

Background: Six years ago, St. John's United Church of Christ and Westminster Presbyterian Church merged to become St. John's Westminster Union Church. We are located on the west side of Cincinnati (Delhi). We have about 275 members, 20% of which have joined since the merger. While we are a suburban church in many respects, we are not far from the Price Hill and Westwood neighborhoods, and Delhi itself has begun changes in socio-economic and racial ethnic make up. We are blended in worship and multigenerational in ministry and mission. Making one congregation of two was a critical step for us, and so as the beginning of our transformation a good deal of time was spent on small groups that would build relationships.

Identified Objectives: Early on, we decided that our focus was to be a community that was "committed to living and sharing the love of Jesus Christ", an identity statement we formed in the first couple years of our life together. Everything we have sought to do comes from that commitment. That means we are to be developing ourselves as disciples while reaching out to others.

Strategies:

Invitational: As we re-formed we worked intentionally to move beyond being "welcoming" to being invitational. Realizing that we no longer lived in an age where you open the doors and people just walk in, the consciousness of the congregation was raised about inviting others into the life of the church. It helped that with all the positive spirit and energy of the merger going, folks we excited to invite others to see what we were doing.

We began the practice of preparing invitational postcards for things like Holy Week services, Vacation Bible School and Christmas services, so that members could take those and mail or hand deliver them. Small flyers for many events were available for people to take and give away as a form of invitation. We continued to talk about all the entry points into the church, sharing with committees and church leadership how our new members came to us- the majority had been invited, many had become part of a group before coming to worship.

Flexibility: As part of this we learned to allow groups to naturally emerge and ministries to develop where there was energy and passion, believing that it was the Holy Spirit guiding the process. Some have grown and sustained, some have not. We adopted a philosophy of "let's try this and see if it works" – if so, great. If not- what did we learn? We adjusted our structure so that if a group wanted to form, it was simple to do it- we sought to make it easy to try new things- even created a budget line item for new ministry start ups- with a small amount of seed money. This made it easier for new folks to get involved, as they were having to "assimilate" to long standing groups or ministries, but could get in on the ground floor of something new, some place where they could creatively make a contribution. Which also means that we had to make it all right for

some things to end or change, as energies and needs changed. You can see some examples of this in the bulleted lists later in the case.

Biblical Models:

The biblical story of the Exodus and the journey through the wilderness has been the scriptural touchstone for us. Many of us thought the merger itself was the Promised Land, but we soon learned that we had, in fact, just crossed the Red Sea. Our wilderness journey was still ahead of us- like the Hebrews we will need a generation to fully see us as The Union Church. We are still in the midst of that journey in many ways. We do see how God is transforming us in each part of that journey.

As we have traveled, it has been tempting on more than one occasion to turn around and return to Egypt- to old ways of thinking, old patterns of behavior and old views of the church and the life of faith. Now over 20% of our active membership have joined since the merger, so we are becoming a new people. To turn back to what we were, as enticing as it is, is the road to death.

Outcomes:

Since the merger, we have seen the following new initiatives:

Worship:

- Work to find authentic ways to use technology, drama, blended music, and multigenerational leadership
- Introduced the Peace Candle
- Use of worship resources from both denominations
- Just as the sanctuary is in the center of our building, worship has become the center of our life in mission, education and fellowship
- Have moved away from establishing traditional practices to which we are bound- our worship has a familiar form, but is very flexible and creative within that form.
- Time for healing prayers once a month
- Broadcast service on local cable

Mission:

- Three multigenerational mission trips (ages 11-80), including one to Thailand (high school, college, 50+ yr old adults)
- Volunteer ministries with local elementary school, brownie troop, and soup kitchen, Established a partnership with a sister UCC church to support their children's ministry
- Monthly mission partners- "change for a change" collections; education about these partnerships
- Sponsoring "Mission walkers" – those who are participating in local walks go commissioned by the church to walk on our behalf

Outreach:

- Participation in Oak Hills High After Prom, Delhi Christmas Parade
- Hosting a Fly a Kite Day on our Campus
- Health Ministry Seminars

- Development of Interpretive materials about the church, church website, cable broadcast
- Fellowship Friends for New Members
- Meet the Candidates Chili Supper

Education:

- Moved education focus to midweek: Bridges of Faith- multigenerational education, music and mission program.
- Short term adult studies
- Reoriented Easter Egg Hunt to make more guest friendly
- Developed a confirmation program that reflects our unique identity

Small Groups:

- Have started nine new small groups – education, special interests, fellowship, service. Some are folks with a common interest (prayer shawl knitting circle, men’s bible study).Some are group around common life situations- Mom’s group, Working Women’s Group. As some develop they have taken on ministries of service or outreach.

Member Care:

- Extended communion and intentional befriending ministry for homebound older adults
- Care packages for those in the hospital
- Email/pen pals for college students
- Martha’s Meals, delivering meals to those recuperating or needing additional short term support

Since the merger there have also been some **not-so-tangible results:**

- Developing an identity as a church that is a good neighbor in the community
- Deeper friendships and relationships among members – the steps we need to continue taking to become one body
- A growing excitement about sharing faith with the next generation, while growing our own faith
- A growing heart for mission and seeing ourselves as missionaries in the world- at work, at school, in the neighborhood
- An increased willingness to invite others to “come and see”
- A growing openness to where the Spirit is leading us next...
- A sense that there is nothing we cannot discuss in a non-anxious and caring way
- Signs of the Holy Spirit moving in and among us

Questions for small group discussion:

1. What do you see that is unique or significant about the mission of this congregation?
2. What can we learn from the transformation strategies or steps that St. John's Westminster has implemented?
3. How is the role of a pastor different in a transforming congregation? What are some effective ways to communicate and educate a congregation about those differences?
4. What question/s do you want to pose to the St. John's Westminster leaders?