

MINISTRY WITH * FOCUSES ON PARTNERSHIPS

BY ERIN EDGEMON

A GROWING NUMBER OF UNITED METHODIST CONFERENCES and congregations are partnering with those they serve in an effort to create more vibrant communities and address the root causes of poverty.

It is a shift from “ministry to ...” to “ministry with ...” The preposition makes all the difference as these ministries are built around relationships – listening to neighbors’ challenges and dreams, learning about the assets already within the community and journeying together toward a shared vision of a better future.

“Ministry with the Poor” is one of The United Methodist Church’s Four Areas of Focus. Since 2008, leadership for the emphasis has rested with the General Board of Global Ministries but is shifting to the General Board of Church and Society. Building upon the lessons learned over the past eight years, the vision for 2017-20 is to grow partnerships and leverage resources in three areas identified by each annual conference to address issues of poverty and create thriving, vibrant communities.

As the website (www.zipcodeconnection.org) for the Zip Code Connection in the North Texas Conference says: “Poverty is ... a complicated set of interdependent variables that we must attack more or less simultaneously. Communities that have been in poverty for multiple generations frequently have absent or broken infrastructure that is necessary to support hope and healthy connections to God, to

neighbors and to resources for all community members.”

A key strategy in the coming quadrennium will be equipping teams of United Methodists for transformational, relationship-based ministries with people living in poverty, ministries that work to eliminate “we” and “they” thinking and language, ministries that build community and abundant life for all God’s children.

MINISTRY WITH NEIGHBORS

Lynn Parsons directs The Zip Code Connection. “‘Ministry with’ is about mutually transformative connections,” she says. “It is a relationship, or a series of relationships, in which each partner grows and is transformed as a result.”

Zip Code Connection began in 2013 by identifying 140 churches in the South Dallas/Fair Park zip code and inviting them to participate in work around community engagement, education, health and wellness and economic development.

In South Dallas, retired teachers, principals and others living there now tutor and mentor children due to the ministry. Candidate forums and voter registration drives are fostering community engagement and increased voter turnout three-fold, Parsons said.

Zip Code Connection is hiring area residents part-time to research the needs for housing rehabilitation as well as health care, education and job training in partnership with the city. Neighbors are talking to neighbors to identify needs.

In Red River County, residents have no access to public transportation or emergency health care. Zip Code Connection opened a community center there in which the Boys and Girls Club offers afterschool and summer programs. Lunches for senior citizens and GED classes are offered, all through partnerships.

The program is also working with the community to increase the number of licensed day care centers to prepare children for kindergarten.

MINISTRY WITH THE DISENFRANCHISED

The Pajarito Mesa is home to hundreds of people living on 18,000 acres in the New Mexico desert. Residents there have no electricity, sewer service, roads or street markings. They share a water fill station. Pajarito is 15 miles from downtown Albuquerque – but a world away.

Many Pajarito residents don’t speak English and some are in the United States without legal documentation, said Cheryl Hicks who leads the United Methodist ministry there with her husband, Don.

The couple drives 50 minutes each way to volunteer at Pajarito. They took over leadership of United Methodist ministries there nearly two years ago when the Rev. Lourdes Calderon (former pastor of St. Andrew’s United Methodist Church in Albuquerque) received another appointment. Calderon started the ministry more than 10 years ago.

The Hickses seek support and funding to provide programs and needed food and medical care. The ministry is based on the relationship being built between the Pajarito community and members of the newly formed Cornerstone United Methodist Church in Albuquerque. The church provides a mobile food pantry once a month; GED, English as a second language and computer classes; family counseling before and after school programs and other special events.

“I feel as long as we have a relationship with these folks we have a chance to make a big difference,” Cheryl Hicks continued. “I don’t see ministry happening without that relationship.”

Following a late 2014 visit to the community, the Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, Church and Society general secretary, said, "What (the residents) are doing reminded me of the promises recorded in Isaiah 35:1-12. The families are resilient and determined. They are working together as a community to bring about a 'blooming in the desert.'"

MINISTRY WITH THE INCARCERATED

"What is different about our ministry is that we are a church inside the prison," said the Rev. Lee Schott.

Women at the Well is a United Methodist congregation inside the walls of the Iowa Correctional Institute for Women in Mitchellville, Iowa. Inmates are members and leaders, deciding what projects to take on and how offerings will be spent. Schott estimates at any given time the church affects about 100 to 150 women, 20 percent of the prison population.

Church members hold an annual Vacation Bible School and open houses for other inmates. Offenders lead worship twice a year and conduct their own prayer groups during the week. Women at the Well also provides classes to prepare women for reentry to society.

"What (this ministry) really ends up doing is creating a church community that cares about each other," she said. This is life-affirming for many women, many of whom are spending large portions of their lives in prison.

"They are dealing with shame and guilt," Schott said. Many have grief over leaving children and family behind, and having family members die while they are in prison. "Grief ends up being the common denominator."

Before Women at the Well, many of the women had never been affirmed as people of worth. "They gain a sense of self that they never had," Schott said.

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Forum started young leader on advocacy path

WHILE IT HAS BEEN more than a decade since the Rev. Kathleen E. Kind participated in a Young Clergy Leadership Forum (YCLF), she will never forget the experience.

"I have a deep love and appreciation for that experience and my continued relationship with (the General Board of Church and Society)," said Kind, now superintendent of the Altoona District in the Susquehanna Conference in central Pennsylvania.

"Connecting and networking with other young clergy was a gift," said Kind. "I remember great presentations that spoke to a place within me that didn't see the light of day in the local church often enough. We spent time preparing and participating in advocacy – voice and presence can be powerful – in order to bring about change."

Before Kind's experience in the leadership forum, she had been serving as a pastor for about six years. "Both churches I had served had been in small towns that were somewhat homogenous. The folks in the churches were similar to one another in terms of experience, worldview, ethnicity, socio-economic standing, education and politics."

That atmosphere reminded Kind of her gym class in elementary school. "We would line up and space ourselves two arm-lengths away from one another, creating a safe space – our neighbors wouldn't penetrate it. Sometimes I feel like we are that way in the church. All we know is that which is an arm's length from us, and because of the space we have created for ourselves, we are safe and protected from anything or anyone outside of our immediate space.

"Participating in the YCLF connected me with other young people who wanted to drop their arms and find a way to be



COURTESY PHOTO

The Rev. Kathleen Kind

together, find our neighbors and penetrate one another's lives. As a follower of Jesus, I have a responsibility to not ignore the realities of those who are outside of my arms' length. I need to walk with my neighbors, hear their stories and lessen the gap between us."

In 2012, Kind was nominated to serve on Church and Society's board of directors.

"One of the areas where I've been able to spend some time has been around the Social Principles," she said. "I've explored how the Social Principles can give voice to so many aspects of who we are as a global church."

As a district superintendent, Kind is an advocate for young clergy from her district participating in the Young Clergy Leadership Forum.

"For the past two years, young clergy have come from my district," she said. "They've returned from their experiences excited, enthusiastic and with a new appreciation of the church and how they might lead in our churches. As much as I enjoyed my own experience participating in the young clergy gathering with GBCS, I think I appreciate sending new young pastors even more. I love that they are having a similar experience to mine. It is a life-giving experience that inspires them to serve the church with a new passion."

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