

How a Two-Hundred-Year-Old, Declining Mainline Church Got Its Groove Back

“This is a different church,” exclaimed Randy after the early worship service. “I barely recognize the place!” Randy, a former member of our congregation, left our church in the summer of 2001 for an out-of-state job. This was his first visit back in over three years. “I can’t believe the changes,” said Randy. “The congregation is so much larger, younger, and more alive than it was before. How did it happen?”

Like many churches in mainline congregations, First UMC Church in Lebanon, Tennessee, peaked in the mid 1960s. Then, over the next thirty-six years, the church slowly grew older, smaller, and more internally focused. The median age of the congregation increased, membership and worship attendance decreased, and the congregation’s primary focus shifted to its facilities. In 2001 that trajectory changed. Over the past nine years our median age has decreased, membership has increased, worship attendance has doubled from three hundred to over six hundred, and the congregation no longer focuses on our facilities but on our mission. So how did a two-hundred-year-old, declining, county-seat, mainline church get its groove back? We got it back by boldly embracing our United Methodist identity while intentionally implementing the following seven strategies.

1. *We dreamed a new dream.* Years ago a Vietnam veteran told me, “When I first went to Vietnam, I had a clear sense of purpose—to save the world from communism. But as the weeks and months wore on and I saw the insanity of the war, I gained a new purpose—to survive another day.” Sadly that’s the story of many churches. They start out with great vision and dreams, but as the years pass by, the dreams slip away. Before long they’re like that Vietnam vet. Their only purpose is to survive another day or week or year. Eventually that survival mentality leads to stagnation, decline, and even death. When I first arrived at Lebanon First, the church was mostly surviving another day. On my first Sunday I preached a sermon called “To Dream Again.” In that sermon I told the story about that Vietnam veteran. Then I said, “I have not come to Lebanon First to survive another day. Rather I’ve come to this place to dream new dreams with you about what God wants to do with us in this community.” In the months that followed, the members of First Church began dreaming a new dream. In short, the dream was to become a vibrant, grace-filled, growing mainline church of “Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open Doors.”

2. *We determined our niche.* No church can be all things to all people. Our worship and preaching style won’t attract every demographic in our community. Our programs will not meet the needs of all persons. Not everyone will embrace our theology. Therefore, every church must discover its own unique niche. At Lebanon First our niche is providing a vibrant, centrist, mainline congregation to our Bible-belt community of mostly conservative churches. We offer:

- An atmosphere of grace rather than judgment
- Historic, orthodox Christian beliefs but with an open-minded spirit
- A healthy balance between faith of the head and faith of the heart

- A rich diversity of theological, social, and political beliefs
- Concern for both evangelism and social justice
- Affirmation of gender equality at home, in church, and in society
- Acceptance of seekers and doubters and their questions
- A blend of ancient, traditional, and modern expressions of worship
- An overall culture of “Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open Doors”

We’ve discovered that large numbers of people in our community are hungry for an alive, open-minded, grace-filled mainline congregation. Offering that kind of church culture is our niche.

3. *We renewed our worship.* In order to revitalize, Lebanon First needed to renew its tired worship services. We began by upgrading from a part-time choir director to a full-time music minister. We also made improvements to our lighting and sound system and installed a high-quality projection system. Since we live in such a highly visual age, we decided that we needed to incorporate that reality into our worship. Most important, we established a worship pattern and style that met the needs of the current congregation but also attracted new people. Our worship pattern offers the congregation a dependable fivefold rhythm of worship yet still allows for flexibility, creativity, and diversity. Our weekly worship outline, which is often printed in the bulletin, follows:

- We Gather to Worship God
- We Listen to the Word of God
- We Respond to the Call of God
- We Celebrate at the Table of God
- We Depart to Serve God

Within that fivefold liturgical pattern, we practice a blended worship style that we call “ancient-modern” worship—worship that incorporates historic, traditional, and contemporary styles of praising our Creator. If you were to visit our church, you would see ancient practices of worship including frequent celebration of Holy Communion, affirmation of The Apostles’ Creed, and anointing of oil for healing and wholeness. You would also see traditional elements of worship like clergy vestments, choral anthems, acolytes, and hymns. And you would see contemporary expressions of worship including praise choruses, drums and guitars (in our early service only), and liberal use of projection screens. Although I vary my preaching style, I’m primarily a narrative, storytelling preacher. And while I occasionally follow the lectionary during special seasons and days of the year, I usually stay in a series of some kind. This blended worship style works well in our community. In fact, it has resulted in our worship attendance doubling from three hundred to over six hundred, a historic high.

4. *We emphasized evangelism.* Most mainline Christians are terrified of the word *evangelism*. It conjures up images of high-pressure, obnoxious gospel salesmen. Trying to sell our congregation on evangelism would have been a losing battle. However, they loved the idea of becoming an “inviting and welcoming congregation.” Inviting and welcoming people soon became a major emphasis for our church. It’s now become part

of our culture. Although we live in a fairly small town of twenty-four thousand people, we have added more than one thousand new members (adults and children) over the past nine years. Of course, we also lose lots of folks to moves, deaths, and inactivity. But our overall membership and attendance have significantly increased. Most of our new members have been away from church for years, even decades. Many have never connected to a church before so we receive a good number of people by affirmation of faith and baptism. The vast majority of our growth can be attributed to our congregation's inviting people to worship. But other factors also play a role, including a new Web site, direct mail to newcomers in our community, guest parking, a welcome center, trained greeters, and a thorough system of guest follow-up. For help in inviting and welcoming newcomers, I highly recommend Gary McIntosh's book, *Beyond the First Visit: Connecting Guests to Your Church*.

5. *We connected people to small groups.* I once heard a story about a northerner who came down south for a business conference in Durham, North Carolina. His first morning in town, he went to eat breakfast at a little mom-and-pop diner close to his hotel. The waitress came to take his order of eggs, sausage, and toast. When the waitress, a southerner, brought this northerner his order, he noticed a little pile of white stuff on his plate. "What's that?" he asked. "Grits," she said. "What is a grit?" he asked. "Honey," she drawled in her southern accent, "they don't come by themselves." Well, grits don't come by themselves and neither do Christians. The Christian faith is not an individual faith but a community faith. At Lebanon First we believe the best way to experience Christian community is to participate in a small group. Our bread-and-butter, small-group connection is our Sunday school program. However, as important as Sunday school is, we know it's not enough. Although 55 percent of our worshipping congregation attends a class, 45 percent do not. So we offer many other small-group options throughout the week, including music groups, Bible study groups, men's groups, women's groups, youth groups, senior adult groups, scouting groups, ministry task force groups, and short-term groups like marriage enrichment and financial planning classes. We even have a knitting group. Every week at LFUMC, about six hundred people participate in one of our small groups. Our goal is to connect every member and friend of the congregation to a small group. We've not yet attained that goal, but we keep trying!

6. *We ministered to our community.* Several years ago we showed our congregation a tongue-in-cheek video called *The Me Church*. The short video features people making ridiculous demands of their church. One woman wants her car buffed and waxed during worship. A young man wants tickets to the Super Bowl. A little girl wants a pony. In every case the church meets the request. The video ends by saying, "The Me Church. Where's it's all about YOU." If churches are not careful, we can spend all our energy meeting the needs of our own members while neglecting our community. But, as Jesus inconveniently reminds us, church is not all about us but all about others. Although we still need to grow in this area, engaging in community ministry has been an important part of our revitalization. For example, we established a counseling center. We helped give birth to a homeless center for women and children and actively participate in maintaining that ministry. Every year we build a Habitat for Humanity house. We're involved in a tutoring ministry at the projects. We provide a much used food pantry.

We've gotten involved in earth-care concerns. We still have a long way to go, but we've made significant progress in grappling with social justice issues and participating in community ministries.

7. *We organized for results.* Seven years ago our leaders wrote a document called "Foundations" which laid out our mission, tasks, and culture. However, we later realized something was missing. We needed a *process* for actually reaching those lofty goals. So we added a simple yet comprehensive four-step process to help us accomplish our purposes. We put the process in diagram form and plastered it on posters throughout the church. It's in the shape of a baseball diamond with the United Methodist cross and flame in the middle, depicting our strong identity as a UMC church. Our four-step ministry process is:

- Worship God Weekly
- Connect to a Small Group
- Serve on a Ministry Team
- Invite and Welcome Others

We believe if our members faithfully follow all four steps, they will grow as disciples, and we will be a healthy church. We've since reorganized our congregational life around this model, with four mission teams (worship, connect, serve, and invite) leading the way. We also have four support teams (lay leadership, staff leadership, finances, and facilities) which undergird our four core areas of ministry. This lean, results-oriented organization helps us accomplish our mission far more effectively than before.

Although the past nine years have brought exciting revitalization, we've certainly faced struggles. For example, we've had our share of staff issues. One staff member rejected our mainline identity and sought to lead the church in a fundamentalist direction, causing tremendous pain for me and the entire staff. We also had some tensions when we added projection screens in the sanctuary. When we tried to demolish a historic house on our campus and replace it with a new building, some of our best members threatened to "stand in front of the bulldozer." So, instead of squashing them with a bulldozer in order to build a new building, we decided to renovate the old one! And, because of our growth, we constantly struggle with space issues. In spite of these and other challenges, the past eight years have been overwhelmingly positive.

Although our revitalization and growth are not the norm in our declining denomination, Lebanon First should not be an anomaly. Mainline churches across the country can experience similar vitality. We in the mainline tradition have a compelling faith story to tell. If mainline churches will unapologetically embrace their identity and work hard and smart to provide a vibrant, grace-filled, open-minded mainline culture, people will enthusiastically respond, just as they have done in Lebanon, Tennessee.

Earlier in this article I mentioned my first sermon at Lebanon First, "To Dream Again." I concluded that sermon by telling a children's story from Winnie the Pooh. In this story Pooh and Piglet take an evening walk. For a long time they walk in companionable

silence. Finally Piglet breaks the silence and asks, “Pooh, when you wake up in the morning, what’s the first things you say to yourself?” Pooh said, “What’s for breakfast?” They walked a little further. Then Pooh asked Piglet, “Piglet, when you wake up in the morning, what’s the first thing you say to yourself?” Piglet answered, “I wonder what exciting thing is going to happen today?” I concluded the sermon by saying, “A breakfast dream or an excitement dream? Which will it be? I don’t know about you, but I have no interest in a breakfast dream—a dream simply to survive another day. Instead, I want to dream an excitement dream. I hope you will join me as we seek God’s excitement dream for our church.”

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