

Church Growth, or Church Development? **By Gary Roberts**

In the August/September issue of UCNews, Rev. Heckles' column considered the definition of mission. I'd like to focus here on what is meant by "Church Development."

My job title is "Associate for Church Development and Renewal." This title reflects a common understanding about church development that goes something like this: Church development equals planting new churches. And church renewal equals reversing the decline in resources (human and financial) for churches in decline. I believe that this understanding of church development is far from complete. Of course, new and renewing churches need to tend to their "development." But church development understood as mission development, justice witness, stewardship development, and widening welcomes is not just for them – it's for all churches. My supervisor in the Church Development Team in Cleveland, Rev. Dave Schoen, is fond of saying "It's ALL about church development."

Many people understand church development somewhat differently. When you raise the subject, it is easy to tell from their responses that they are defining the subject in terms of numbers. For them, church development is about growing in worship attendance, membership, pledge units etc. Some churches even call their church development committees "Church Growth Teams," or something similar. The problem here is that the focus is on numbers, not on widening our welcome, on effective invitation, nor on developing disciples. It suggests statistics and merely joining, not the transformation of lives. It focuses on desired outcomes, perhaps, but misunderstands both why and how to achieve them. In sports, it is a cliché amongst coaches that "if you tend to the fundamentals, the score takes care of itself." I think that, in order to succeed, church development needs to focus on a few fundamentals in church life, and assume God will take care of the outcomes.

So what are the fundamentals of church development in today's culture in Southern California and Nevada? An incomplete list of subjects that define church development would include:

Widening our Welcome – getting clearer about how and why we welcome everyone to our church

Effective Invitation – meeting people at their place of need, telling them of God's work in our life, and inviting them to join in that banquet.

Being Mission – this means both being clear about the church's mission in its community and actively involving a majority of the church in that mission with a commitment of their time to programs that implement the mission.

Becoming Disciples – constantly increasing our understanding of God's presence in our lives, and finding ways in which we can invest our lives in God's work.

All of us could learn to do these things better. Unfortunately, most written resources are better at describing the problem than they are at offering specific suggestions, applicable programs, or great ideas. That's not entirely fair, but it is what I get from much of my reading.

I think that's understandable. We live in a culture that is rapidly changing, one that has been provocatively described as having "antagonistic indifference" to organized religion generally and to their understanding of Christianity in particular. Many of the people with more favorable attitudes towards church tend to be conservative personally, and therefore more receptive to the messages of other churches. In this kind of an environment, good ideas are quickly outdated, and some may be effective in other settings, but not in Southern California and Nevada's incredibly diverse and unique culture.

But these very facts make it all the more important that UCC churches and others with a similar understanding of the gospel give church development the very highest priority. Both the unchurched and the conservatively churched people of Southern California and Nevada's population need to hear that there are churches like your church. Could anything be more important?

Given all this, where do we find the best thinking available? Believe it or not, I think the most relevant help is in our midst. As I get to know the 135 churches that make up Southern California Nevada Conference of the UCC, I am impressed with the incredible spirit of experimentation that many of our churches are bringing to this effort. There seems to be an understanding that old methods are going to produce the same old results, so they are trying new things in their settings, and constantly assess their effectiveness. This willingness to try new things is uncomfortable for some, of course, but plenty of churches are going ahead anyway. And clearly, it is this willingness to experiment that holds the most promise for development of our churches.

If you would like resources to aid you, give me a call – it's my job to stay up-to-date on what's happening in church development around the Conference and the UCC. If you have a success story to tell, please give me a call. Or even a failure. After all, in an environment where all of us are learning how to do church development in our communities, we can learn from both the successes and failures of others. In future columns, I will be publishing the best ideas that come from this communication, and wherever those ideas show up. Stay tuned.