

## **A Plan of Action for the Churches of Syracuse**

*(adopted by consensus by the Citywide Leadership Team on Jan. 13, 2015)*

### Introduction

This document is the result of a growing awareness that, for all of the good initiatives that have begun over the past year, there is little significant progress or lasting change that can be pointed to, in terms of moving toward a genuinely collaborative citywide ministry. There is also an increasing (and double-edged) sense of frustration brought on by (a) a top-down mandate to do ministry in a totally new and different way and (b) the complete lack of apparent progress toward that end.

In light of that, the available options have limited appeal and viability:

- ~ muddle on as we've been doing
- ~ throw the towel in and give up
- ~ press on full speed ahead, regardless of all questions, concerns, complaints, foot-dragging and disagreement over goals and methodology.

It was in that context that Mike Nevin and Craig French met on Saturday, Jan. 10, 2015, to see if there might be any hope and any way for moving forward constructively with broad-based support and participation. We have spent much time and effort over the past year trying to get everyone on board the same train and train track. We now believe that exercise to be both fruitless and pointless. We therefore offer the following proposal as an alternative.

This proposal is centered around the recognition that the various churches have different tolerances for change and the pace of change. A one-size-fits-all approach is doomed to dissent and failure. Instead of that, this proposal recognizes that the city churches are at different points in the congregational life-cycle; in their hopes for, confidence in and approach to the future; and in their ability to handle change.

Key to the proposal is giving churches and people *choices*. The choices described below may not be ideal for any one of us personally or for any one of our churches, but we believe that some choice is better than no choice. Another core element of the proposal is the creating of a framework for moving forward in partnership and collaboration with other congregations, while simultaneously keeping the decision-making as close to the grassroots as possible.

The proposal provides churches with a chance to choose from three different starting points for the revitalizing of United Methodist ministry in the city of Syracuse. Like the staggered start of a relay race, these three starting points are not isolated from each other, but truly part of a single and shared revitalization process.

In a nutshell, this proposal creates several clusters or units of like-minded and/or like-positioned congregations, all under the umbrella of a single parish. Congregations will be matched up by affinity, not by location or budget size (especially in terms of pastoral appointment). It is our fervent hope and prayer that churches will prove to be much more ready and willing participants, when they are allowed to be honest about who and what they are and the pathway to the future that seems to suit them best, and when they are surrounded and supported by willing partners.

Before delineating the three different starting points, it is essential to note that, regardless of where churches choose to place themselves, they are all subject to the benchmarks previously established by the Cabinet of Upper New York Annual Conference. Similarly, the churches will continue to be served by a single clergy team and appointed director (though the alignment of that team may well differ from today's pattern). Additionally, the process of revitalization will likely—and almost surely—result in a congregational make-up different from the pattern we have today.

All city congregations will continue to function under a single, over-arching and coordinated umbrella. A key component of this will be the next stage of the current citywide leadership group: a citywide "parish council" with representation from each existing congregation and with still to be defined areas of overall responsibility and authority. Apart from the steps described below, any changes in church organization, legal status and autonomy remain to be considered and dealt with as part of the revitalization process.

Finally, it is important to note that the three starting points are only that ... starting points. A church choosing to begin one place (at one particular starting point or in one particular category) will be free to move to a different category, if circumstances change. That is to say, the categories will be permeable, not fixed or permanent. While the categories will be clearly demarcated and distinct from one another, we want the revitalization process to be as fluid and dynamic as possible--with churches able to speed up (or slow down) their approach to the overall change process, in response to God's leading.

### 3 Categories (or Groups) of Churches

A key differentiation among churches is their level of comfort with change. The descriptions that follow are built around the pace of change--fast track, slow track, side track. Churches will be asked to decide which track is "right" for them. Each church will have the next month to make that decision, then report the decision to the citywide leadership team before the end of February 2015.

The anticipated outcomes of the Fast Track and Slow Track categories are exactly the same (other than pace): new, enhanced and invigorated vision, vitality, identity, leadership, structure, fruitfulness and mission for the people called United Methodist in Syracuse. The anticipated outcome of the Side Track category is profoundly different: a gracious ending. Churches placing themselves in the "fast track" will begin to meet and work together immediately, according to the description of that category. Similarly, churches placing themselves in the "slow track" or "side track" will begin to meet and work together immediately with any and all other churches in that group. (Remember: All churches will continue to be part of the overall revitalization process and the overall parish council.)

One more wrinkle . . . In addition to these three categories, we have identified a fourth--one that is principally open to individuals from any of the existing churches. You will find a description of this category (the "new track" group) following the other three.

#### Fast Track

This category is for churches that are ready to freely, fully and whole-heartedly embrace the need for comprehensive (not piecemeal) change, in a full-blown revitalization and church growth process that is assisted and guided by a consultant. Churches choosing this course of action must possess the needed resources (human and financial) and will to initiate and follow through on the revitalization process. In all their visioning, planning and implementation, churches in this category will function as models and pacesetters for the other city churches. As such, they will consciously and continually keep the full scope of city churches, citywide ministry and citywide goals and objectives in mind, so that others are welcome and constantly being invited and encouraged to join them at any time. As a group, they will be led by one or more pastors, as funds permit. This group of churches will move quickly and purposefully to experiment with integrated planning, budgeting, leadership structures and church staff in ways that further the goal of revitalization. They will also participate in and be accountable to the citywide parish council, which will meet at least quarterly. This group of churches will be expected to honor and work toward the benchmarks previously established by the Cabinet of the Upper New York Annual Conference. With multiple churches in this group, one or more of their buildings will be repurposed (put to new use) over time.

### Slow Track

This category is for churches that are open to and desirous of significant growth, change and vitality, but at a slower, more deliberate pace. Churches choosing this category must have the necessary capacity and willingness to fully engage in a revitalization process guided by a consultant. Churches in this group will share pastoral staff to the extent of what they can afford collectively. Decision-making authority for churches in this category will rest in: (A) a combined church council and shared committee structure with representation from each of the churches and with the power to establish broad goals, directions and priorities for all churches in the group; and (B) a minimal local church council and committee structure, responsible for implementing the common (shared) goals, directions and priorities. Churches in this group will also participate in and be accountable to the citywide parish council, meeting at least quarterly. This group of churches will be expected to honor and work toward the benchmarks previously established by the Cabinet of the Upper New York Annual Conference. With multiple churches in this group, one or more of their buildings will be repurposed (put to new use) over time.

### Side Track

This category is for congregations that are small in numbers and have become overwhelmed by the many responsibilities and limited resources of their church. They have little desire or energy to take on significant change. They expect to continue to decline in numbers, resources, energy, and vitality and accept that they are headed for eventual closure. Churches choosing this option will be given basic pastoral staffing (principally for pastoral and spiritual care of members), to the extent they can afford, until they are no longer financially able to meet this expense and/or other financial obligations. With their limited leadership and human resources, churches in this group will place all financial and legal decision-making authority and responsibility in the citywide parish council. Other programmatic decision-making responsibility will rest in the hands of a combined church council and shared committee structure, made up of representatives from all the churches in this category. Churches in this group will also participate in and be accountable to the citywide parish council, meeting at least quarterly. This group will be encouraged to be mindful of the benchmarks established by the Cabinet of the Upper New York Annual Conference. All of the buildings associated with churches in this category will be repurposed sooner or later. It cannot be emphasized enough: freeing a small and shrinking congregation from the burden of maintaining its own separate building does not equate with the closing of that congregation. Christian hospitality and charity require that we provide options for such a congregation to continue its existence for as long as it desires, by securing a "nest" for it in another building and/or congregation or perhaps by reinventing itself as a "house church."

### New Track

This category is for individuals (from any of the existing city churches) and/or congregations, who feel called to help start a completely new ministry, having checked their old "baggage." The focus of this group will be not on the legacy of the past (what to do with existing buildings, congregations and ways of doing church and ministry), but solely with the new thing(s) God is doing and calling them to. This group may nest in an existing church. Members of this group may worship and minister independently of or along with the existing congregations. In choosing this option, this group will work with the Annual Conference's Director of New Faith Communities.

### Process and Timeline

- Jan. 13, 2015 Citywide leadership team reviews, perfects and approves the new process
- January 2015 Citywide leaders take the proposal to each church for study and discussion
- M. Nevin / C. French will oversee getting a letter out to all churches about the new plan, its genesis and its implications. They will also seek to set up at least one all-city meeting for persons to learn about the plan together and be able to ask questions about it. An effort will also be made to accumulate questions about the plan from all the churches and then disseminate common answers to those questions.
- M. Nevin / C. French take the proposal to the DS and Cabinet for their review, input and support. Part of this conversation will include the identifying of potential appropriate consultant(s).
- February 2015 Churches determine which category they belong in
- Churches report their decision to the citywide leadership team
- Churches make "new track" option known to congregants
- Churches collect and report names of persons interested in the "new track" option
- M. Nevin / C. French report the outcomes of their discussions with the DS and Cabinet to the citywide leadership team
- Citywide leadership team confirms the proposal (with any needed changes) and readies for action (including notifying individual congregations)
- March 2015 Implementation begins, with initial steps clearly spelled out for each category
- Churches, by category, notify Cabinet of how much they can afford for pastoral coverage in 2015-2016 Conference year
- (lots of questions remain ... lots of decisions still to be made ... lots of steps, processes and logistics, along with checkpoints, decision points and deadlines still to be figured out)