

“Small Church Vitality Initiative”
Led by the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development
Maine Conference, United Church of Christ
October 2009

DRAFT

Road to Vitality:

If someone asked about your church’s vital signs what would you say? “Alive and kicking?” “Coughing and groaning?” “On life support and not expected to survive?”

For small churches who are not currently working with the Small Church Mission Team and who want to be fully vital and alive, the Maine Conference has developed a “**Small Church Vitality Initiative**,” which is designed to help churches begin a process to discover ways of bringing new life and health to their church’s ministry. This initiative incorporates resources available from the UCC Congregational Vitality program and other published resources.

This initiative incorporates laity and clergy involvement in facilitated work sessions with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development as the churches create their own individualized planning for redevelopment/congregational vitality. Each participating church must have 5-7 dedicated persons, including the pastor, who are willing to participate in the initiative requirements. Participation in this initiative is voluntary with goals and guideposts as the church works their process.

Initiative Eligibility/Focus:

A limited number of churches will be selected to participate in the first phase of this initiative – currently only three churches and/or sites will be selected. (Two or more churches may combine and participate in a single site location).

The first selection of churches will begin in December 2009 with initial sessions to be scheduled for January 2010. This initiative targets small churches in the Maine Conference – consisting of less than 100 members, with an average Sunday attendance of 50 or less, and who employ less than a full time minister.

Churches interested in participating in the initiative are asked to contact the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development and provide the following information:

- Church name/location
- Membership
- Average Sunday Attendance
- Complete copy of Annual Budget
- Copy of Pastoral Call Agreement outlining the terms of employment
- Describe the ministries that the church is currently involved
- Names and email addresses of the Vitality Team members (5-7)
- A statement which indicates why you are interested in participating in the Small Church Vitality Initiative
- Tallied Results of “Congregational Vitality Preliminary Assessment”

Overview of the Process:

1. **Readiness Assessment and Process Design:** Initial work to determine readiness for the process and for team members to learn about congregational vitality.
2. **Unbinding the Gospel:** Team completes 8-session study of text.
3. **Unbinding the Church:** All-church completion of 6-session study of text.
4. **Creating a Shared Vision:** Team creates a vision statement.
5. **Assessing the Current Situation:** A reality check of the church is made.
6. **Analyzing Community Needs:** Outreach needs are determined.
7. **Establishing Objectives:** Goals are written.
8. **Developing a Plan of Action:** A plan to accomplish the goals is written.

Details of the Process:

Phase 1: The Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development will meet with the church's Vitality Team(s) to outline the process and discuss their readiness for this initiative. Each member of the team will be required to read a different book from a bibliography list, which will be provided. The team must meet regularly during this phase to discuss their progress and talk about what they have learned from their readings. Once all team members have completed their reading assignments, a follow-up meeting will be scheduled with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development.

Phase 2: In a second meeting with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development, an assessment will be made regarding readiness for the next phase in the vitality initiative. A decision will be made to proceed with the heart of the initiative or for the church to withdraw from the process. Churches found ready will proceed with an eight-session extensive study of "*Unbinding the Gospel*" by Martha Grace Reese (Chalice Press). Team members will be expected to discuss the questions as a group at the end of each chapter and to complete the exercises. The team will also be expected to complete the 40-day personal prayer journal as they go about their work. Once the team has completed their course of study, a follow-up meeting will be scheduled with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development.

Phase 3: In the third meeting with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development, an assessment will be made regarding readiness for the next phase in the Vitality Initiative. A decision will be made to expand the church Vitality Team to include additional church members (20% of worship attendance) and to repeat Phase 2, or to proceed with an all-church saturation six-session study of "*Unbinding your Heart*" by Martha Grace Reese (Chalice Press). This second *Gospel Series* is designed for at least 85% of worship attendance. Participants in this phase are asked to pray each day's prayer exercise, study a chapter with their small group, and attend worship and focus on the weekly theme. Once the church has completed this all-church study, a follow up meeting will be scheduled with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development.

At the conclusion of this phase, a church may opt-out and consider their participation in the Vitality Initiative complete, or they may wish to continue with additional phases, which are taken from the Small Church Mission Team "Parishes of Promise" program.

Phase 4: In this phase, the original Vitality Team will begin meeting with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development to develop a shared vision regarding the church now that the “*Unbinding the Gospel Series*” has been completed. The focus of this facilitated session is to imagine the church in five year’s time. In this process, team members will be asked to place themselves at a point in the future and to respond to a series of questions regarding the congregation’s experiences, accomplishments, and challenges. The guided visioning technique is intended to draw upon individuals’ intellect and emotion, and then build upon individual input in order to develop collective ownership of a vision for the future. In effect, the outcome sets a stake in the ground that serves to pull the plan in a particular direction.

Team members will be asked to write a church Vision Statement, which should be refined by input from members of the congregation as well as be approved by the church’s governing body. It may be necessary for an additional meeting with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development in order to complete this phase.

Phase 5: The next phase of the process focuses on developing a common understanding of the church’s current situation. The Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development will meet with the Vitality Team to discuss the church’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This assessment will help provide guidance regarding the establishment of objectives that will ultimately allow the church to move from its current situation toward the achievement of the vision it has developed.

Phase 6: This phase of the process will be highly dependent upon the location and geographic reach of the participating church. The Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development will assist the Vitality Team in identifying the types of community input that should be gathered, depending upon the unique circumstances of each church. The intent is to engage the local community in dialogue regarding ways in which the church can help to meet pressing community needs. Appropriate contacts may include town officials, school teachers /administrators, health care professionals, social service providers, and representatives of other local churches. Depending upon the scope of the input being sought, the number of leaders whose opinions are being solicited and the church’s resources, this may entail several group meetings, one-on-one interviews, the solicitation of written input, or any combination of the three methods.

Phase 7: In this phase of the process, the Vitality Team will consult with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development as they focus on establishing objectives for the church’s mission outreach effort, drawing upon the vision that has been developed, relevant current and historical data and information, and the input of the broader community. The objectives should clearly identify what the church would like to achieve in its mission outreach in the next three to five-year period. Revisions may be made to the vision, if appropriate.

Phase 8: In this phase of the process, the Vitality Team will consult with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development as they develop a plan of action detailing how the church intends to move toward its vision and objectives. The plan of action will outline the specific mission outreach initiatives that the church intends to undertake in the next 3-5 year period. To the extent that the plans are dependent upon other related changes in church operations, these should be identified. This Plan of Action should be approved by the entire congregation at an annual or special meeting of the church.

Expectations of the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development:

A church that elects to participate in the “Small Church Vitality Initiative” can expect the following support from the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development:

- Assistance in determining if this process is a good fit for the church.
- Consultation and guidance in the development of the detailed process.
- Facilitation of planning sessions as the church proceeds through the phases of the initiative.
- Guidance regarding plan format and review of draft plans.

Expectations of the Participating Church:

The church should be prepared to invest significant time and energy in the plan’s development. Specifically, the church will be required to:

- Purchase all materials that the team requires in order to complete this initiative.
- Team members must give dedicated participation in each phase of the initiative, including completion of any and all reading assignments.
- Work with the Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development throughout the vitality initiative process.
- Record minutes of team meetings and document team efforts.
- Prepare all communications materials for the church governing body and congregation, as appropriate.
- Coordinate all administrative arrangements related to meetings (securing locations, processing meeting confirmations, mailings of advance materials, etc).
- Representatives of the church are asked to participate in a workshop at a future Maine Conference Annual Meeting to share the successes, challenges, and usefulness of the resources utilized in this vitality initiative process.

Rev. Darren L. Morgan
Associate Conference Minister for Small Church Development
Maine Conference, United Church of Christ
24 Vista Way, Glenburn, Maine 04401
947-1660 (home/office), 944-9469 (cell)
dmorgan207@roadrunner.com