

Acts 12: 24 Churches

Superintendent's Report, June, 2011

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I am honored to be reporting for the twelfth time to the conference. It is a joy for me to be able to serve each of you and each church. I also have great joy in the people that I work with. I am thankful for each person that serves as part of the conference administrative staff: Al Sones, Sue Gonzalez, Kerrie McCluskey, and Diogenes Cezila. I am also thankful for each member of the conference boards, and especially for Jack Steele who chairs the conference board of administration, and Al Sones who chairs the MEG board. I get to work with good people. It is a great joy.

I also want to report that I have great joy in my walk with God. I am experiencing joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. Even though this work is often difficult, His yoke is always easy and the burden is light. I continually learn new things about God and about how to serve Him and how to walk with Him.

“Thank you” to our retirees

We want to say a heartfelt “thank you” to Jim Shields and Joe Shimko, both of whom are retiring after conference. While they will both be more formally honored in a gathering of the Wilkes Barre District during conference, we want express our deep appreciation to each of them for their service to Jesus and to our conference. Jim has pastored both Maplecrest and Outlet. Joe has pastored in White Haven. We have been blessed by their presence in our conference.

Memoirs

We have had two pastors who have left their life on earth to be “present with the Lord” during this past year. Kaern Lovett who transferred into our conference from the Florida conference and who never had the chance to pastor a church for us, passed away after a long struggle with cancer. Gil Dutton as a well loved pastor who spent most of his career pastoring Waverly and Ironia churches also passed away this year. Gil’s ministry was characterized by a heart for God and a love for people.

We will miss both Karen and Gil and we are thankful for their work for Jesus among us.

In this year’s report I want to briefly report on three different areas: A simple review of the last ten years; Some areas of concern; and goals for the next five years.

I. Review the last ten years

The first decade of the twenty-first century was generally a good decade for the group of churches that now comprises Acts 12:24 Churches. We have experienced a 61% increase in attendance and a 42% increase in membership.

In addition we have averaged three successful church plants a year over the past ten years. We have closed 5 churches that were planted in the last ten years which had progressed far enough that they were having regular weekly services. We have also had several churches that started as “paper circuits” that never materialized into a full church planting project.

Currently we have 85 churches and church plants. That is a gain of 33 churches over ten years, or an increase of 63%.

The Conference has very good leadership on its boards and is a stable, growing organization with no more than the usual number of crises for an organization of its size. It maintains solid financial health. There is a good spirit of unity and cooperation along with a healthy culture of completing due diligence for new ventures.

I have taught the basic values of Rapid Expansion, Submission, Transformation, Multiplication and Order (STMO) during my tenure and I believe that the conference as a whole is living out those values as best we know how at this time. I believe these values have contributed to both organizational growth and to organizational health.

We all understand that all of these positive gains are a direct result of the grace of Jesus Christ among us and the assistance of the Holy Spirit. We have little to “bring to the table” of Kingdom Expansion except our own helplessness and a willingness to be used by Jesus to advance his Kingdom. We also acknowledge that our primary goal is not an increase in the number of churches or even an increase in attendance in our churches. These numbers are only important because they represent an increase in the number of people who have come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, and they represent broken lives that are being purified by the Holy Spirit. Our goal is not simply to increase the number of churches, but to see increase in THE Church.

II. Concerns

There are also some areas of concern in the conference that we should not ignore.

We have seen large losses in a number of churches. Last year for example, we had eight churches that showed losses of between 20 and 125 in attendance. It should be noted that all but one of these churches ministers to immigrant populations. This reflects the severe distress some of these immigrant churches have been under for the last three years. I estimate that in

the last three to four years conference churches that minister to immigrant populations have lost between 500 and 600 people in attendance. Several of these churches have been through a severe struggle to survive. A few have not survived. Many of the families that have left these churches have returned to their home country because of economic conditions, or have simply become more transient in their search for employment.

All of these churches have been learning to adapt over the last three to four years and a few have actually seen significant growth in that time period.

The other major area of concern in the conference is that despite our growth as a whole, we have about as many churches showing losses as showing growth, and about one third of our churches could be considered plateaued. I understand that attendance numbers are not the sole determiner of whether or not a church is healthy, but if a church has been declining or plateaued for a period of years it is probably sign of one of two things: either the church needs a new leadership style to get to the next level, or the pastor needs to lead the church to start a new church in a neighboring community.

There are also several immediate concerns that deserve our attention.

One of my goals for the coming year is to make sure that we have district or network meetings for every pastor to attend. It is really important that each pastor meet monthly with their peers. When the WAVE began about 13 years ago and pastors began meeting with their peers and sharing their story monthly, two things happened: the rate of moral failures decreased drastically and churches that had not been growing began to grow. We want to re-affirm that monthly meetings are necessary for each pastor.

Secondly, I need to ask pastors to be more diligent about completing their year-end annual reports on line. These reports are due _____. The staff in the conference office has to devote several weeks each year to just trying to get these reports in. This is a simple task that can be done in a few minutes by pastors, but it is literally costing the conference hundreds of dollars and many, many work hours to track down pastors who just choose not to do this on time.

III. Goals for next five years

I am always a bit leery of setting goals. I prefer the school that says we should not set goals; we should just learn to listen to the Holy Spirit and be open to the opportunities he brings into our path. However, it is good for a group that is as geographically and ethnically diverse as our group is, to have a common sense of where we are going in the future.

Our goal as always is to create a culture of rapid expansion. We have learned a lot over the years about what to do and what not to do to create this culture. Here are a few principles we know about creating this culture.

Principles

1. Rapid expansion is not created from the top down. Rapid expansion happens first and foremost by Christians “in the street” reaching people for Christ, and secondarily through churches starting new groups and churches.
2. The role of the conference is to enable the local churches to expand the Kingdom. Through conversions, through new groups, through training new pastors, through starting new churches, the local church is THE agent of rapid expansion. Discerning the ways that a conference can help facilitate this work of a local church is our primary task at the conference level.
3. One way to view rapid expansion is to view it as a deployment issue. The more people we deploy into the streets with the Gospel, the more the Kingdom grows. The more new groups and churches we start, the more the Kingdom grows. The number of people we reach is directly related to the number of people we deploy.
4. That growing the Kingdom is primarily oral work, and that growing the church is primarily “systems” work. Both are legitimate and necessary for rapid expansion to happen.

With these principles in mind, here are our goals for the next five years.

Goals

- A. To create churches planting churches systems that, through the ministry of local churches, produce trained leaders and financing systems which enable local churches to plant new churches all over the world.
- B. To continue to empower pastors to create networks of churches all over the world which they oversee and essentially superintend, in compliance with Free Methodist polity and the Book of Discipline.
- C. To have every church involved in creating new groups and new churches. Even if a church cannot take the initiative to plant a church on its own, it can at least assist in providing support

for a church plant. “churches planting churches” resourcing conference. This will supplement our current annual Multiplication Training Event as a resource for local churches.

E. To create Friends Churches systems in a number of different cities. These lay-led small churches of twenty people may enable us to reach thousands without the costs of pastoral salaries and real estate. They can also provide a needed path of ministry to many in our local churches who have a sense of wanting to do more for Jesus, but who are not sure what that “more” may be.

F. To create more resources regarding holiness theology, both in the form of training classes and by producing web-based resourcing.

G. To upgrade support systems for pastors through district/network peer groups and greater focus for MEG clusters on pastoral support.

Conclusion

This is the history and the humble goals of a group of believers whom God desires to bless. And yet, in spite of all the words we have spoken and actions we have done, we are always aware that:

We bring our helplessness to God, and find that he helps us.

When we are weak, He sustains us.

When we struggle, He supports us.

When we are defenseless, He defends us.

We thrive, in his acceptance.

We submit, and he honors us.

We lay down our plans, to hear from his Spirit.

We move forward, by prayer.

We are healed, by His gentle grace.

We continually seek to have our love purified, so that we can adequately love God and others.

We use our best gifts, for His just cause.

Our hearts reside in joy, because we see his goodness everywhere we turn.

At the end of the day we rest, because we've been blessed beyond what we deserve.

May the Lord of the harvest give the increase.