



part one

# GOD IS STILL SPEAKING

## Seeking Leaders

We need leaders  
who seek to be  
empowered by  
the Holy Spirit

### The Challenge of Starting a Church

**T**HROUGH THE AGES, Christianity has expanded through the multiplication of churches. The book of Acts records how the boundaries of the Christian faith were pushed to the outermost parts of the world by developing new churches. We are Christians today because those who preceded us faithfully reproduced their churches through church planting.

Church planting is not new to the United Church of Christ. Starting new congregations can be traced back to the seventeenth century for the faith communities that became known as the United Church of Christ. Today Evangelism has been identified as one of the highest priorities of the United Church of Christ.

Now it is our turn. We can touch generations and new communities with the transforming and life-giving power of Jesus Christ.

Church planting is not to be entered into lightly. A new church development strategy will require focused time, prayer, energy and hard work. Starting a new church or renewing the ministry of an existing church, to reflect a changed population, is always an exercise in faith. It may be the result of years of planning, or a blaze of the Spirit so strong that a church virtually forms itself. The real challenge for new churches is to take root and grow. And the key is the pastor.

### Faithful Leaders

Who are going to be the leaders of new churches? Who has the spiritual gifts and passion, the temperament and leadership ability to plant diverse new communities of faith? Finding solid leaders is key to establishing new churches. Most important in the task of seeking leaders is to know that *we* don't start churches: God does.

God leads and sustains the church through the Holy Spirit. That's an obvious lesson in the book of Acts, and it still holds true today. Acts 1:8 can be read as a summary of the whole book. Here Jesus tells his disciples and the church that follows: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (NRSV)

We need leaders who seek to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. We look for new church planters who place emphasis on their authentic, daily walk with God in the manner of Jesus of Nazareth, discerning the movement and leading of the Holy Spirit. Such leaders show a commitment to spiritual discipline, a growing relationship of loving God, self and others. Administration and management may be important skills these leaders hone, but the core of their ministry focuses on leadership as spiritual quest. Leaders who

develop a new church must accept challenge and risk. They must trust God to sustain them with energy, unflinching confidence, and hope.

## **Becoming a Multiracial and Multicultural Church**

The United Church of Christ embraces a diversity of culture, ethnicity, and language and seeks to become “a radically inclusive, extravagantly welcoming church.”<sup>1</sup> This desire to live the prophetic welcome of Christ is most celebrative and open to new promptings of the Holy Spirit in the area of new church development.

There is no single correct way of becoming a welcoming church. Some new church starts intentionally reach out to multiple racial or ethnic groups in their community, choosing to create a mosaic of the whole. Other new church starts aim specifically at one target culture: for example a mission to a new immigrant population or generational group. Each, in its own way, affirms the value of becoming a multiracial, multicultural church. Each builds toward the overarching effort of the United Church of Christ as it “embodies these diversities as gifts to the human family and rejoices in the variety of God’s grace.”<sup>2</sup>

Welcoming diversity affects the ways in which Associations/Conferences view ethnic church starts. Much sensitivity is needed in order to welcome to Christ’s table leaders and core teams whose cultural traditions and styles of leadership differ from the dominant culture. We cannot simply say we want to become multiracial and multicultural and then expect all comers to conform to one culture’s expectations. We must welcome the opportunity to change our traditions and processes as we seek to embody the variety of languages, cultures and ethnicities God brings. To this end, it is well for the Association/ Conference or the local church wishing to birth a new congregation to engage in a time of self-reflection to discern what practices and presumptions may block the ability of ethnic new churches to experience Christ’s welcome in our midst.

Everything from methods of financial support, optimal church size, what activities a pastor undertakes, planning and decision-making styles vary greatly from one culture to another. Insure that people knowledgeable about such cultural nuances have direct linkage to the Association/ Conference staff and Church Development Committee.

Seek advice on these matters from the Church Development and Renewal Team, the Minister for Multiracial and Multicultural Transformation, or members of the Multiracial and Multicultural Implementation Team of the national setting of the United Church of Christ.

## ***Hispanic New Church Start Pastors***

The most important element to consider when starting a new Hispanic church is the pastor developer. Key skills this leader should bring to the church include openness to the diversity of the Hispanic community, the ability to promote social justice, and the ability to develop and empower leaders. Hispanic pastoral ministry should also exhibit:

- *Encuentro*, or collaborative pastoral style
- Evangelization and spirituality which build inclusive community
- Marriage and family: New ways to be a family based not on *machismo* but on partnership and equality
- Renewed hope for Hispanic youth and young adults

It is very important to consider the values of the Hispanic community: family, religious background, celebration/traditions, facility of language, spirituality, cultural sensitivity, and pride.

The pastor should not ignore or try to sever the strong connection Hispanics have with the dominant religion of their culture (Roman Catholicism). Rather, United Church of Christ pastors can modify or transform the rituals of faith by understanding their roots or purpose. Generally speaking, Hispanics value and seek a connection with the sacred through personal piety. Hispanics sense a very strong connecting point between their own history of sorrow and the history of Jesus of Nazareth.

New immigrant pastors and church members may feel closer ties to their homeland than to the United States. Financial plans, facility use agreements or ministry plans may have a tentative feel to them because the leaders may be uncertain whether they can adapt and thrive in the United States or whether circumstances will lead to their return to their country of origin. Mentors and Church Development Committees should discuss how this dynamic affects the ministry plans of the new congregation.

Hispanic new church developers see God's people on a faith journey and lift prophetic voices. They are motivated by compassion to seek social justice for the community. Such leaders should focus this concern into a well developed and articulated pastoral plan of action that offers a holistic and strategic response to the needs of the Hispanic community.

It is very important to promote a church model grounded in the community with emphasis on evangelism, mission, and spirituality, embodied in their own cultural reality. New church developers need to understand and promote a discipleship plan for the new community of faith. This includes promoting vocation and call in the laity to empower the young people. New church leaders must develop culturally relevant stewardship models. Hispanics always respond with great generosity to the efforts the church makes to reach out to Hispanics in the community.

Hispanic new church pastors are encouraged to connect with the vision of the Council of Hispanic Ministries' Plan of Action. Hispanic new church starts should promote United Church of Christ ministries.

### ***PIAA New Church Starts and Leadership Development***

The Pacific Islander and Asian American (PIAA) populations are among the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States. There are 14 nationalities of Pacific Islander and Asian American descendants that are members of the United Church of Christ with at least 30 languages or dialects. New Testament apostles communicated the Gospel to diverse cultures, making it relevant to people in their settings. This is the pattern used by Pacific Islanders and Asian American peoples when they immigrate to the United States.

It is natural for people in the Islands to fellowship and worship within their sociological groupings. Ethnic churches can understand, believe, and incorporate the Gospel into their lifestyles and values. The United Church of Christ does not try to convert ethnic congregations to the dominant culture, but rather recognizes, respects and appreciates the diversity of people from various cultures, traditions and linguistic settings.

Pacific Islander and Asian American churches respond more readily to the Christian witness of someone they know and respect—preferably a person from their own culture. Congregations grow healthier under

their own leadership and their own forms of organization. Pacific Islanders and Asian Americans have a strong sense of family loyalty and unity. They work hard to witness to family members and to be united in their new church and service to God.

In Samoan new church starts, for example, three or four families (average 10 to 12 in a family) come together and form a group to become a church. Nurturing Christian faith is a primary concern, not financial support of a new church. A man respected by the families is asked to be the lay leader and start a Bible study. After time, the congregation begins a regular service of worship in a home or a rented facility, preferably a church building. This lay leader eventually leads the families through the chartering and In-Care process toward becoming a full member church in the United Church of Christ. Doubling or tripling the number of worshippers and members from the original 3 or 4 families happens quickly because of the loyalty of extended families.

Samoans perpetuate their cultural way: when the high chiefs talk, the community listens. He announces before the congregation to support the church financially. Individuals are respected and have their opinions listened to if they are officially recognized as supporting and contributing to the church. The moderator of the church sets the tone as to how to raise money. They don't have a set method of stewardship, and don't believe in systematic tithing.

The Micronesian community is similar to the Samoans. The four Island groups coming from Micronesia are the Marshallese, the Chuukese, the Kosraean and the Pohnpeians. Because they speak separate languages, they congregate with people from their own island community. In some nesting missions, the four Micronesian groups worship and organize themselves for governance as distinct communities of faith. Micronesians form a group soon after immigrating to worship God and nurture their religious spiritual life. If they can't worship in a house or building, that doesn't prevent them worshipping in parks or under the trees.

There is a denomination in Micronesia named the United Church of Christ. Although similar in name, it is not like the United Church of Christ USA in matters of church governance. Many Micronesian immigrants join the United Church of Christ USA out of a mistaken belief that they are linking up with the familiar denomination from their homeland.

There is no presence of United Church of Christ in Korea, where United Methodist and Presbyterian churches dominate. Korean United Church of Christ new church starts appeal to second and third generation Korean Americans who are looking for an alternative to the strict authoritarianism of first generation of Korean American church leaders.

Hawaiians are very spiritual people who perceive the divine is in all creation present everywhere. Christians of Hawaiian descent value the church as a visible sign of God's presence in their midst. The Kahu, or Pastor, emerges from the community as a spiritual leader. In Hawaii every new enterprise receives a public blessing. People in the community call on the Pastor to bless houses, business, boats, and the birth of children.

The Chinese and Japanese United Church of Christ churches are all older established congregations. There has not been a new church start for the last decade or so. As Chinese and Japanese communities formed in the United States, they organized churches as well as civic associations, which remain very strong even in the 21st century.

Filipino-Americans started organizing United Church of Christ new churches in the 1980s. Filipino clergy were recruited in their homeland and trained in the United States to organize new congregations in the United Church of Christ. From these congregations came one successful model of new churches starting other new churches. In areas where there were several Filipino-American congregations, pastors of recently chartered churches rotated leadership in a newly organized congregation until a permanent pastor became available.



### ***African American New Church Start Pastors***

There is no one complete list that will give the benchmarks that define an African American new church start pastor. Likewise, those characteristics that are most important to African Americans may also apply to other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the following characteristics are common among most pastors of African American new churches.

African American pastors know that starting a church is not a job but a calling by God, and their ministry is ordained and anointed by God. They have spiritual and scriptural grounding and are anchored in the Lord. Their love of God is manifest in the devotion, attention and time that is needed to start and sustain a new church. African American pastors, having accepted the call, allow nothing to discourage them. Some pastors receive no salary or compensation for the first few years. Even if the church does not grow rapidly in numbers, there is never a question as to whether the church doors will remain open to those seeking Christ. What is important is the spiritual growth of the congregation. The church will grow numerically in God's time, not human time. So there is no advance planning about how fast the church should expand, or goals for the number of new members per year. If the church grows beyond all expectations, if space becomes an issue, or if the pastor's workload triples, there is little worry that the pastor is overworked, only joy that God's will is being done and new persons are being introduced to the saving grace of Christ.

African American leaders take seriously the power of prayer. Scripture tells us to pray without ceasing. Pastors stay in prayer for discernment of the will of God for the people of God. It is the power of prayer that gives them the courage, stamina and motivation to continue the journey of planting a new church. They are not alone in praying. Their families, friends and church members pray for God to build the church and for God's will to be done in the lives of those who gather together as one body in Christ.

African American pastors praise God. There is never a situation that does not warrant praise for the many blessings taking place in the life of the pastor and congregation. There is praise when things are going well and during difficult times. Praise and thanksgiving are part of all prayers. Praise is included in all worship services. Praise is an acknowledgment of the presence of

the Holy Spirit in all that is done in the name of the church.

Scripture tells us that without a vision the people will perish. African American pastors are visionaries. They articulate the various missions and ministries that the church is being called to do. The pastor knows the community and sees needs that can only be met by the church and the love of Christ. The vision is not one-dimensional. It includes components that center around the needs of the people who are in the church, those who are seeking a spiritual renewal and those who have never before accepted Christ. The vision does not come from the pastor, but from God to the pastor as the under shepherd of the community of faith. The pastor shares the vision with the congregation and together they develop ministry plans that will live into the vision.

Pastoral leaders are called to preach prophetically and creatively. People attend worship to hear a word from God as preached by the pastor. Prophetic preaching grants access to the truth of the gospel to all that hear it. Creative preaching reaches every person in the audience whether they know Jesus or are being introduced to Jesus for the first time. The preacher gives words of comfort, words of hope, words of encouragement and words of peace. The preached word is one of the most powerful aspects of the African American Church.

The pastor of an African-American new church understands that good music is essential for the life and growth of the church. Spirituals, hymns and gospel songs of our ancestors and of modern musicians speak to the culture, the desires, the hurts and the needs of the people. The music reaches into the souls of the members and soothes the aches and gives hope for the future. Music breaks the bonds of pain and suffering and reassures the people of salvation that comes from the grace and love of God. Music frees people and

opens them up to the Holy Spirit that is present in the rhythm and words of the songs. Singing brings comfort, reassurance and hope. The pastor uses the music to prepare the people for the preached word.

Pastors are called to teach the word of God. Everyone is encouraged to study so that they will be aware of what God is calling them to do in their lives, in the life of the church and the community. Through teaching members are made aware of their spiritual gifts. An essential part of the teaching is empowering people to use the gifts that were given them to glorify God. The pastor, through teaching, enables people to understand more clearly their responsibilities as Christians, church members and disciples. Teaching includes the youngest child and reaches to the oldest member. Children are taught in all settings of the church, such as Sunday School, youth Sundays, youth choir, youth groups, vacation Bible school and holiday skits or programs. Adult study is accomplished during Bible Study, Sunday School and ministry team meetings.

African American new church pastors are good stewards who lead by example. Tithing of one's time talent and treasure is taught and modeled by the pastor. Tithing is as important as prayer, praise and mission. The pastor preaches and teaches tithing and uses every opportunity to encourage the congregation to tithe. A tithing church is a church that has the funds to make an impact in the lives of the community through various outreach ministries. Likewise, a tithing church is available to assist members when they are in need. The pastor never stops teaching and preaching tithing.

African American pastors listen for the still small voice of the still speaking God, and press on toward the mark of the high calling. They live a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called and strive to walk the talk and teach.

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## Notes

1. Becoming a Multiracial and Multicultural Church: A Pronouncement and Proposal for Action. Synod 19.

2. Becoming a Multiracial and Multicultural Church: A Pronouncement and Proposal for Action. Synod 19.

## Bible Study on Passion

(see page 15)

*Romans 12:11–12 (NRSV) Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.*



Paul speaks in this passage of what we call “passion,” or “passionate faith.” What kinds of images does the word “passion” bring to mind for you?

Name the factors that limit or block passion in your church.

Why do you think Paul linked together the various attributes in this text?  
Can they each be said to involve passion?