

REPORT OF CONFERENCE TABLE #6 – COOPERATIVE PARISH MINISTRY

The Sixth Conference Table was held on Wednesday, November 12 in the Leesburg District.

“Local churches, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may enhance their witness to one another and to the world by showing forth the love of Jesus through forms of mutual cooperation.” Paragraph 206, The Book of Discipline, 2000

Cooperative Parish Ministry

Cooperative Parish Ministry is an expression of the connectional nature of the United Methodist Church in which two or more churches work together in a formal arrangement to share at least one staff member and strengthen the ministry of all participating churches. No longer just a rural model of ministry, it is also suitable for suburban and urban settings as well as arrangements containing churches from two or more of these settings. Cooperative parish ministry demonstrates good stewardship, features gift-based ministry and is an ideal training environment.

Cooperative parish ministry enhances the stewardship of participating churches. In most cases, the churches in a cooperative parish will receive more ministry per dollar of investment. Utilizing fewer Conference-credentialed clergy than when the churches were separate, expenses can be reduced and/or specialized ministry staff brought onto the team. A smaller investment in ministry staff (especially in the area of benefits) can lead to lower apportionments – both for the local church and for the Annual Conference. Investing in specialists instead of clergy generalists can lead to an expansion of ministry in the partner churches.

Cooperative parish ministry lives out the biblical teaching on spiritual gifts. The staffing is built around the gifting of the Director and involves people with complementary gifts. Since the staff functions like a team, the laity of the churches are also encouraged to discover their spiritual gifts and form teams for doing ministry.

Cooperative parishes make great training grounds for four kinds of people. Candidates for ministry can use their involvement in a cooperative parish as a way of testing their calling and discerning the true nature of that calling prior to undertaking the expensive investment in a seminary education. Seminary students can use their participation in a cooperative parish as a way of gaining practical experience while also receiving a theological education. Those who may direct a cooperative parish in the future can gain valuable insight and experience from being part of a cooperative parish team. Directors of cooperative parishes who are successful in that role will have demonstrated many of the skills needed to serve as Senior Pastors of multi-staff churches thus providing a training and proving ground for those who will serve some of our largest churches.

Cooperative Parish Ministry is a movement that is Christ-centered, God-honoring and outreach focused. Churches that are selected to take part in a Cooperative Parish are those which desire to embrace the future, want to reach their community with the life-

changing message of Jesus, are open to change and are willing to work with other churches to change their community.

Cooperative parishes are formed by the Cabinet and may result from a request from the participating churches or the initiation of the District Superintendent. Cooperative parishes are formed for the purpose of intentional transformation. This is not a strategy for placing several dying congregations together in order to give them a few more years of life. Instead, it is a strategy for bringing new resources and enhancing the current ministries of the participating churches. The District Board of Missions in each district is encouraged to review with the District Superintendent the churches of the district in order to identify possible settings for the formation of new cooperative parishes.

A Cooperative Parish is NOT the same as a multi-point charge (circuit). Cooperative parishes are for churches that want to grow, congregations that want to connect with their community and faith communities that are open to change and doing ministry in new ways. Circuits will become a strategy for linking smaller or struggling congregations that do not reflect the characteristics listed above.

A Word from the Bishop about Cooperative Ministry

“For too long there has not been enough connecting in our connection among congregations. We may be missing opportunities for churches to work together to advance the cause of Christ in our communities. There may be financial advantages to considering cooperative parish ministries in some situations. The cost of each church having its own ordained pastor has become a challenge for smaller congregations. The cooperative parish ministry is really not new, and it has always been part of our tradition as American Methodists. It may be one of those ideas whose time has come, again.” – Bishop’s Corner, UM Review

More information about Cooperative Parish Ministry can be found on the web site of the Florida Conference – www.flumc.org.

We thank the members of the Conference Task Force on Cooperative Parish Ministry for their hard work. The members were Bob Hobby, Jeffrey Ice, Frank McKown, Dave Herman, Don Nations, Charles Lever, St. Clair Moore, Cliff Patrick, Julie Bullerdick, Charles Weaver, Jacquie Leveron, Geraldine McClelland and Jim Knight.