



part six

GOD IS STILL SPEAKING

Challenging

The Body of Christ
is strengthened as
new churches are
born in our midst

SO, YOU ARE STILL READING! Good for you. Many issues have been named. Many tasks of a new church start have been outlined and introduced. Perhaps by this point you are saying, “Here I am. Send me.” Perhaps by this point you are saying, “I am not so sure this is for me. I did not know a new church start would take this much work.” Perhaps you are somewhere in between, still praying, still discerning, and still listening for God. “Is God still speaking to me?”

New church starts do not happen overnight. New church starts do not happen in isolation. New church starts are hard work. There is nothing better than a new church start that really works, takes off, and thrives. There is nothing worse than a new church start that doesn’t.

When it all works well, a new church start is reaching out to new communities, new immigrants, and new populations. It is exciting to witness people who have had negative experiences of church in their past become a part of a vibrant new church. Many of these people say, “I never thought I’d be in a church again. I have been looking for a place like this my whole life!”

When it all works well, a new church start is part of transformation in people’s lives. People turn from despair and loneliness to hope and relationship. People find an intimacy with God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. People find meaning and purpose for their lives. People find joy and generosity. People become “contagious” with a spirit that others sense and wish for themselves also.

If the new church faces difficulty

When it all works well, the whole United Church of Christ celebrates the new church. New congregations are more likely to be growing churches than established churches. New churches may model innovation, teaching other congregations how to “do church” in a new way. But new churches can also come under suspicion by established congregations. Established congregations that are struggling to survive see the amount of resources and attention given to the new church, and wonder if anyone cares about helping to revitalize existing churches. The vision of a new church to be “Multiracial, Multicultural, Open and Affirming, Accessible to All” may not be the vision of the some of the churches in an Association where the new church will seek its official United Church of Christ standing. It is important to have open communication and clearly established processes within an Association and a Conference as new churches are started. The Body of Christ is strengthened as new churches are born in our midst.

So what are some of the issues when it does not work well, when people do not respond to the vision, when a critical mass of people do not come together, when you try to build the church and they “do not come”?

The following are questions that can be asked not only at low points in the life of a new church, but anytime during its formation. They may be asked as “course corrections,” evaluations of current ministry that are raised repeatedly for continuous improvement. If you use them for fine-tuning your direction, substitute the present tense verbs as needed:

- Was the Vision clear and compelling?
- Were the Core Values/Core Behaviors clear?
- Was there a Ministry Plan?
- Was the Leadership, both pastoral and lay, suited to the task?
- Did the demographics match the vision?
- Did the Vision match the vision of the Conference/Association?
- What effect did the Facility/Space have on gathering a group?
- Were costs prohibitive from the beginning?
- Was funding sufficient?
- Was leadership mentored and well equipped?
- Was the partnership between the United Church of Christ settings strong?
- Was support available and appropriate?
- Was the worship style, including music and preaching, exciting and excellent?
- Did the ministries meet the needs of the people and community?
- Was there a traumatic event in the first 1–2 years of the new church start that perhaps stunted its formation as a healthy church?

The list of questions could probably go on and on. Honest and critical evaluation needs to happen on an on-going basis. Sometimes persons inside the new church are too close to the situation and need outside eyes and ears and voices to help them assess. Honest evaluation takes trust and care, and the willingness to act on the recommendations, that is, to change. Even new churches need to know how to change! If the new church is not happening according to the original

vision, it will not help to keep doing the same things over and over again. This will only lead to burnout, rejection and discouragement.

Burnout occurs when a small group of people are trying to do everything right, but they are not seeing the fruits of their labors. The harder they work, the fewer results they see. Support Committees, prayer partners, distance, reflection and evaluation may help re-focus and re-prioritize the work, even give permission for rest from the work.

If your new church does not grow as quickly as projected, you lose some key leaders, you have trouble with your meeting location, or you encounter a financial problem, your group may become discouraged as they mourn the loss of the original dream, the way it “was supposed to be.” You may compare yourself with other new church starts or you may get signals from other partners that you are not growing fast enough. How do you celebrate what God is doing, what lives have been touched, what ministry has been done? Can you find things to celebrate? Can your partners recognize you for the good work you have done? Re-state the vision in an encouraging way, speaking of abundance rather than scarcity, for example: “We have been a new church now for one year. We are not as large as we hoped we would be at this point. But listen to the stories of some of the people whose lives have been touched by our ministry. Hear the stories of how we have had a positive impact on our community. We need your continued support and help as we continue on our journey to be a United Church of Christ congregation in this community!”

You need to realize from the beginning that you cannot please all of the people all of the time, nor will you be attractive to everyone who visits your congregation. Other churches may not even support you in your area, as you may be perceived as a threat to the growth of their congregations. Some of the early core group leaders may walk away. You can choose to say, “I feel rejected. Look at all those people who are not coming to this new church.” Can you begin to refocus by saying, “Why did we start this church? What did we believe God was calling us to do and be? If we were not here, would anyone miss us? What voice are we speaking that no one else is speaking? Are there not other people out there searching for a place, a community, such as this? How do we start again? What gifts has God given us to build up God’s church?”

There may be times when it will be determined that a new church start will need to close. In the midst of the pain, how do we celebrate the good work that was done, the seeds of faith that were planted, the hope that God is Still Speaking to us, perhaps in a voice we have not yet discerned? One new church pastor said,

You have to believe in miracles. Not wait for them, but believe in them. In our first few years, there were challenges that might have shut us down. We lost the first pastor, we lost our space in the school, we had no place to go that we could afford. Then we found a space and a generous donor gave us a large check. People followed us now through two additional moves. We are not out of the woods yet, but it has been a journey of miracles, and hard work. It can work. We are meant to be in this community.¹⁴

Our Final Gratitude

We do not end all these pages in a word of despair. We end in words of encouragement and gratitude.

Thank you so much for your passion for sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Thank you so much for exploring a potential journey into a new church start.

Thank you so much for deciding if this is really for you, if it really matches the gifts God has given you.

Thank you so much for listening to the Still Speaking God.

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Notes

14. David Krueger-Duncan, Northwest Community Church UCC, Las Vegas, NV at a new Church Development gathering, February 2004.

