

**The Arkansas Annual Conference
of The United Methodist Church
Bishop's Mission Plan - "Next Steps"
Bishop Gary E. Mueller - April 2016**



Spiritual Revival is a Movement, Not a Moment

Almost six years ago, the Arkansas Annual Conference began the Imagine Ministry journey as **Phase ONE** of understanding and adapting to a projected future characterized by financial unsustainability, decreasing membership and more and more churches focused primarily on survival instead of faithfulness. Thankfully, **Phase One** was short-lived as Imagine Ministry quickly moved into its next two phases.

Phase Two involved the Annual Conference adopting a mission, vision, and core measures (since revised in response to feedback from local congregations) that articulate the future you believe God envisions for Arkansan United Methodists.

Vision:

Congregations and surrounding communities transformed by the Holy Spirit to demonstrate love of God and neighbor, holy living, and justice.

Mission:

To make disciples of Jesus Christ equipped to transform the world with excellence and passion.

Core Measures used to evaluate the deep change necessary to make disciples of Jesus Christ and transform the world:

1. We will be enriched by our Wesleyan heritage of Scriptural holiness so that we are connected by our mission of making disciples instead of being connected by our apportionments, appointments and benefits.
2. We will establish the mission field as the primary focus of our attention and resources instead of directing the majority of our attention and resources to mere maintenance of congregations and clergy.
3. We will equip laity and clergy to transform individuals, communities and the world instead of trying to satisfy personal preferences of current members and ensure congregational preservation.
4. We will address the unique context of each mission field instead of depending on standardized programs and structures.

Phase Three began when significant changes in Annual Conference structure, alignment, staffing and budgets were implemented in order to re-direct resources toward fostering greater vitality in local congregations. This work is now underway, and will continue to unfold in the next several years under the leadership of the Extended Cabinet and the Executive Director of Mission and Ministry.

Over the last four years, I have spent a great deal of time observing, asking questions, learning, consulting, reflecting and praying in order to answer the question, "What's next?" **Phase Four** of our journey together involves embarking passionately and intentionally on a trajectory that focuses fully on the only place that actually can do what God is calling us to do: the local church.

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Our Trajectory for the coming years:

Creating vital congregations that make disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples, equipped to transform lives, communities and the world.

I believe the churches, laity and pastors of the United Methodist Church in Arkansas need to embrace the 10 "Next Steps" in order for us to move ahead on this trajectory God has charted for us. However, there are two important things to remember about these next steps. First, they have been shaped by the previous phases of the Imagine Ministry journey. Second, we will only be able to see the fruit of these next steps as we fully utilize the resources provided through the Center for Vitality and the Center for Technology.

Next Steps for the Arkansas Annual Conference

1. **Experience Spiritual Revival** The churches, laity and pastors of the Annual Conference must experience spiritual revival. We need to experience in deeper ways how Jesus' love is so unconditional he accepts us just the way we are, so transforming he is unwilling to leave us the way we are and so powerful he gives us what we absolutely need but can never get on our own – reconciliation with God, healing and a new way of living that is eternal in every sense of the word. This revival is foundational for everything we do, because we can only passionately share Jesus' love that brings healing, hope, justice and transformation in lives, communities and the world when we first have been transformed ourselves.
2. **Tell the Story** The Annual Conference will tell Phase Four of the Imagine Ministry story as it communicates how the 10 "Next Steps" are bearing fruit in local congregations. The Annual Conference will communicate intentionally, consistently and in a variety of ways the story of how local congregations are becoming vital in order to make disciples of Jesus Christ, who make disciples equipped to transform lives, communities and the world.

Next Steps for District Superintendents

3. **Broaden Disciple-Making through District Mission Plans** District Superintendents will become skilled in developing District Mission Plans that align with the Bishop's Mission Plan. Often it will involve working with existing churches to reach out in mission to their community in new ways. Sometimes it will mean finding new ways to reach new people. But the goal is always the same: to create and develop vital congregations who are ready and willing to make new disciples in new mission fields.
4. **Make Mission-Field Appointments** The Cabinet will become proficient in making mission-field appointments. This may be one of our most challenging undertakings, because we have spent so much energy over the years trying to keep churches and pastors content rather than focusing primarily on the people outside our doors in the mission field surrounding every congregation. The Cabinet will need to work harder, smarter and more prayerfully to match the right pastor with the right gifts in the right mission field at the right time, instead of paying primary attention to salary, tenure and age.

Next Steps for Congregations

5. **Look Like the Neighborhood** More congregations will increasingly begin to look like their neighborhoods. A church's neighborhood is the heart and soul of its mission field. A church that looks like its neighborhood has taken the time to develop relationships with the people there, reach out in ways that make a real difference in their lives and begin being in ministry with - and not just to - them.
6. **Grow By "1"** More churches will continue to grow every year by at least one new adult profession of faith, at least one more person in worship, at least one additional small group and at least one more ministry that reaches into the mission field. Only 310 of our 683 churches had a profession of faith in 2012. Sadly, this statistic indicates a lack of vitality and readiness to face the mission field of too many churches in the Annual Conference. Every single church—regardless of its size—can be vital and reach its mission field with excellence and passion

Next Step for Laity

7. **Unleash Lay Leadership in Ministry** Laity will be coached and mentored so they increasingly demonstrate passion, boldness and excellence in faith sharing, servant ministry, stewardship and using their spiritual gifts. Disciples make other disciples. Increasing the number of new disciples who are equipped to contribute to the vitality of their congregations so they can make disciples who make disciples will enable churches to reach their mission fields with excellence and passion.

Next Step for Pastors

8. **Grow Excellent and Passionate Clergy** Pastors will be coached and mentored so they increasingly demonstrate passion, boldness and excellence as spiritual leaders through personal discipleship, preaching, evangelism, mission-field engagement, stewardship and equipping laity for ministry. Our clergy leaders must demonstrate these basic competencies if they are going to lead vital churches that successfully engage the mission field.

Next Step for the Arkansas Context

9. **Create Vital African - American Congregations** The Arkansas Annual Conference will create vital, self-sustaining and growing African-American churches. There are nearly 450,000 African-Americans in Arkansas, and only a handful of vital, self-sustaining and growing African-American United Methodist congregations. Strong churches must be developed in order to reach the mission field for which God has given us responsibility. This is not just an issue for African-Americans; it is vitally important for the entire Arkansas Annual Conference.

Next Step for a Changing Culture

10. **Reach the "Nones"** The churches of the Arkansas Annual Conference will connect with the previously churched, de-churched and never churched, especially the "nones." Twenty percent of adults in America—including more than one-third of those under 30—identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated. Many of these "nones" consider themselves spiritual in some way, but reject traditional congregational life. Laity are in positions to build relationships and share Jesus'

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love through local churches. Clergy need to be committed to training, nurturing and supporting laity in this work.

Taking the Next Steps

These next steps will take time, involve ongoing adaptive learning and send us on some unexpected detours, because there is never an easy shortcut to deep and lasting change. The rigors of this journey over the next several years, however, are worth it because it is Jesus himself who is inviting us to join him.

Various groups around the Conference are generating ministries and resources to equip laity and clergy for transformation. We have intentionally pursued spiritual revival by sharing together in prayer and spiritual disciplines, such as the Spiritual Revival Initiative, earlier this year. The Cabinet has gained ground in processing vast amounts of data concerning our congregations in order to make better mission field appointments. The impact of spiritual revival is felt most tangibly through events such as Veritas and the Grow-By-One Summit. Transformation is one prayer, one plan, one life changed by the grace and love of Jesus—one step at a time.

What You Can Do

You can play an essential role in these next 10 steps as you join in fervent, sustained and corporate prayer; focus more on the future than the past; challenge your local church to reach out into your mission field; share your joy at being part of Jesus' mission; and long for our church to become a Spirit-led movement again!