



NEW UMCs

Last month's newsletter featured data comparisons for the most recent years of General Minutes and showed a few hopeful blips of moderation in the ongoing general decline. One of these was an easing in the number of churches reduced from the previous year. Since this number reflects both churches removed from the database and churches added, each of these should be examined. As it turns out, the number added is the most in recent memory. This can happen when two churches merge and change their identity, but most commonly occurs when new church starts reach a point where they either charter or are otherwise recognized as having enough presence to receive a church ID number. It appears that these are on the uptick, a good sign indeed.

On February 21, 2013, days after the last newsletter was submitted to the Communications office of the General Board of Global Ministries, two press releases came out within minutes of each other, both on similar topics and both from general agencies, yet each was totally independent of the other. One was from the General Board of Discipleship (GBOD) and the other from Global Ministries. The topic was starting new churches in the most recent quadrennium. GBOD focused on the US and Global Ministries focused abroad. Both had great reports, with the US coming in with 684 new starts and the rest of the world with 574 new United Methodist faith communities. Both of these figures represented notable increases over the previous quadrennium.

The GBOD article described the domestic starts from the perspective of Path One and the role it played in this increase. Path One originated as a joint initiative from the Council of Bishops and the Network of Congregational Developers. While starting outside

the institutional structure of The UMC, it landed at GBOD. Path One consists of staff members, expert in the various facets of new church development, who lend their services to annual conferences and other pertinent constituencies. They don't have any budget for starting churches themselves, so that task is still the responsibility of the annual conferences.

Of the 684 new starts, the article noted that "all five jurisdictions recorded healthy growth: 232 new churches in the Southeastern, 146 in the South Central, 148 in the North Central, 92 in the Northeastern and 66 in the Western." Also, "By comparison, the denomination planted 278 churches during the previous quadrennium ending in 2007." (There was some confusion in the article about which actual years are included in each quadrennium.)

The counting methodology used by Path One has something to do with the increase. Prior to Path One, there was not a uniform new-start counting agency that polled the annual conferences yearly, so the data had not been collected as efficiently. Furthermore, Path One developed some guidelines on how to define what constitutes a new start. This had not been fully implemented in the previous quadrennium, so those counts are expected to be lower.

Another means of counting new churches is to identify those which show up as new churches in the General Minutes. These will usually be delayed with respect to the Path One counting, since they are identified at different stages of development. Traditionally, these would only show up when chartered, at which time the GCFA ID would have been secured. Each conference has had standards on when a church can charter, such as a certain number in worship or a certain financial status. While not verified, it is believed

that new starts are getting GCFA ID numbers earlier now, and hence showing up in General Minutes data sooner.

At any rate, the number of newly appearing IDs (including mergers, though these are believed to be a small number) has markedly increased in the most recent quadrennium. The average over the 2009–2011 period is 131 per year, vs. 59 the previous quadrennium. A closer look at these increased newly appearing churches finds some curious statistics. For example, in 2011, 53 of the 183 newly appearing churches did not record any members. Also, 16 reported zero attendance, 32 reported less than 20, and 55 less than 40. This causes one to wonder why these churches were brought into official status, at least when traditional standards are considered. The GBOD article noted a greater rate in new starts not failing, but declaring them to be somehow viable at these low numbers is still questionable.

Diversity advocates have sometimes commented that too many new starts are in the white suburbs. The General Minutes does not flag racial/ethnic categories, but insofar as the membership is reported correctly, some feel for this distinction can be obtained. In 2011, 62% of newly appearing churches reporting membership, reported predominantly white members, while 30% were of some other racial/ethnic composition. In 2008, these numbers were 55% and 38%, respectively. Both these racial/ethnic figures are well above current levels of existing UMC churches in the US.

(The flip side of all of this counting is the number of churches closed. This too has increased in the most recent quadrennium, with an average of 393 dropping off the rolls yearly compared to 325 in the prior period.)

The other news release related to new church starts was from Global Ministries, which had set a goal of starting 400 new churches outside of the US in the most recent quadrennium. Global Ministries announced 574 churches from 2008 through 2012.

(As with the other agency, there is apparent confusion over which years are to be included in the quadrennium.) In contrast to the US starts, the vast majority of these were not started by annual conferences. Also unlike the US, the general agency, in this case Global Ministries, did have a high level of direct involvement in the actual starting. This often happened in the form of missionaries facilitating the new ministries or overseeing multiplication of faith communities they have started. A number of these new places happen in countries that have never had any United Methodists before. Southern Asia and Africa have a preponderance of these new ministries. These typically happen through the Mission Initiatives work area at Global Ministries. The counting of these new faith initiatives did not take place in the same manner in the prior quadrennium to make a clean comparison, but it is safe to say that the number of these in the most recent period is a large increase.

All this is to say that there are signs of hope in the statistics. Starting more successful new churches is a proven method of growth. Time will tell if this can counteract the forces of decline, but current trends are moving in the right direction.

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