

Maine Conference Church Leadership Project: A Summary Report

By Annette Mott, Director of Local Church Resources

I. What I Did

As part of my 2004 sabbatical, I decided to visit congregations all over the Maine Conference and interview their pastors and key lay leaders about church leadership issues. You will find attached to this document a copy of the questions that I used. I asked our Conference Ministers, Jean Alexander and David Gaewski to help me identify churches in each of our ten Associations that would represent a range of settings, sizes, and styles. I interviewed a total of nineteen church groups, two per Association (one of my two selected churches for the Lincoln Association proved unable to meet with me). A list of the congregations that I interviewed is provided in the attachment.

I was not trying to engage in a scientific study. I wanted to listen closely to what the leaders of these congregations, both clergy and lay, had to say as they reflected on their own congregational experience with regard to ministry and leadership and as they anticipated future challenges. I then wanted to integrate what I learned from these sabbatical conversations with what I had already learned from churches in my role as Director of Local Church Resources and with the reading and thinking that I have been doing around church leadership issues for the past several years.

2. What I Found Out

I have long been convinced that raising up, equipping, and supporting gifted leaders in the church is essential to healthy congregational life and effective ministry in the world. This is even truer during times of great cultural change such as we are living in today. I found that though all the churches reported similar cultural challenges to Christian ministry, some congregations were growing in membership while others were declining. What was responsible for the difference? As I listened, observed, and then considered what I had heard and seen, it seemed to me that there were three chief factors that influenced both the overall health of a congregation and whether its membership was growing or declining:

- 1) Effective Pastoral Leadership
- 2) A Vibrant Sense of Mission
- 3) Demographics

You may notice that “a warm, supportive fellowship” is not on the list. This is because I found that the churches that I visited that were declining in membership were as likely as churches growing in membership to describe themselves as warm, friendly, supportive churches. And based on my experience of them, I believe they were describing themselves accurately. This does not mean that we should dispense with friendliness and warmth. It does suggest that other factors need to be in place as well as friendliness for a

congregation to grow. Being kind to people who are already inside the church walls will not do the job.

3. Effective Pastoral Leadership

One of the most heartening discoveries I made during my church conversations was how deeply the lay leaders I interviewed valued their pastors and their leadership. Almost all the congregations I talked with were “in a good place” with respect to pastoral leadership, and there were two areas of church life that were repeatedly mentioned as depending on able pastoral leadership: 1) managing conflict and 2) raising up and equipping lay leaders. Growing congregations named a third essential aspect of pastoral leadership: providing a vision for mission and effectively communicating that vision to the congregation.

All the congregations I talked with experienced disagreements as a natural part of their life together. Occasionally these disagreements became pronounced enough to be called “conflicts.” Several of the congregations I interviewed had in the past experienced destructive forms of conflict that inhibited ministry and mission. When I asked the leaders of these congregations what was the difference between the former times of destructive conflict and the current time of constructive conflict management, every person named pastoral leadership as the essential difference. I then asked how the current pastor contributed to a healthy handling of conflict. The most frequent responses were “the tone they set/climate they create,” “the behavior that they model,” “transparency and good communication,” and “dealing with issues in a timely manner rather than letting them fester.”

Most of the lay leaders said that they looked to their pastors for leadership training. Only a few people seemed interested in Conference leadership training events, although there were two congregations that expressed interest in the Conference creating distance learning opportunities for lay people. Many of the people I interviewed seemed to be unaware of Conference training events such as Church Leaders Convocation, the Mission and Stewardship Gathering, and Christian Education events. Most said that they were primarily interested in on site training from their pastors and other leaders, though some expressed interest in area events close to home, e.g. Association training events. A small minority had attended Conference leadership training events. Those who had done so expressed appreciation for what they had learned.

The overall message I received from lay leaders and from a number of the clergy as well, was that strong support for and continuing training of clergy was the most significant way that the Maine Conference can equip local congregations for effective ministry.

4. A Vibrant Sense of Mission

I had a wonderful time visiting our churches, and was delighted by the stories of mission and service that I heard everywhere I went, but I must say there were four congregations that knocked my socks off. These were Lincolnville, Waterford, Eastport, and York. These churches just breathe mission! What exciting places to be! Most of the churches I visited were genuinely interested in reaching out beyond their church walls, but these were four congregations that had really gotten the knack of it. It is interesting that three

of these mission giants are smaller congregations and the fourth is a very large church. Apparently size doesn't matter when it comes to mission. Three of these churches are growing in numbers as well as spirit (for the reason why Eastport is having a harder time with numerical growth, see *Demographics* below).

What I particularly noticed about several of these mission churches was how porous their boundaries were with regard to the community. They host community events. They perform acts of service for people who are not connected with the congregation. They encourage folks to participate in the mission of the congregation who are not members and who do not wish to become members, but who want to help out with a particular project or benevolence. They are open, inclusive faith communities with a heart for their town and their world. They are not primarily looking for more people to help with the congregational work and bills. Instead they are looking for new ways to make God's love known.

5. Demographics

Demographics are important. Certainly one can find some congregations that are managing to decline in membership while the communities around them are growing, so increasing population does not guarantee numerical growth. Nonetheless demographics matter. And congregations face a stiff challenge where the population is actually declining, as it is in Aroostook County and some other regions in Maine. You can be doing everything "right" and still be losing numbers when your geographical area is losing numbers.

Another demographically challenging situation exists when many congregations are competing for the same small "market." When I arrived at Eastport forty-five minutes early for my church visit, I took the opportunity to tour this lovely, small downeast village. I soon noticed that there were a great many church buildings for such a small community. When I met with the Eastport church group, they confirmed that the town was indeed over-supplied with purveyors of religious services. It is no wonder that this congregation is finding it difficult to grow the numbers. But they have certainly grown the vision, grown the mission, and grown the spirit. What a privilege it was to be in their midst, and what a gift they are to their town!

6. Challenges

The churches I visited were in agreement on current challenges to congregational life and leadership. Women in the work force, dual income families, and hectic, over-scheduled lives have meant fewer volunteer hours and often, fewer volunteer leaders. Churches report there are still a lot of worker bees, but not many who will take responsibility for heading a project. A common refrain is, "I'm willing to do my part, just don't ask me to lead anything."

But the church needs good, visionary leaders as well as sincere workers. A worker might volunteer to type the Sunday bulletin on the church typewriter, but it is the leader who sees the bigger picture and says, "Forget the typewriter, we need a computer!"

The most difficult question on my questionnaire for many of the congregations was the one where I asked them to anticipate future changes and challenges to congregational life and mission. Most preferred to respond in terms of the next two to five years, rather than the

ten to twenty years the question had suggested. Things are changing so rapidly, who can say what a congregation will be dealing with twenty years down the line? The near future challenges named were all over the map with two exceptions, which were named quite frequently:

- stewardship and the issue of funding ministry
- becoming more diverse, inclusive communities (ethnically, generationally, economically, educationally) in fact as well as in theory

7. Sabbatical Products

Growing out of my sabbatical experience and my reflections on it, I have composed a set of three studies for use by church leadership groups:

Study I: The Changing Landscape of Ministry

Study II: Letting Go and Letting God

Study III: The New Mission Field

All three studies share the same three-part format: 1) *The Lay of the Land*, 2) *Voices from Our Maine Conference Churches*, 3) *Voices from Scripture*. Discussion questions are included for each section.

I have also written a document for Maine Conference leadership groups entitled **“Church Leadership Sabbatical Project: Some Implications for Maine Conference Ministries.”** All of these resources are available on the Maine Conference web site (www.maineucc.org) and from the Resource Center (1-800-244-0937, resourcecenter@maineucc.org).

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ON CHURCH LEADERSHIP ISSUES
Annette Mott's Sabbatical Project for the Maine Conference

- 1) What do you consider to be your two greatest strengths as a congregation? If you had to name one ministry that your congregation "does best", what would it be and why?
- 2) Do you think it is more difficult to find and develop committed leaders for your congregational ministries now than it was twenty years ago? If the answer is "yes", what cultural shifts and changes in church life do you see at work? Have you changed anything about the way you recruit, train, and support leaders as a result of these challenges?
- 3) How do you see church life and mission in your congregation changing in the next ten to twenty years? What are the implications of these changes for the kind of leadership the church will need? What are the implications for the way we recruit, train, and support leaders?
- 4) Many of our Maine Conference churches experience destructive forms of conflict in their life. What role do you think leadership training should play in helping church leaders to handle conflict constructively? What is your church currently doing to foster positive approaches to conflict in congregational life?
- 5) What role would you like to see the Maine Conference play in training church leaders? What existing Conference ministries and programs are especially helpful? What would you like to see changed or dropped? Is there something brand new that needs to be developed?

CHURCHES INTERVIEWED FOR THE SABBATICAL LEADERSHIP PROJECT

Bangor, All Souls	New Sharon and Industry
Bar Harbor	Newport
Camden	Portland, Stevens Ave.
Eastport	Portland, Woodfords
Farmington	Presque Isle
Hallowell	Waterford First
Houlton	Wells
Lincolntonville	Winthrop
Machias	York
Mexico	