([jwaugh@wocumc.org](mailto:jwaugh@wocumc.org)).* Perhaps there is something better that God is calling your congregation to do and to be in mission and ministry in these days.