



FLORIDA CONFERENCE FOCUSES ON HEALTHY CHURCHES THROUGH ITS CONGREGATIONAL TRANSFORMATION MINISTRY

Not only does the Florida Conference lead the denomination in new church starts, in 2002, it became the first Annual Conference to create a full-time Office of Congregational Transformation (OCT), a ministry supported by connectional giving and dedicated to helping churches grow and thrive.

“Churches, like living organisms, need a certain environment in order to grow,” says Rev. Kendall Taylor, executive director of OCT. “We define a healthy church as one that has balanced its inward and outward focus,” he noted. “A healthy church is one that can blend its missionary outreach to the community with caring for its own members through worship, fellowship and small group ministries.”

“Churches that maintain an inward focus are not doing what Christ called us to do in the Great Commission,” Taylor explained. “Our role as church members is to become disciples for Christ and to make new disciples for Christ in our own church communities.” (Matthew 28: 16-20)

According to Taylor, the Florida Annual Conference has developed, and every congregation is required to complete, an annual Congregational Category Survey. The survey instrument measures such things as worship attendance, new membership through professions of faith, leadership development and training, rotation of leadership, small group ministries, connectional giving, hospitality to non-members and outreach to the community. It is a simple snapshot of congregational health at a particular point in time.

The survey will yield a score for the congregation, which indicates it falls into one of three categories: transforming, maintaining or dying. There are two other categories, beginning and reproducing, but the survey doesn't measure them. Since the program began in 2003, most churches – about 80% -- have been in the maintaining category.

Churches in that category could be “high maintaining” or “low maintaining,” Taylor said. “Wherever they score, their ministry focus will determine whether they move toward transforming or toward dying. A congregation that adopts an inward ministry focus will eventually die,” he said. “However, one that chooses to blend its missionary outreach to the community with caring for its own members will likely be strong and vibrant.”

In 2003 the Conference approved a transformational process called Natural Church Development (NCD). Using this process, a congregation can assess its health and implement ministries that will help it become a “transforming” congregation.

The Natural Church Development process uses its own much more comprehensive survey to measure eight characteristics of a healthy church:

- Empowering leadership – the church equips, supports and motivates members to be leaders
- Gift-oriented ministry – the church helps its members identify and use their spiritual gifts in ministry
- Passionate spirituality – a church, hungry to know God, living its faith
- Functional structures – a church organized to facilitate the accomplishment of its mission
- Inspiring worship – a worship experience that connects people to God and is joyful and inspiring for members and non-members
- Holistic small groups – provides opportunities for spiritual growth and intensive spiritual interaction. Groups are organized to multiply in number

- Need-oriented evangelism – creating bridges of relationship by meeting the needs of unchurched people and sharing the Gospel with them
- Loving relationships – mutual love and respect for each other

According to Taylor, churches that exhibit these traits are churches that are in mission to the community and the world at large. “By becoming a healthy or transforming church, we can be a positive influence in the world in which we live,” he said.

Taylor said that his office has trained more than 50 coach/facilitators to work with individual churches that participate in the Natural Church Development process. “In most cases, we have noticed increases in attendance, giving and professions of faith,” he said.

In addition to the coaching program, the conference also offers training for clergy and laity through the Healthy Church Academy and Conference Spiritual Formation Team. Study programs and video resources are available. For more information, click on the ministries tab of the Conference web site, www.flumc.org or call OCT at (800) 282-8011, ext. 109.

###