

Jim's Tool Box

Focus on "Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60"

The theme that Hank Stringer and I are using in the Capitol Area South District Cluster Church Conference gatherings this fall is "Disciple Making: Fishing in Deep Water." The theme is based around Luke 5: 1-11 where Jesus tells Peter, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Hank and I are challenging clergy and lay leadership in congregations to move out of their comfort zone and put down their nets for a catch.

In the message that I am sharing, one of the ways that congregations can do that is by facing the challenge of how they can reach people who are under age 40 while holding onto people who are over 60. This is the basis of a book by Eddie Hammett. He is Leadership Consultant and Congregational Coach for the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. His book *Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Over 60* is available through Cokesbury (<http://www.cokesbury.com>). My article contains excerpts from an article that Hammett wrote in *Net Results* which is now published in an electronic format (<http://www.netresults.org/>).

In my message for the church conference gatherings I indicate that some of the information that I share about this article in my message will appear in my Tool Box article for October. So here is much of the information that I share in my message about Eddie Hammett's article and book. Consider the challenge that Hammett offers as your church seeks to put out into the deep water (out of your comfort zone) and to let down your nets in reaching persons for Christ whom you are not now reaching.

In the article in *Net Results*, Hammett declares, "*The real issue is whether or not the church wants to grow and be a church for all generations.*" Hammett points out that over the last several decades cities, states, organizations and institutions have found themselves challenged by a growing multi-culturalism and a pluralistic society. Now the world has shifted, families have changed, schools have integrated, businesses have become culturally sensitive, but churches for the most part haven't changed at all.

Hammett believes that churches need to alter their *methodology* so that those in our new world might be able to hear the Good News in ways they can understand and embrace. We don't need to change the *message* of God's love for all people, but we need to examine our methods. **As he puts it bluntly, "In most communities, if the congregation decides to keep the 60 plus crowd satisfied,**

they will not grow numerically and in time the congregation will die."

Also, in all probability, keeping the 60 plus crowd happy almost always assures that the church will reach very few persons under 40 years of old. Most of these younger persons are from a world with different values, traditions, rituals, and personal preferences. Hammett describes what happens when efforts are made to include other generations of folks: "Tension escalates, leaders resign or become disgruntled, money begins to dry up, and the community becomes more and more introverted and focuses on caring for 'us' rather than being concerned about reaching out."

What needs to happen? Those who are seeking to move out into those deeper waters and let down the nets need first to identify and name those barriers that are keeping growth from happening. This probably won't be an easy or comfortable experience because naming the barriers to growth is much like personal confession – it is like naming our sins, but the sins must be named before they can be eliminated.

"In most communities, if the congregation decides to keep the 60 plus crowd satisfied, they will not grow numerically and in time the congregation will die."

So it is important to identify as many barriers as possible. For example, do any of these exist in your church?

- Prejudice – not just against racial/ethnic groups but against anyone "not like us."
- No clear mission statement
- Lack of clearly defined goals
- Lack of a plan
- Inadequate resources
- Lack of a spiritual foundation
- Fear of losing some current members because of change
- Fear of losing the close family feel and good relationships in the church as it is.

– just to name a few.

After naming the barriers that keep your church from launching out into the deep, what do you need to do? Briefly, here are some "win-win" solutions for leaders and congregations that Eddie Hammett offers:

- ***Build on your strengths rather than your weaknesses.*** Most churches can't do everything well. Hammett says, "Discern what God has called you and your members to do and discover how (God) has gifted you. (God) never calls unless (God) has first gifted (us) to fulfill (God's) calling."
- ***Find and follow your focus.*** Once you discover God's calling and gifting, follow it. Delete those activities, budget items, leadership positions, and so on that do not *directly* help you in accomplishing your mission.
- ***Retool staffing/leadership core.*** Keeping in mind the shifting culture and demographics, many churches are rethinking their staff positions and organization. For any paid or volunteer staff that

you have in your church if any – what are they doing to give your church the most “bang for the buck” in the impact they are having on your ministry in the context of your congregation and community?

- ***Reinventing organization.*** Most church organization hasn't changed significantly in the last fifty years or so. To really focus and target your ministry, organization and budgeting must shift toward that target.
- ***Creating parallel structures.*** This is a certain way to keep those over 60 and reach those under 40. That is, keep what ministers to those over 60, while creating non-threatening comfortable entry points for persons under 40 in the appropriate groupings for your community. In fact, you will likely find persons over 60 who will share this dream and give some of their time and energy to helping you birth the new, while they continue in the existing organization. In order to do this effectively, it is essential to create a number of lay-led ministry teams to birth the new.

How is it going with things in your congregation with your efforts to reach those under 40? What is working? What has not worked for you? Send me an email and let me know: jwaugh@wocumc.org.