**District Superintendents Report to the Annual Conference**

**Jim Todd, Dean of the Cabinet**

**May 16, 2013**

Good afternoon, Bishop, clergy, and lay members of the Eastern PA Conference! My fellow Cabinet members and I would like to bring you up to date on where we’ve seen the Annual Conference moving in the past year and to highlight direction for the future. Again this year on our Cabinet, we’ve seen some big changes. In late 2012, one of our members stepped down from the Cabinet, and another retired rather suddenly. We give thanks for the excellent work done by both Tom Haugh and Dorothy Watson Tatem. They are sorely missed, but God has shown forth grace by bringing back to the Cabinet table two who had previously retired, as DS’s and elders in the church. These two, Michele Wright Bartlow and H. Joe Tyson are true “RINO’s,” and by that I don’t mean “Republican in Name Only” but “Retired in Name Only.” They hit the ground running when they joined us in January 2013, and both have shown they have what it takes to move back into this challenging position.

The Apostle Paul says this in his letter to the Philippians 2:1 says this:**“***If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,****2****make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*.” Above all, we want to offer encouragement in Christ in our report, as we challenge ourselves as a conference to become more outwardly focused in our common mission and ministry.

Statistics don’t tell the whole story as we look back over the past year, but they do give us some important indications about how we faithful we have been to our mission in the United Methodist Church. Let’s focus on one for a moment. “Professions of Faith.” That is one of the areas where we ask all of our churches to set goals for growth on the Vital Congregations website. Did the renewed focus on Professions of Faith lead us to add 100 persons by profession since the previous year? It depends. If church leaders simply went onto the website and put down some “best guess numbers” and never looked at it again until the following year, then no, there is no correlation. For the Vital Congregation goals to mean something, churches need to develop strategies to help guide them toward meeting the goals.

Let’s quickly review all five of the areas where churches are being asked to submit numerical goals. They are:

1. Average Weekly Worship Attendance
2. Professions of Faith
3. Small Groups
4. Members in Mission
5. Dollars Given to Mission

These five areas are at the core of what we are about as Christians and United Methodists. If we are doing other things well as a local church, but are not doing well with these five or are ignoring them to pursue other goals, we have lost our way as a church. If we are about *Making disciples for the transformation of the world*, then these five are indeed vital to fulfilling that mission.

There is a commonality which runs through each of these five areas, in addition to their being central to the life of the healthy church. They are outwardly focused. We love a term which is used by a staff member at Church of the Resurrection near Kansas City, Debi Nixon, who developed the CATCH program used in many of our churches. Debi talks about the need for churches to be “relentlessly outwardly focused” in all they do. That is, there is never a time in the local church when the pastors, staff, lay leadership, and all the members are NOT focused on those who are still outside the church.

Let’s take increasing worship attendance, the first of the five key areas. Unless we’re going to spend time reaching disaffected and often disgruntled members who haven’t shown up in a long time, the way we increase worship attendance is by offering new opportunities for worship to those in the community who, up until now, have not attended. Professions of faith by their very nature have to be focused on those who are not yet a part of our worshiping community, unless we only focus on our confirmands. Confirmation classes for young teens are vitally important, but the Gospel compels us to go out into our communities to introduce others to Jesus Christ. People involved in hands on mission…need I say more? Dollars given to mission…again, that’s fairly obvious. Perhaps the one not so obvious is that middle one: Small group ministry. On its face, it sounds like something done for those already a part of the church, but wise church leaders also know that there are people in our communities turned off by imposing church buildings, but may very well respond to the invitation to meet with a small group of people in someone’s home to study the Bible and to pray.

Back in September 2012, Dr. Gil Rendle, a clergy member of this Annual Conference, met with the Cabinet on retreat and got us started on the right foot, just before the charge conference season started. He kept pushing us on a fundamental question: “Who is our client?” In other words, who are we trying to serve? The most obvious answer is, of course, the Lord, but Gil wanted us to answer the question in the human realm. Was it the Annual Conference? The local church? The community? He helped us to see that the ones we are called to serve are those who have not yet met Jesus. All that we do should be focused on introducing others to Jesus Christ.

As a Cabinet, when we come together for our meetings, we have one page sheets which we call sharing forms, which cover a variety of different areas important to the Bishop and the Cabinet. That form has remained unchanged for as long as I’ve been on Cabinet until this past year, when at the urging of one of our DS’s, we added a new category: “What opportunities did you have for witness, and how did you respond?” Even though our Cabinet members are not connected to any one church, we bear the light of Christ no matter what, and we need to be outwardly focused in all we do in our personal lives.

Faith sharing is something all of us need to learn more about, and we were delighted when Christopher Kurien was able to arrange for Dr. Eddie Fox to come and spend a day in our Annual Conference to teach us about faith sharing. Even Superstorm Sandy could not keep him away, and by moving the event from November to March, we were able to advertise it more and have more people join us. We want to make sure everyone knows there are DVDs from the faith sharing event are available in each of the district offices which can be a valuable training resource in each local church.

Of course, a big part of being relentlessly outwardly focused is how we welcome people when they do show up in our churches. Recently, a retired pastor contacted me by email and said this:

*“I want to share with you some recent experiences that, in my opinion, speak directly to our attendance issues.  We met a man who is a life-long United Methodist who moved here from the DC area.  He visited three of our churches and wound up in a different denomination.  When I asked him to tell me about it, he said it had nothing to do with music or worship styles or any of that.  It was simply that no one ever contacted him in person, by phone, by email - nothing.  That is sad.  It reminds me of an experience my wife and I had after I retired and was asked to fill in at one of our churches.  When we arrived and walked in the door, several people looked up from their conversations, stared at us, and went right back to their conversations.  I was deeply distressed as you can imagine.  We stood in the lobby until we finally went up to someone and told them why we were there.  The person who was to be our contact/host arrived some 15 minutes after the scheduled time.”*

[Insert video, *What if Starbucks Marketed Like a Church? A Parable.* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D7_dZTrjw9I>. Cut off at 3:24].

Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:35 are simple and direct, “*I was a stranger and you welcomed me*.” “Radical hospitality” is the term used in the book Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, by Bishop Robert Schnase. We commend this book as a good starting place for any congregation wishing to become more outwardly focused and to intentionally work on goals and strategies for the five areas identified on the Vital Congregations website, because each of the Five Practices identified by Bishop Schnase match up with the five areas where our churches are setting goals.

We’d like to highlight some of the work being done on each of the districts by churches or groups of churches to more strategically reach their communities for Jesus Christ.

Supt. Powell reports that on the Central District, the following things are happening, and she reports the goal of each of these projects is to enable congregations to use resources for the purpose of increasing missional vitality and fostering good stewardship practices:

(1) Creating expanded uses of the church building through space-sharing, involving 12 churches

(2) Forming the New Journey Cooperative Ministry of Berks County, involving 11 churches

(3) Re-structuring church buildings for new purposes (ie apartments for seniors) while maintaining space for worship and ministry, involving 1 church

(4) Merging congregations for more effective ministry, involving 4 churches.

On the NW District, Supt. Nicholson shares that the Bethany Church in Lebanon noticed the lack of men and particularly young men in the church. One of their responses was “Five Stone Fight Club”. Inspired by the five stones and sling that David used to defend the children of Israel, the club teaches young men personal defense, sport fighting and physical fitness. Through the personal relationships built at the club, the Bible studies and prayer, young men are coming to know the Lord and joining their young fit bodies to the Body of Christ. When the club lost the space it was renting, neighboring Trinity United Methodist Church made available a large room in its Pathfinder Building so the program could continue to transform lives.

On the East District, Supt. Bartlow reports that Harriman UMC in Bristol, the United Methodist Church closest to the race track, regularly delivers sandwiches and refreshments and pray with the men and women who groom and train the horses. First UMC in Fairless Hills provides meals for homeless families living in a nearby park, and, not waiting until the families come to the church themselves, offers to bring the children to Sunday school.

On the Northeast District, Supt. Cotto tells us

(2) people are being trained to improve their job skills and job search through the Bridges out of Poverty initiative at Faith Church in Stroudsburg

(3) soup kitchens and food banks are active in the churches on the northern end of the district

(4) ecumenical ministries happening at small and big churches and there are several clusters where churches and pastors are working together to serve their communities through a variety of community projects.

(6) English as a Second Language program is based at Diamond Church in Hazleton.

(7) Vital ministry to the rapidly increasing Latino population is happening through the witness of La Trinidad in Allentown, La Hermosa in Easton and the Korean community in Bethlehem

On the Southeast District, Supt. Tyson reports that several pastors under the leadership of Steve Morton prepared a Lenten Bible study series *Upon this rock* that featured a video teaching segment and study guide. The series was used widely throughout the district in churches both large and small.

On the Southwest District, I have been delighted to see at least half a dozen churches in the past year begin community meal programs, where folks get together to provide a meal to the community one night a week or one night a month. Churches which have been doing this for a while report that it transforms their congregations and causes them to re-shift priorities to reaching those outside their walls. One such program which just began is called “Kitschy Kitchen,” and is done at the Long Memorial Church in Neffsville, Lancaster County. It was recently featured on the front page of the Lancaster newspaper just a couple of weeks ago. When churches begin unique ministries like this, it gets noticed and reported, and we begin to communicate to our communities what we most want them to know about us; that is, that we care about **them!**

We are pleased to report that a number of our urban churches in both Philadelphia and Lancaster have been working for more than a year with an organization based in Philadelphia called *Partners for Sacred Places*. *Partners* has been helping more than 20 urban churches in both cities see themselves as community resources, and to explore greater opportunities to partner with community organizations. Again, there is an emphasis here on becoming more outwardly focused.

Finally, a word about *Mission ConneXions.* If this is voted affirmatively in a few minutes, this will open up a whole new way for our churches to be able to reach out to their communities. Too often, our churches have seen themselves as being in competition with each other, as if the number of unchurched people out there were a limited resource. They’re not!

Once again, we need to listen to Jesus as he tells us that the “*Fields are ripe for the harvest*” (John 4:35). When more than 80% of people on a given Sunday morning are not to be found in any church building or worship service, there are plenty of opportunities to go around for all of our churches. Why not cooperate instead of compete? Why not develop a community-wide or regional strategy among our churches to reach out to those who do not yet know Christ, and have all of our churches becoming places of welcome, of “radical hospitality?”

We have been very intentional about not calling these gatherings of churches “clusters,” but “Mission ConneXions,” which put the focus on what we’re to be about: being in mission with other Christians, in our communities, for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We hope you’ve noticed a common theme here today! As happy as we are that we had 100 more professions of faith in 2012 than the year before, we believe that number could be much, much higher. If all of us, in our personal lives, in the lives of our congregations, in what we do as an Annual Conference can move toward becoming relentlessly outwardly focused while at the same time calling upon the strength of the LORD in helping us to do so, God can do a GREAT THING among us!

In a world filled with reports of bombings, shootings, terminal illnesses, depression and despair, God has called God’s people to share the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the only hope of the world. Your superintendents want to partner with you in that work! May God bless all of you in the wonderful work you are already doing!