

Action Guide for the *Local Church*

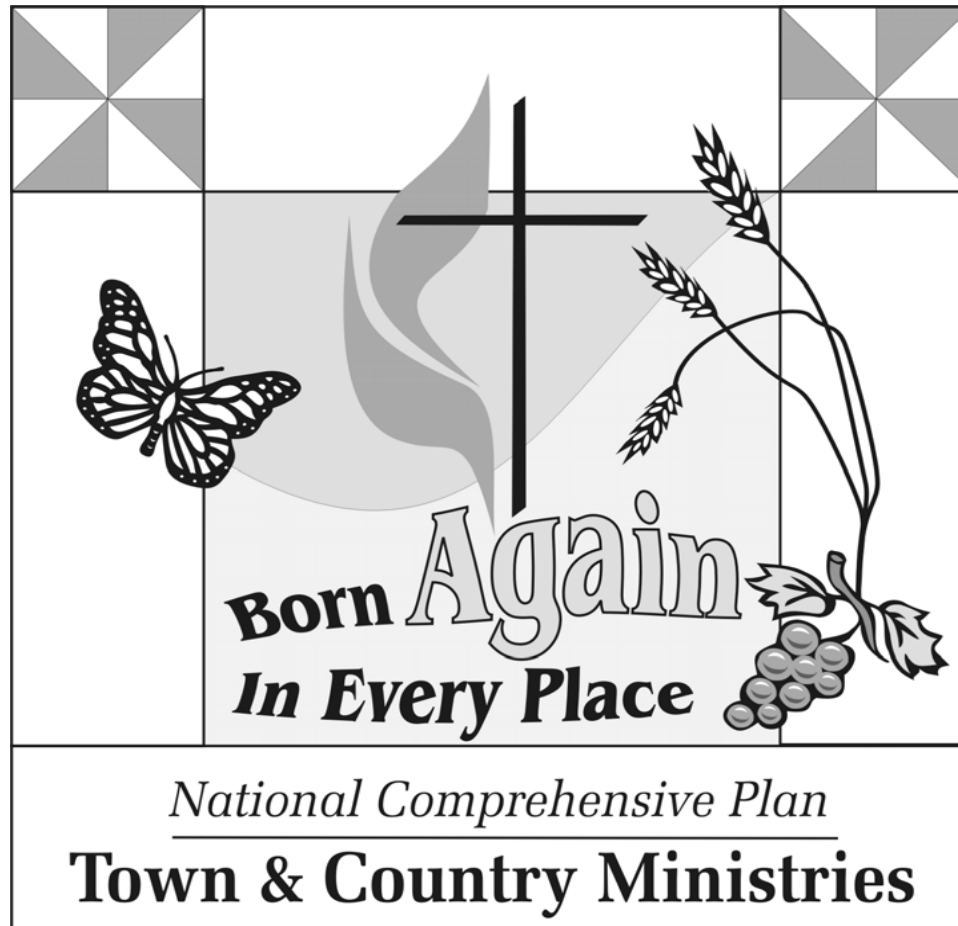


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Why an Action Guide for the Local Church?

This Action Guide is the latest step in a journey that began in 1996, as a group of rural people who cared deeply about the faithfulness and effectiveness of rural churches proposed to the General Conference that a Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry be developed for the United Methodist Church in the United States. The proposal was adopted, and the plan that was subsequently developed was presented to the 2000 General Conference and adopted. The text of the plan, *“Born Again in Every Place”* can be found and downloaded from the Town and Country page of the GBGM website: www.gbgm-umc.org. or from The National Comprehensive Plan web site at www.townandcountryumc.org

The 2000 General Conference also mandated that a plan be developed to implement the *“Born Again in Every Place”* report.

The Action Plan was approved by the 2004 General Conference, and was delegated to the General Board of Global Ministries for implementation through its office of Town and Country Ministries. The text of the Action Plan for *“Born Again in Every Place”* can also be found and downloaded from the Town and Country page of the GBGM website: www.gbgm-umc.org or from The National Comprehensive Plan web site at www.townandcountryumc.org Utilizing rural church leaders from around the nation, leadership from the Council of Bishops and staff from other boards and agencies, a general church team to coordinate the implementation of the Action Plan was formed.

This Action Guide for the Local Church is offered to local church, district and Conference leaders as a beginning step toward the revitalization of the whole church. As clergy and laity work and worship together as partners in town and country ministry, it is the hope of the authors that God’s Spirit will again move among the people of Christ in every place called United Methodist, bringing a new birth of love and joy in ministry and fruitfulness in mission.

“Born Again in Every Place” **The National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry of The United Methodist Church, Invites you:**

- **to view town and country churches as assets;**
- **to dream of energized, faithful, effective congregations in every place;**
- **to yearn for effective lay and clergy leadership for the renewal of effective ministry to communities in every possible place;**

- **to envision thousands of United Methodist disciples freed for joyful obedience, motivated by the love of God, serving in town and country settings,**
 - **taking up the cross of self-denial**
 - **committed to *making disciples* and *making a difference in their communities*, rekindling the historic fires of holiness of heart and life.**

If we can dream in faith, it can happen!

Across the United States, many United Methodist town and country congregations effectively make disciples for Jesus Christ and creatively minister to their local communities and the world beyond. Imagine what will happen when these more than 20,000 churches with 2.9 million members in the United States renew and enlarge their visions of ministry, are supported and resourced for such work, and are affirmed in their importance to the church and its transformative work for the Kingdom of God. It is possible that the renewal and revival of the church will flow from town and country congregations to the rest of the world!

Why a Comprehensive Plan?

Most town and country churches were founded as a result of the desire of local people for a local Christian community. Across the years, numbers of us have become more focused on the maintenance of the church family and facilities than on the Church's mission, and many have passively drifted into patterns of stagnation and survival. By trying to save our own lives, we have forfeited our vitality.

At the same time, many rapid changes are occurring in town and country settings, including

- the loss of thousands of family farms;
- the changing face of agricultural production;
- the growth of racial ethnic/migrant populations;
- the emerging challenges of forestry, mining, fisheries, and other industries such as small manufacturing and prisons;
- patterns of use and control of rural land;
- the prevalence of severely depressed economies with high unemployment; and
- environmental issues such as soil conservation, water quality and hazardous waste disposal. Such changes affect and often frighten town and country congregations. Concerns are often expressed as questions such as:

“Is there a tomorrow?”

“How do we learn to reach out to new people?”

“How do we – clergy and laity – get the kind of training we need for effective ministry in OUR time and place?”

“Can we get quality leadership appropriate to our cultural setting?”

“How is God at work in the changing world around us?”

“What does God want of us?”

As town and country churches have struggled with these realities, those who work with them on district and annual conference levels are tempted to view these congregations as problems.

“What pastoral leadership can these churches afford?”

“What pastor can we appoint to this charge whose gifts and abilities will fit well with the needs and opportunities present?”

“Can we financially sustain this congregation’s ministry even if they have not always been able to pay their apportionments?”

“What resources or leadership should the annual conference invest to revitalize this church’s mission and ministry?”

The Action Plan for the National Comprehensive Plan for Town and Country Ministry of the United Methodist Church invites town and country congregations, and the church as a whole, to be “born again in every place.” This is an invitation to join in a movement, to explore the riches of history and tradition, to examine our current community contexts and to open to the fresh movement of the Spirit of God -- to be transformed for renewed and effective ministry in the places God has called us all to live and to serve. It is also an invitation to join a nationwide community of learners and teachers, as those who attempt to foster renewal, experience success or failure, learn from it, and share our learning with others for the encouragement of all.

How to Use this Action Guide

This Action Guide is intended for use by local church and district leaders, lay and clergy together, in finding the next steps they may take toward renewal and revitalization. It is designed to lead participants in “worshipful work,” as worship, prayer and other spiritual formation disciplines accompany study, reflection, discussion and planning precede work. Each session will contain some of the same elements, while also having opportunity for new ideas, information or application. For the sessions to be meaningful, it will be essential that participants relate their own setting and its realities to the issues, examples and experiences of ministry presented. It will be up to you to “bring it home.”

The General Outline for each session:

- **Gathering and call to worshipful work** – be sure all are introduced, and are comfortably seated where they can see each other. Share any joys or concerns since you gathered last as a group. Agree to take part to the best of the ability of each.
- **Litany of Vision** – voice this piece aloud at each session to anchor the group’s work in hope and faith. Each Session introduces a different area of possibility for the life of the Church; Session 6 brings them together.
- **Hymn** – sing or say aloud the hymn suggested, as a way of uniting hearts and minds in a common faith journey; UMH # refers to numbers in the United Methodist Hymnal, FWS# refers to numbers in the Faith We Sing.
- **Devotional** – read aloud the scriptures suggested, and have someone present the devotional thoughts printed in the resource. Spend time in silent reflection and also in group response to the scripture and devotional text.
- **Experience of Ministry** – Look together at the examples of effective ministry that are offered. Talk together to clarify what issues and questions the example raises.
- **Ruminating** – Use the questions listed to guide the group’s discussion of what the stories and experience of ministry teaches or has to say to you in your situation. Pray together for insight into God’s will for your church, in response to the experience of others.
- **Closing hymn** – use one of the hymns suggested as a way to bring the group toward a harmonious closure.
- **The Lord’s Prayer** – pray together for God’s will to be done on your part of God’s earth, as it is in heaven. Feel free to include other prayers during this time, along with a prayer of blessing as group members’ part.

Notes to the Leader

- a. It is recommended that:
 - each Session be 1½ hours in length;
 - most participants be the acknowledged leaders of the congregation; and
 - participants agree to attend each session.
- b. The pastor need not lead the Action Guide, but must be supportive
- c. The Sessions and questions for discussion are designed to not need any special training to use. However, to gain confidence in the process of recognizing your assets (that with which people individually and the congregation together have been blessed) you can read Luther K. Snow's book, [The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts](#). It can be purchased from The Alban Institute (www.alban.org look under "bookstore", then "books", locate by author) for \$18.00 plus shipping. Or call 1-800-486-1318 or send an order to The Alban Institute, 2121 Cooperative Way, Herndon, VA 20171
- d. *Adapt the material as needed; find the points of contact with your rural culture and the meaning of the stories.*

As an example:

The Setting:

In Session 5, Upper Sand Mountain Parish had a facility which could provide protection in the event of a tornado to families living in a nearby trailer park, but no contact had been made with the families.

You may not have a need for offering protection from tornadoes, but do you have a facility that could be used to provide services to families?

A Response:

A rural church in Oregon had a large carpeted fellowship hall with several small Sunday School rooms along an adjoining hallway. The county health department was looking for space to expand their services; an examining table, covered by a cloth, was placed in one of the Sunday School rooms, the fellowship hall was used as the waiting room. A cupboard in the hallway provided storage for needed items.

The Result:

The public health nurse had a private place to examine children, administer shots and converse with parents. Families could care for the health needs of their children relatively close to their homes.

The doors of the church were opened to be in ministry in a new and different way to families in the area!

Ruminating:

What additional ministry might the congregation have done? What physical resources does *your church* have that could be made available to provide care for others? What would need to happen to make that ministry a reality? Who would need to be contacted? Who would do the contacting? When could you begin the ministry?

How to Begin

Introduce the Action Guide to the entire Congregation at a regular, or special, covered dish (potluck) dinner by showing the Introductory DVD or the Introductory PowerPoint and script. (Items available through the Office of Town and Country Ministries, cjthomps@gbgm-umc.org or find the Town and Country Comprehensive Plan home page, under Quick Links at www.gbgm-umc.org click on the “Introductory PowerPoint and Script” icon)

1. Ask someone ahead of time to play the piano for the hymn or song.
2. Following the showing of the PowerPoint/DVD, lead a discussion of what has just been seen and heard.
3. Distribute copies of Session 1, have hymnals or song books available and someone prepared to read the I Samuel text.
4. Follow the format of Session 1 to “Ruminating”
5. Lead a discussion of what has just been seen and heard.
6. Invite all who are interested in participating in the Sessions of the Action Guide to help choose a time and date to begin.
7. Ask the remainder of the congregation to pray for the undertaking.

Before the first Session:

1. Read the Session through
2. Ask someone to read the Bible text
3. Decide which hymns or songs to sing
4. Ask someone to play the piano to accompany the singing of the hymns/songs
5. Make a copy of the Session for each participant
6. Decide whether you will use a flip chart/newsprint to record the assets people identify or if you will ask each person to write in large block letters each asset on a half-sheet of paper in the “landscape” direction
7. Set up the room where you’ll meet
 - put Session 1 at each place
 - put hymnal or song book at each place
 - provide marking pens, masking tape and paper following decision of #6 above
 - have Bibles available
8. Depending on the time of day of the meeting, you may want to ask someone to provide coffee/tea/juice

Each Week

1. Repeat steps 1-5 and 7 above.
2. You may find it helpful to divide the time as follows:

60 90 Minutes

- 7 **10 Gathering and call to worshipful work** – Share any joys or concerns since you gathered last as a group.
- 2 **2 Litany of Vision** –voice this piece aloud at each session to anchor the group’s work in hope and faith.
- 5 **5 Hymn** – sing or say aloud the hymn suggested, as a way of uniting hearts and minds in a common faith journey.
- 7 **15 Devotional** – read aloud the scriptures suggested, and have someone present the devotional thoughts printed in the resource. Invite the group to spend time in silent reflection then lead the group to respond to the scripture and devotional text.
- 5 **7 Experience of Ministry** – Look together at the example of effective ministry that is offered; clarify as a group issues and questions the example raises.
- 20 **35 Ruminating** – Use the questions listed to guide the group’s discussion of what the stories and Experience of Ministry teaches or has to say to you in your situation. Pray together for insight into God’s will for your church, in response to the experience of others.
- 5 **5 Closing hymn** – sing or read one of the hymns or songs suggested as a way to bring the group to closure.
- 7 **10 The Lord’s Prayer** – develop a “group way” to pray together which includes the Lord’s Prayer and a petition to seek God’s will to be done on your part of God’s earth, as it is in heaven; include other prayers during this time, along with a prayer of blessing as group members’ part.

3. **SAVE THE HALF-SHEETS OF PAPER, OR LISTS, EACH SESSION FOR SESSION 6**

Before Session 6

1. Post on the wall (s) the half-sheets of paper or lists you have generated during the previous 5 sessions.
2. Make necessary arrangements to celebrate Holy Communion or a Love Feast.

Follow-Up

1. **After completing the 6 Sessions**, meet as a group with the Church Council, or equivalent, at their next regular meeting or ask the chair to call a special meeting to share what you as a group have discerned.

2. Before the Church Council Meeting:

- Decide what you will share about the process of using the Action Guide for the Local Church.
- Determine the order in which the ministry groups will speak. Be prepared to ask presenters questions if you feel that the ministry hasn't been fully explained.

3. At the Church Council Meeting:

- Place each ministry group sheet around the room before the meeting begins.
- Make your overview presentation, ask each ministry group to present, ask for questions of clarification from the Church Council members.
- Ask Action Guide participants to stand in front of their selected ministry; ask each Church Council member to stand in front of the ministry in which they would most want to be involved; add the names of Church Council members to the paper.

Allow an hour to an hour and one-half for the remaining steps; this is an exciting part of the experience, be sure to allow for ways for God's Spirit to move among the people, providing energy and vision!

- Ask each group to determine who else—individuals and groups—in the church and community is concerned about this? (The asset of formal and informal association) As an example: the need for a before and after school program may be recognized by the resident deputy sheriff, the teachers in the elementary school, the public health or school nurse as well as individual parents. Determine who would be best to talk with each of them.
- As a ministry group, determine the next steps to making God's will a reality for your congregation and community through this ministry.
- As a ministry group, establish both a short term and a long term goal. For example:
Short-term “By the end of July we will have established a meeting date for all those interested in starting a before and after school program.”
Long term “By May of next year, we will have done all of the necessary preparations to have a before and after school program in place for the opening of the following school year.”
- Bring the group back together; have each group report on their short and long-term goals.
- Affirm the decisions and work of each ministry group.
- Decide how the congregation as a whole will be told about the decisions made and the actions that will be taken.¹
- Close with prayer.

4. Provide feedback on the experience and outcomes of the Action Guide to the Office of Town and Country Ministries at the General Board of Global Ministries by e-mailing the Executive Secretary cjthomps@gbgm-umc.org or by calling 212-870-3684 or writing to Rev. Carol J. Thompson, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1539, New York, NY 10115. Please include your name, postal mailing address and e-mail address, the number of participants and then respond to the following:

¹ The process used for Session 6 and the meeting with the Church Council is an adaptation of the work of Luther Snow and Hinton Rural Life Center.

What has been helpful to your church?

What could be further refined in this process?

What other information or references could have been helpful?

What didn't work?

What is the cultural-ethnic diversity within your church?

What changes did you make to the Action Guide to include your congregations' cultural-ethnic diversity?

Where does the congregation feel God calling them into ministry?

What else do you think we should know about using the Guide?

Use of Material

Permission is granted and encouraged for downloading, copying and distributing this material for the use of local churches, districts, Conferences or any judicatory.

The material may not be used for personal financial gain and may not be sold except to cover the cost of production.

2006
National Comprehensive Plan
for Town and Country Ministry Advisory Team
Office of Town and Country Ministries
General Board of Global Ministries
The United Methodist Church
475 Riverside Drive
New York, New York 10115

Session 1

Born Again: Building on the Past

GATHERING AND CALL TO WORSHIPFUL WORK

A LITANY OF VISION

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

Left: the life and ministry of every congregation is honored regardless of size, location, age, ethnicity, culture, economic strength or special context;

Right: the special opportunities, challenges, gifts and needs of congregations in rural or town and country settings are recognized;

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

All: all Christians are seen as *partners* in mission, all persons are seen as *neighbors* in Christ.

HYMN *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing* UMH #400

DEVOTIONAL *Born Again: Building on the Past*

Read 1 Samuel 7: 5-12

The people of Israel go up to Mizpah to hold a religious service. They are fasting and repenting for turning away from God and serving the gods of Baal and the goddess Astarte. In the meantime, the Philistines hear of the Israelites camped there and decide to attack. Against insurmountable odds, and with a shout from the Lord, the Israelites route their enemies. To celebrate, and to mark the occasion forever, Samuel erects a memorial – a stone – and calls it Ebenezer (Stone of Help/Witness).

As I was tossing rocks – or stones – out of a farmer’s field I got to humming *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. I realized that the field I was working had been worked before me. In fact, there was once a home that was built here, where children grew-up and probably picked the field for stones. After I am gone, there will likely be someone else to pick through the field and toss the stones to the side. Or will we come up with a rock-picking machine to do the work for us? As I picked stones I wouldn’t necessarily mind a rock picking machine.

I also got to thinking about the church – both as the people, but also as a building, a place. I have come to appreciate the history of church buildings. They remind us of stories that occurred there. Stories of people who cared for one another through a monthly soup night, stories of times when a community struggled to remain faithful to living out God’s Kingdom during times of a localized depression, stories of ol’ Frank’s mule who became the Christmas Donkey one year during the Christmas Pageant. She came up the stairs to the sanctuary okay, but it took five hours to “persuade” her to go back down. Other times, the church buildings just give us hints as to those who have gone on before – the Anderson Family, who donated a stained glass window, - the Harpers, who donated the baptismal font, ...

These stories, both those shared when the church gathers, and those hinted at with names on plaques, remind us of God's presence in the past. The reminders of God's presence in the past, prods us to take note of God's presence with us now, in the present. And because of that we know that God will be with us into the future.

In many respects we share this common history with our ancestors of the faith – with these Hebrew men and women of the Old Testament. The people erect Ebenezer – to remind them of how God was “a present help in a time of trouble”. And they, too, in a mysterious way, join us when we recite the communion liturgy: Christ *has* died, Christ *is* present, Christ *will* come again.

What are some of your stories of how God has been with this congregation in the past? How have you found these stories to remind you of God's presence? How often are they shared, so that the community can be reminded that God *is* present, and *will* be with us into the future?

Allow for all who care to respond to these questions to do so.

AN EXPERIENCE OF MINISTRY

Read through the Experience together. The questions below will continue to refer to the witness presented.

The following story tells of how one congregation's past experience of God's presence led them into the future:

There were no children or youth in Sunday School or worship. There were children in the small, rural elementary schools in the area and students in the high school. Two older members of the congregation, Bertha and Janice, decided something needed to be done. They prayed about the situation, ordered Sunday School curriculum, prepared lessons, went to the church at the time Sunday School was posted on the church sign and waited for children to come. After two Sundays without children, they made a new sign announcing Sunday School, inviting children to come and put it outside,...still no children.

The following week, Bertha talked with her granddaughter who was the mother of three pre-school children. Chris said that she would bring the children the following Sunday morning to “see how it would go”; she kept her promise. Another young mom, new to town, with 2 pre-school children also came; she had seen the sign outside. *They had a Sunday School!*

Sitting in the Fellowship Hall, Chris and Cindy got acquainted over cups of tea, which Janice had hastily prepared in the church kitchen, while Bertha and Janice taught the class in one of the children's Sunday School rooms. The following week, everyone stayed for worship.

Both of the younger women continued to bring their children, both of the older women continued to teach. Other children and parents began coming for Sunday School and staying for worship. Both of the younger women assumed more and more responsibility in the life of the congregation, as did others.

The “*Ebenezer*” was children in Sunday School and worship!

RUMINATING

Cows, goats and other ruminants all chew cud as part of their digesting of food. Here we are inviting you to spend some time, chewing the cud, ruminating, over the experience of ministry together. Not that anyone is suggesting that any of you are ruminants. Some of us just tend to think through things by “chewing” on them. If things later spring to mind, all the better. Share them when you next gather.

- From this Experience of Ministry, what assets can you identify that were used for ministry? (Luther Snow identifies five types of assets - *physical, individual, formal and informal associations, institutions and economic-* in The Power of Asset Mapping How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts.)
- Using their assets in a different way, what other options/courses of action do you see that they could have taken?
- What are the stories from our congregation’s past that shed light on issues similar to this?
- How do those stories shape our view of ourselves, our assets and what we can share?
- What assets do we have as a congregation to address the same or a similar situation? As you identify each asset, using half sheets of paper in “landscape” direction, write, using block letters, one asset on each sheet of paper, i.e. family, Sunday School room, kitchen, etc.
- What are the assets in our community that can be shared with others in relation to the Experience of Ministry? (Use above process to record community assets.)
- How was the leadership of the laity helpful in the Experience of Ministry?
- How was the leadership of the pastor helpful?
- How was the leadership of other members of the congregation or community helpful?
- What are similar kinds of issues that our community is dealing with and how might we share in the work of the kingdom?

HYMN

Hymn of Promise

UMH #707

LORD’S PRAYER

Might want to emphasize “ ... Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven ... ”

BENEDICTION

Session 2

Born Again: Open to the Future

GATHERING AND CALL TO WORSHIPFUL WORK

A LITANY OF VISION

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

Right: each congregation enables new persons to experience a life-changing encounter with God in Jesus Christ so that all may experience the gospel within the Reign of God; and

Left: each member, every congregation and every community experiences a new birth of faith, hope and love through the movement of God's Spirit among all people.

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

All: all Christians are seen as *partners* in mission, all persons are seen as *neighbors* in Christ.

HYMN *Breathe on Me, Breath of God* UMH #420

DEVOTIONAL *Born Again: Open to the Future*

Read John 3: 1 –10 (11 – 17)

Nicodemus had quite a profile:

- He was a Jew, a member of a covenant people, a participant in a long-standing religious tradition, committed to be faithful to God.
- He was a Pharisee, a member of a lay renewal movement within Judaism, passionate about “doing it right”, needing everyone to do it right so that the whole people might be righteous.
- He was a teacher, a guide and instructor for others, an expert and exemplar, and thus set up to evidence either integrity or hypocrisy.
- He was a council member, part of the ruling elite, making judgments about right and wrong, good or bad, acceptable or not, in or out.
- He was an elder, one whose experience has given wisdom that gains respect.
- He was dissatisfied with his life as it was – even his religion – and came to Jesus, secretly seeking something more.

There is one other thing that makes Nicodemus unique in the testimony of scripture: he is the only one in the Bible to whom Jesus said, “You must be born again.”

It appears that it was because of his experience, commitments, status and authority that Nicodemus needed to open up to a new future. It would be like a birth, in which a living being moves by a strenuous process from one life to a very different one. The new life requires adjusting to a new environment, with new ways and new experiences, a life that requires learning and growth and adaptability. The newly born person is vulnerable, needing help, sensitive to new stimuli, facing a totally new future. Jesus said that God's spirit works this new birth in people's lives – freely, unpredictably, uncontrollably. And it needed to happen for Nicodemus.

In Corning, Iowa, highway 148 snakes through town with a big “S” curve. On the second bend of the S as one drives north, there is a nice brick church building, with a fiberglass cupola and steeple on top. On the east end of the building, in foot-high plastic letters that can be read from the road at 45 miles per hour, is the message, “You must be born again.” If we realize to whom Jesus said these words, we must conclude that the church leaders put the sign on the wrong side of that wall. It should be on the inside.

As the Comprehensive Plan document, “Born Again in Every Place” states,

When Jesus told Nicodemus, "You must be born again," (John 3:1-8) he was talking to a religious insider of long standing. Nicodemus was heavily invested in the religious establishment of his day -- he knew the rules, played by the rules and taught others the rules. It was for **Nicodemus** that Jesus prescribed the necessity of new birth, not for the fishermen, or the "tax collectors and sinners," or the woman at the well, or the rich young ruler. Today's Nicodemus could be the chair of the Administrative Council, or the Sunday School superintendent, or a bishop, or a general agency executive, or a district superintendent, or the pastor, or the congregational matriarch/patriarch or the dedicated youth group member. It is to the insiders of The United Methodist Church—rural, urban, and suburban—that Jesus says, "YOU must be born again!"

How many leaders of our town and country churches share in this deep and nagging feeling of dissatisfaction, a sense that the old ways aren't working, that there has got to be something more than this? In how many congregations is there a thirst for a fresh stirring of the Spirit of God – a hunger for a life-giving, life-changing experience of faith? How about you? Are you one to whom Jesus says, “You must be born again”?

AN EXPERIENCE OF MINISTRY

Read through the Experience together. The questions below will continue to refer to the witness presented here.

“Knitters & Crocheters”

One day Betty B. greeted me as I entered the building, saying, “Oh good! You’re just in time for Show and Tell.” I put my briefcase and coat in my office, and went to the lounge where the Knitters and Crocheters were meeting.

There were 16 or so women and men in the room, some with knitting needles, some with crochet hooks, some with circular wooden knitting looms used to make stocking caps. There were United Methodists, Roman Catholics, two types of Lutherans, and a Congregationalist in the group. Two of them were passing out coffee and chocolate chip cookies. And they were ready to share what each of them had made in the month since they last met.

It had been almost two years since the day Betty came back from a “snowbird sojourn” in the Southwest, excited by the group of women in her Arizona church who met to knit and crochet together. They made baby blankets and tiny little knit caps for the local neonatal intensive care unit, among other projects. Betty thought to herself, “We could do that.” So she came back to Humboldt, Iowa with the inspiration and asked if she could start a group. I said, “Sure! Give it a try and see what happens.” And so she did.

And now, nearly two years later, grown from a handful to nearly two dozen members, the group was ready to share their excitement and joy. On a large round coffee table in the middle of the room, each person piled up what they had made. There were the little “preemie caps”, and layette blankets. There were baby blankets and afghans for the local family violence shelter. There were mittens and scarves and stocking caps for the local community action agency to distribute this winter. Bill B. reported he had just finished his 267th stocking cap for the year, on his trusty “knitting wheel”. (Incidentally, these knitting looms are made by Marilyn J., who recycles scraps of countertops into three different sizes of “wheels” especially enjoyed by the men.)

A couple of folks had made shawls for our prayer shawl ministry, to be given to people who are ill or dying or under stress, or who have a new baby. As one lady brought out her afghans, crazy with colors because they were made out of the ends of skeins of yarn that had been donated, Betty noted, “These will go to the ‘Afghans for Afghanistan’ program – we’ve gone international!” About then, a woman brought in two more black plastic bags full of yarn from her mother’s collection, since she had recently died. And then Betty brought out the doll clothing she had crocheted to give to a family service agency.

There was great joy in the room, and great appreciation for what each had accomplished, according to her or his level of skill. “This is church at its best!” I exclaimed. “It’s what I dream of: gifted people doing what gives them joy, making a practical difference in the lives of others, using recycled resources, while enjoying spiritual fellowship -- and chocolate chip cookies to boot! God bless you!”

And God does.

(From Ed Kail, pastor, Faith United Methodist Church
Humboldt County, Iowa)

RUMINATING

Use the questions listed to guide the group's discussion of what the stories and experience of ministry teaches or has to say to you in your situation. Pray together for insight into God's will for your church, in response to the experience of others. Here we are inviting you to spend some time, chewing the cud, ruminating, over the case study together. Not that anyone is suggesting that any of you are ruminants. Some of us just tend to think through things by chewing. If things later spring to mind, all the better. Share them when you next gather.

- From this Experience of Ministry, what assets can you identify that were used for ministry? (Luther Snow identifies five types of assets - *physical, individual, formal and informal associations, institutions and economic*- in The Power of Asset Mapping How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts.)
- Using their assets in a different way, what other options/courses of action do you see that they could have taken?
- What are the stories from our congregation's past that shed light on issues similar to this?
- How do those stories shape our view of ourselves, our assets and what we can share?
- What assets do we have as a congregation to address the same or a similar situation? (Use the same process as last week to record assets.)
- What are the assets in our community that can be shared with others in relation to the Experience of Ministry? (And again as last week!)
- How was the leadership of the laity helpful in the Experience of Ministry?
- How was the leadership of the pastor helpful?
- How was the leadership of other members of the congregation or community helpful?
- What are similar kinds of issues that our community is dealing with and how might we share in the work of the kingdom?

HYMN *Seek Ye First* *UM Hymnal* #405

LORD'S PRAYER

Might want to emphasize " ... Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven ... "

BENEDICTION

“Jesus initiated His ministry by declaring that the Kingdom of God was at hand (Matt. 4:17). By the Kingdom of God, He meant a world in which all that was suggested by shalom would be realized. This kingdom was to be composed of people delivered from sin and guilt, and freed to love one another. It was to have its social institutions reshaped according to the will of the heavenly Father and would be a society marked by justice, offering to all peoples everywhere the opportunity to live with dignity. Its citizens were to be spiritually "reborn" through the transforming work of One who was not of this world, and they were to be in this world as agents through whom God would change the world from what it is into what it ought to be. (See Millard Fuller's No More Shacks, Word Books, 1986, in the Foreword by Tony Campolo, p. 9.)”

Today, the Church as the Body of Christ exists to help carry out that vision of Shalom. It is as if we live between two kingdoms – two times – the Now and the Not Yet (See Paul Sampley’s book Between Two Times). We have entered into the worldview of Christ’s vision, of Christ’s Kingdom. Yet we still live in the old kingdom with its worldview of inequality, sin and oppression.

Yet there is still hope. For God remains present in our lives, encouraging us in both complex and simple ways to respond to one another in the spirit of Shalom. And our United Methodist understanding of God’s prevenient grace, reminds us that God is a God who goes before us. God is already at work in the world around us. Dare we join in?

AN EXPERIENCE OF MINISTRY

The following story tells of how one congregation attempted to faithfully live out their vision of shalom, how they attempted to live within God’s Kingdom.

Read through this Experience of Ministry together. The questions below will continue to refer to the witness presented here.

“Just Do It”

About 4 years ago, President Bush came out with an initiative on Faith Based Organizations and Community Based Organizations working together. He even gave money for such. As happens in a lot of cases, the money went to a state agency to hold meetings. And so after a couple of meetings, I decided to JUST DO IT. The family advocate for Department of Human Services (Social Services) in Archuleta County (she is a member of the Catholic Church), the Rector of the Episcopal Church and I decided to do something together. We each talked with our church. The result was a year later Pagosa Outreach Connection was formed. To date we have the following organizations involved on a weekly basis:

Community United Methodist Church
St. Patrick's Episcopal Church
Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church
Angelian Fellowship
Salvation Army
United Way

LPEA -the local electric company assistance program
local Rotary Club
Department of Human Services
Domestic Violence Office

More than \$57,000 has been paid out by the group for electricity, heat, rent and food, medical and dental bills, glasses, prescriptions, mileage to the hospital including food and lodging, and yes, even counseling for chemically dependent folks.

In three years of ministry, 150 low income families in Archuleta County, Colorado have been assisted by 10 churches and groups working together.

(From Don Ford, pastor, Community United Methodist Church, Pagosa Springs, Colorado)

RUMINATING

Use the questions listed to guide the group's discussion of what the stories and experience of ministry teaches or has to say to you in your situation. Pray together for insight into God's will for your church, in response to the experience of others. Here we are inviting you to spend some time, "chewing the cud", ruminating, over the Experience of Ministry together. (Not that anyone is suggesting that any of you are ruminants!)

- From the Experience of Ministry above, what assets can you identify that were used for ministry? (Luther Snow identifies five types of assets -*physical, individual, formal and informal associations, institutions and economic*- in The Power of Asset Mapping How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts.)
- Using their assets in a different way, what other options/courses of action do you see that they could have taken?
- What are the stories from our congregation's past that shed light on issues similar to this?
- How do those stories shape our view of ourselves, our assets and what we can share?
- What assets do we have as a congregation to address the same or a similar situation? (Repeat process from Sessions 1 and 2)
- What are the assets in our community that can be shared with others in relation to the Experience of Ministry? (Repeat process from Sessions 1 and 2)
- How was the leadership of the laity helpful in the Experience of Ministry?
- How was the leadership of the pastor helpful?

- How was the leadership of other members of the congregation or community helpful?
- What are similar kinds of issues that our community is dealing with and how might we share in the work of the kingdom?

HYMN *God Who Shaped Creation* UMH #443
 (or) *Wounded World that Cries for Healing* FWS #2177

LORD'S PRAYER

Might want to emphasize “ ... Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven ... ”

BENEDICTION

Read Matthew 25:1-13

Five of those bridesmaids were not very polite were they? Why didn't they share with the other five who had not prepared for the delay of the bridegroom? Without consulting the commentaries, could it be that this is a simple message that there are some things we must do for ourselves? One prime example is our own spiritual fire. No one else can tend it for us. No one else can read the Scriptures for us, reflect on its meaning, spend time in prayer and meditation before God so that we are shaped in the image of the Christ.

The “**F**” in fire is focus. Think of the power of the magnifying glass. When the sun shines brightly through the shaped glass a fire can be kindled. It is not the power of the glass but the power of the sun that is the source of the fire. Likewise our own focus on the things of God shapes us and empowers us. Unless we stay watchful and focused neither as an individual or as a congregation can we be ablaze.

What is the focus of your congregation? Are the leaders most concerned with budgets, building and being in charge of what happens? Or is the focus upon Christ's Great Commandment to Love God and Love Neighbor? Or is the focus upon the Great Commission to make disciples? Better yet is the focus of your life and your congregation both Great Commission and Great Commandment? Look at the four squares at the end of this session. Which square best describes the congregation's focus as it is now? Which square is where the wise would focus?

Read Matthew 25: 14-30

Who you are working for does matter! Do you think the one talent manager was punished for having only one talent or for not using what was entrusted to him? Why would Jesus tell this story to disciples just before his death on the cross? Could a lack of self-confidence to do new things, risk-taking things, and leadership things be involved in the decision of the one with one talent who managed to bury the asset given to him? Is this a story about those who will not take action because they do not have the confidence in themselves that Jesus has in them? Or is it a story about those who will not lead with greater responsibility because they do not have confidence in Jesus. Or is it about both?

The “**I**” in F.I.R.E. is for Initiative: Think of Moses and the burning bush. That burning bush encounter called for the barefoot shepherd to go forth to a bold new work. Moses answer was a five fold “but Lord”. (Exodus 3:11&13; 4:1, 10 & 13) Moses' talent burying was first “doubting”: who was he to do the work of God? The second was “questioning”: who was it that was assigning him this great task? The third was “guessing”: why would those to whom he was sent believe him? And the fourth was assuming he did not have enough talent for such a thing. The last was the big mistake of presuming he could just tell God to send someone else. Does God's response of anger remind you of Jesus' story of the talent? Are assignments from God optional? Can we choose not to be about God's work? If so, what are the consequences of not taking initiative? Look again at the four squares. Does your congregation have initiatives that are making disciples and making a difference for your neighbors?

Take your shoes off for a moment or two. In a moment of silence... barefoot and with head bowed ... stand before the God of Moses who sent fire on the faithful, but frightened, followers of the resurrected Christ and listen for marching orders!

Read Matthew 25:31-46

How could those folks be so preoccupied that they did not see Jesus in others? Could it be that they were all gathered in a church building where the windows had all been replaced by mirrors? Could it be that all they were able to see were the needs of their own? Could it be they consumed all of their resources and energy on themselves?

The “**R.** and **E**” in F.I.R.E are for Resources and Energy: Think of the rich young man (Matthew 19:16-30) He had resources and energy. Yet when Jesus called him to go with him, the invitation was refused because the young man’s faith was in the resources, relationship and residence he already possessed. They were more compelling than an invitation from Jesus to make a difference to the poor and be about a daily walk with Jesus.

How would you characterize the response of your congregation to the invitation of Jesus to cast your lot with him? Are the resources of the congregation stashed and carefully given out to “the family” few? Are the church’s resources scarce as a few fish and loaves in the presence of hungry thousands? Are these resources withheld from the One who can multiply and cause abundance? How are the resources and energy of the congregation deployed? How are those decisions made? How will all of that sit with Jesus on the day we all stand before him?

AN EXPERIENCE OF MINISTRY

What could you and the congregation be and do to make a difference to those all around you? Can you see Jesus in your neighborhood? Can the neighborhood see Jesus in you? If you have not yet done so, put your shoes back on. Get up, get out of the building and go with Jesus to tour the area around your church. In particular go to the places you do not usually go or maybe even feel uncomfortable to go. Keep an open eye and heart, consider: how could your congregation’s resources and energy be multiplied to make a difference? Keep an open ear and heart: ask those you encounter what they know about your church. Listen carefully to what is being said and not being said. When you get back make a record of your findings for future use.

RUMINATING

What is the focus of our congregation?

What initiative can we as a congregation undertake to be disciples, make disciples and make a difference?

What are the resources and energy available? (Using the five types- *physical, individual, formal and informal associations, institutions and economic*- identified in the *Power of Asset Mapping* by Luther Snow, record these assets God has already provided).

Is there a need for a future planning session, utilizing the guide provided by Hinton Rural Life Center², to become focused, take initiative and utilize your resources and energy for being and doing in Christ Jesus?

² A series of resource notebooks for strengthening ministry in town and country churches is available for \$20 each from Hinton Rural Life Center, P.O. Box 27, Hayesville, North Carolina 28904 or by calling 828-389-8336 or via www.hintoncenter.org

HYMN *Filled with the Spirits Power* UMH # 537
(If the hymn is unfamiliar, read it out loud as an act of commitment instead of singing it)

PRAYERS
Day of Pentecost UMH # 542
The Lord's Prayer

BENEDICTION

BEING WITHOUT DOING

Characteristics: High Spiritual Focus

Focus on Evangelism
Focus on Disciple-Making
Matthew 28:18-20

*James warns us that being without doing is deadly
(James 1:22, 2:14-26)*

Inadequate Initiative:

Faith Without Work

BEING AND DOING

Characteristics: High Holistic Focus

Focus on Evangelism
Focus on Disciple-Making
Focus on Needs of Community

*Christian discipleship is to be a **lived out** being of holiness of heart and life; that is **loved out** in doing for both the spiritual and earthly needs of others.*

Faith At Work

INERT AND NEAR DEATH

Characteristics: High Inward Focus

Focus on Chaplaincy
Focus on Comfort of members
Focus on Survival of Institution

*“...I know your works; you have the name of being alive but you are dead” (Revelation 3:1)
Salt without saltiness...s, light under a bushel basket...
(Matthew 5:13-16)*

No Initiative:

Inert Faith

DOING WITHOUT BEING

Characteristics: High Earthly Needs Focus

Primary Focus on Ministry for Needs of Body, Mind and Emotions
(Matthew 25:31)

For by grace you have been saved through faith...it is a gift of God; not the result of works (Ephesians 2:8,9)

Inadequate Initiative:

Good Works

Session 5

Born Again: Welcoming the Stranger

GATHERING AND CALL TO WORSHIPFUL WORK

A LITANY OF VISION

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

Women: the political and economic powers that threaten to fragment and destroy local communities around the world are challenged by the Church;

Men: the longstanding patterns of racism, exploitation of the poor and the powerless and environmental degradation are actively addressed; and

All: the involvement of the Church in this is recognized, lamented, repented and forgiveness is sought.

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

All: all Christians are seen as *partners* in mission, all persons are seen as *neighbors* in Christ.

HYMN *Help Us Accept Each Other* UMH #560
(or) *God of Love and God of Power* UMH #578

DEVOTIONAL *Born Again: Welcoming the Stranger*

Read Acts 10, the story of Peter's vision, Cornelius's vision and the inclusion of the first Gentile believers.

Taboos are incredibly strong social norms. A modern day example would be *not* eating cats or dogs in the United States culture. Imagine, however, having a vision in which God invites you to a feast in which there are thousands upon thousands of gourmet dishes of cat and dog for you to eat. The entire meal, God continues to invite you to eat and eat. If you can imagine such a scene, you might have an idea of the vision Peter has in Acts 10. Here Peter is praying and witnesses God inviting him to eat of all the unclean or taboo animals. Jews do not eat these animals. God has told them not to eat these animals. Yet, Peter is having a vision of God inviting him to eat these animals. It makes no sense.

As he ponders what this vision might mean, three men come looking for him. They have been sent by Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter follows these unclean, these taboo men back to Caesarea. Peter is invited to preach. Yet it is not until these Gentiles, these unclean, these taboo people have received the Holy Spirit that Peter understands his vision. Peter could not have imagined that God would welcome these people into the fold, but it appears God was greater than Peter's imagination.

It is a good reminder for the church that before we are at work, witnessing to our faith, attempting to live into the Kingdom, God is already working before us. And conclusions that we came to long ago may not be what God has in mind for people now.

Reflect for a moment on those times in your faith journey where you have felt like Peter and like Cornelius. If you choose, please share these experiences with others.

AN EXPERIENCE OF MINISTRY

Read through the Experience together. The questions below will continue to refer to the witness presented here.

“Welcoming the Stranger”

Upper Sand Mountain Parish is a Cooperative Parish of ten United Methodist Churches covering about 1000 square miles on Upper Sand Mountain, a sandstone mountain in the Tennessee River Valley of northern Alabama.

Several years ago, the Parish received a grant from the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) to build a storm shelter to provide protection for people whose homes were particularly vulnerable during a tornado. The residents of the neighboring trailer park were of particular concern. After the shelter was built the concern then became how to let people know that it was available for them and to assure them that they were welcome to come.

In the same summer of the completion of the storm shelter, the Kentucky Baptists took Alabama on as a “project”! When they were told by someone that “you don’t go to Alabama without going to Upper Sand Mountain”, a leader of the group made contact with the Parish! Fifty young people came to provide a variety of work, among which was face-painting and puppets.

On the day the project began, 2 boys on bicycles from the park were asked to take flyers to each home announcing that puppets and face-painting would be in a tent on a vacant space from 2-4 p.m. 40 children came on their own, plus mothers pushing strollers with little ones. Puppets told Bible and other stories, faces were painted, songs sung and refreshments served. Then they were asked, “If we do this again next week, will you come?” All said, “YES!” and they did and continue to do so!

An element not initially anticipated is that everything is now done in two languages: for most of the residents of the trailer park English is their second language.

The first Christmas following the initial weekly summer program, 15 children came to the Los Posada Service and one family came for refreshments in the community room/storm shelter following the service. Christmas 2004, near 100 people came to celebrate a Mexican/American Christmas with food, singing and worship in the facility!

The ministry continues each summer with the help of young people who come to Upper Sand Mountain Parish for work camp. Each week a tent is set up for crafts, another for refreshments, and this summer, a third was added as a place where folks could begin to learn, or practice, their English, or their Spanish. Each week they begin with crafts, move to recreation, story time, singing, worship and a meal; parents and children participate as they are able.

Key to the success of the ministry are Rev. Rosendo Sanchez and his wife, Esparanza Baltazar. Rev. Sanchez is a retired District Superintendent from the Methodist Church of Mexico who has come to the North Alabama Conference as a Missioner through the National Hispanic Plan. Both he and Esparanza also live and offer ministry in another area of the Albertville District with employees of chicken processing plants and their families.

The Parish has resisted the suggestion to put a trailer into the park from which to provide ministry, being concerned that residents will live in the area, but not be recognized and acknowledged as a part of the total community. The Parish has begun instead the process of renovating the former Parish Ministry Center to create a United Methodist Hispanic Community Center!

The opportunities for ministry continue to manifest themselves. A weekly conversational Spanish class has been well attended by members of the Parish. When “goodies” from Little Debbie* baked goods to cabbage are received at the Parish Ministry Center, they are eagerly distributed throughout the park by resident “helpers”! An after school program is in the process of being dreamed into reality.³
(This *Experience of Ministry* was received from Rev. Dorsey Walker, Director, Upper Sand Mountain Parish, Sylvania, Alabama.)

Use the questions listed to guide the group’s discussion of what the stories and experience of ministry teaches or has to say to you in your situation. Pray together for insight into God’s will for your church, in response to the experience of others. Here we are inviting you to spend some time, “chewing the cud”, ruminating, over the Experience of Ministry together. (Not that anyone is suggesting that any of you are ruminants!) Some of us just tend to think through things by “chewing”.

- From this Experience of Ministry above, what assets can you identify that were used for ministry? (Luther Snow identifies five types of assets -*physical, individual, formal and informal associations, institutions and economic*- in The Power of Asset Mapping How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts.)
- Using their assets in a different way, what other options/courses of action do you see that they could have taken?
- What are the stories from our congregation’s past that shed light on issues similar to this?
- How do those stories shape our view of ourselves, our assets and what we can share?
- What assets do we have as a congregation to address the same or a similar situation?
- What are the assets in our community that can be shared with others in relation to the Experience of Ministry?

* “Little Debbie” is a brand of bakery snack foods.

- How was the leadership of the laity helpful in the Experience of Ministry?
- How was the leadership of the pastor helpful?
- How was the leadership of other members of the congregation or community helpful?
- What are similar kinds of issues that our community is dealing with and how might we share in the work of the kingdom?

HYMN *They'll Know We Are Christians*
 (or) *Here I Am, Lord*

FWS #2223
UMH #593

LORD'S PRAYER

Might want to emphasize “ ... *Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven ...*”

BENEDICTION

Session 6

Born Again: Moving On

GATHERING AND CALL TO WORSHIPFUL WORK

A LITANY OF VISION

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

Right: the life and ministry of every congregation is honored regardless of size, location, age, ethnicity, culture, economic strength or special context;

Left: the special opportunities, challenges, gifts and needs of congregations in rural or town and country settings is recognized;

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

Men: each congregation enables new persons to experience a life-changing encounter with God in Jesus Christ so that all may experience the gospel within the Reign of God; and

Women: each member, every congregation and every community experiences a new birth of faith, hope and love through the movement of God's Spirit among all people.

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

Left: new resources are developed which respect and respond to the unique problems and potentials present in town and country communities,

Right: especially those dependent upon agriculture, forestry, mining, fisheries and other producers of food, fiber and natural resources.

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

Right: each person is nurtured in a faith relationship with God as a Christian disciple through life in a faith community

Left: and the personal and spiritual gifts of all disciples are discovered and sent out in mission and ministry to all the world.

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

Women: the political and economic powers that threaten to fragment and destroy local communities around the world are challenged by the Church;

Men: the longstanding patterns of racism, exploitation of the poor and the powerless and environmental degradation are actively addressed; and

All: the involvement of the Church in this is recognized, lamented, repented and forgiveness is sought.

One Voice: As the Church, we have hope. We look forward to a day when:

All: all Christians are seen as *partners* in mission, all persons are seen as *neighbors* in Christ.

HYMN *The Voice of God is Calling* UMH #436
 (or) *This is My Song* UMH #437

DEVOTIONAL *Born Again: Moving On*

Read Acts 1:9-11

The disciples gathered together on Mount Olivet to see Jesus for the last time; or is it? After blessing them, Jesus ascends into heaven. They remain standing there, in awe at what has taken place before their very eyes.

Five months into our second pregnancy, my wife and I finally scheduled an ultra-sound for 4:00 p.m. We decided to take our young son with us so that he could see his new sibling growing. The ultra-sound technician started the process and squealed with glee, “I never thought I’d see twins!” Our son became more fidgety sitting on my lap as I sat stunned in numbed silence.

That night we had an all church potluck supper. As we walked home to get our covered dish, I turned to my wife and said, “We’re going to have to buy a new car, after just paying off this one.” “A new car!?” she responded, “I’m just wondering how we’re going to survive.” The congregation gave us some space that night but was a little concerned at our numbed silence.

At various times in our lives, we are confronted with things that are amazing and unexpected. We are shocked at the ways in which God is at work in the world. And our temptation is to sit in numbed silence or to stand looking up to heaven.

Spend some time reflecting (either silently or shared) on your own experiences of amazement. What happened to you? How long did it take before you were ready to move on? After a while, continue.

Yet, the angels appear to the disciples – and through the story, to us. They remind us, “Why do you stand looking up to heaven?” The Holy Spirit has come, and we are called to share the Good News, to invite others into living out the Kingdom.

AN EXPERIENCE OF MINISTRY

There is no story today. Or maybe there is: This Congregation continues The Story!

Looking at the half-sheets of paper or lists of our assets, how is God calling us to be good stewards of them, to share them with others?

How is God calling us to move out of our amazement, and into Spirit filled sharing of ourselves with others in the name of Jesus Christ? What will we do? Be?

Organize the assets you’ve gleaned each week by clustering what seems to go together

Step back...reflect individually...what are you discerning?...what is emerging?...

Talk as a group about what you see

Determine a name for each cluster of assets, i.e. community celebration, day camp, mission trip, sidewalk Sunday School, before and after school care, elderly transportation, repair and maintenance, woodworking class/group, skateboard park, prayer group

Separate the named clusters from each other on the walls around the room.

Ask each person in the group to stand in front of the ministry in which they would most like to be involved.

On a piece of newsprint or flip chart page, put the name of the ministry, i.e. Before and After School Care, write each person's name who wants to be involved; tape the half sheets naming the assets or write the assets from the pages of each session to the page.

Determine from each ministry group who will do the presenting to the Church Council.

HYMN *Many Gifts, One Spirit* UMH # 114
 (or) *Sois la Semilla (You Are the Seed)* UMH # 583

COMMUNION

Be sure to end with the prayer on UMH p. 11:

**Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery
in which you have given yourself to us.
Grant that we may go into the world
in the strength of your Spirit,
to give ourselves for others,
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

BENEDICTION