

## **COOPERATIVE MINISTRY**

by A. Clay Smith

*Models for Ministry in small membership churches are occasional publications of the Hinton Rural Life Center and demonstrate examples of programs, organization or procedures that have provided effective ministry and mission in small membership church settings. The models are suggestions by which a local church may gain insights for strengthening their own ministry and mission.*

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The idea known as cooperative ministry or cooperative parish has been around for many years. It has been implemented in many settings ranging from isolated rural smaller congregations to major metropolitan communities. It has been used both as a way to organize a few churches in one community and also as a way of doing ministry across whole annual conferences. The results have varied from place to place. There have been and are wonderful successes, and there have also been dismal failures and frustrations. However, in spite of this history of mixed results, cooperative ministry is still a valid way of thinking about and doing ministry in almost any context. Some of us believe that it is the most hopeful and promising way of going about ministry within the United Methodist connection.

### **DEFINING COOPERATIVE MINISTRY**

First of all, cooperative ministry is NOT three things. 1) It is not closing small, struggling churches. 2) It is not merging weak congregations with other congregations. 3) It is not imposing a structure from the outside on a group of congregations. Although all of these things have been done in the name of cooperative ministry this is not what cooperative ministry is about. Instead, cooperative ministry enhances and builds up the identity and strength of local churches. Cooperative ministry affirms the value of all congregations, both large and small. Cooperative ministry helps churches move beyond maintenance to strong ministries of witness and outreach in their communities.

Furthermore, cooperative ministry is not just for small, weak congregations in isolated communities. Rather, it is a way of doing ministry that goes to the heart of what United Methodist connectionalism is all about. Cooperative ministries are in place and working well in large urban church settings, as well as in small and medium size congregations. It works in the city and in the country. It works with weak as well as strong congregations. It works to break down all kinds of racial/ethnic and other barriers that divide people and congregations.

Cooperative ministry is more a style of ministry than any particular structure or organizing technique, and it is initiated when church leaders, lay or clergy, begin to ask questions about effective ministry for their congregations. Some of these questions could be:

*Cooperative ministry is a style of ministry that helps us focus both on the health and strength of the local congregation and on witness and outreach across a larger geographical area.*

\*What would happen if we envisioned the whole county as the arena for our ministry rather than just the small community around each United Methodist church?

\*Are there some things we can do more effectively together than we can do alone?

\*Can we do some training together that would enhance the strength and identity of each congregation and at the same time strengthen our total witness in the wider community?

\*Are there some needs in our community that no one church alone can meet?

\*What are the issues, problems, dreams, and visions common to all our congregations?

\*How can we work together on these mutual concerns?

All of these questions are questions about building more effective ministry. Cooperative ministry is a style of ministry that helps us focus both on the health and strength of the local congregation and on witness and outreach across a larger geographical area.

## **EXPERIENCES IN COOPERATIVE MINISTRY**

One example of the many cooperative ministry ventures that are in place across the United Methodist Church began about twenty-five years ago when lay and clergy leaders in twelve United Methodist churches in a rural county began to ask the effective ministry questions. Over several years their discussions and planning slowly evolved into a well-organized approach to ministry across the whole county that included churches of other denominations.

Some of their activity was directed toward the strengthening of each local congregation through such programs as training events for local church leaders, county-wide evangelistic programs, a secretary to serve all the churches, and more efficient church office operations and equipment.

Other ministries were directed toward the community. Working together they were able to tackle issues that they had never been able to approach as individual congregations working alone. They began a prison ministry to two prison units, established a day care center for children with handicapping conditions, set up a program to meet the needs of battered

women and children, and operated a cooperative clothing closet, food pantry, and utilities assistance fund.

Hearing of their successes and excited about this new vision of how churches could work together in ministry, congregations of other denominations asked to join and were welcomed. Local church representatives still meet regularly to plan and implement programs. They strive to keep a healthy balance between outreach and witness ministries across the county and nurture ministries that help to strengthen each local congregation. Many lay persons have experienced new avenues of Christian witness and service because of the expanded programs of the cooperative venture. The bottom line is that the total Christian witness in that county has been much stronger because of the cooperative approach to doing ministry.

With all the obvious benefits of working together it is surprising that everybody isn't doing it. However, there are obstacles that lie in the way for those who want to move toward this ideal, so to be successful planners must be aware of the possible points of conflict they must overcome. First, cooperative ministry really is different from the way we usually approach ministry. Both clergy and local congregations tend to think of themselves as independent and self-sufficient. Sharing in ministry can be both threatening and frustrating. Sometimes it is simply easier to do it by one's self than to try to organize a larger group. It takes time and hard work to build the trust necessary for a group to move forward with a clear vision and purpose.

Also, putting a well-organized cooperative venture in place is difficult because it requires a minimum commitment of three to five years, and the church tends to move clergy leaders before the initial work is completed. In addition, many local congregations have quite limited visions of what ministry ought to be and don't see the need to move out beyond their own family church setting.

## **REWARDS**

However, the frustrations and hard work are well worth the effort. Amazing things begin to happen as the web of relationships among members in different congregations begins to grow.

\*People realize that they have many of the same concerns and

\*They don't feel as isolated or alone as they did before.

*There can be no  
"lone ranger"  
preachers or  
churches in the  
Body of Christ.  
Rather, all are  
bound together  
under the  
Lordship of one  
God, united in a  
common ministry.*

\*As folks work together and relationships grow, love and trust, mutual support and caring, listening and bearing one another's burdens increase. Fear, suspicion, prejudice, anxiety, distrust, despair, loneliness, isolation, and hopelessness decrease.

\*People begin to realize that they have many gifts and strengths to share with each other in doing the Lord's work in a particular place. Not everyone, for example, may be interested in prison ministry. But if you have one person in this church, and two people from that church, and two more from the church across the county, pretty soon you have a dozen folks who can come together around a shared concern.

In I Corinthians 12 Paul writes about the Body of Christ. He says that the Christian life is characterized by interrelatedness. Interchange and interdependency are the NORM. The very idea of an independent, self-sufficient pastor or church doesn't fit. There can be no "lone ranger" preachers or churches in the Body of Christ. Rather, all are bound together under the lordship of one God, united in a common ministry.

As members of the Body of Christ, one congregation cannot fully succeed if another congregation is failing. How can there be real satisfaction if things are going well in our church when another church is going through tough times but has many gifts to offer?

In the Body of Christ each person, lay and clergy alike, and each local church has gifts to share in ministry and is of ultimate value. Everyone comes with something to offer to enrich the whole body. The principle of mutuality comes into operation.

"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong ---- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith."

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## **BIBLICAL IMAGES FOR COOPERATIVE MINISTRY**

Psalm 133	Unity is affirmed and blessed by God
John 17:20-23	Perfect unity in Christ is a witness to the world of God's love
Acts 2:44-45	Sharing of resources, tending equally to the needs of all
Romans 12:3-16	Many with different gifts are joined together in harmony
Romans 15:1-6	Please others and build them up; praise God with one voice
I Corinthians 3:3-9	God's servants, working together with God
I Corinthians 12:4-31	One Spirit/ many gifts One body/ many members
Galatians 6:2, 9-10	Bear one another's business
Ephesians 4:1-7; 11-16	Unity of the body of Christ
Philippians 1: 27-28	Striving side by side with one mind
Philippians 2: 3-11	Look out for one another's interest, Let the mind that was in Christ be in you
Colossians 3:12-15	Love binds together in perfect unity

## WHY COOPERATE?

Arrange the twelve items below in order of priority, from the most important (1) to the least important (12) reasons for your church to join in a cooperative venture.

- \_\_\_ **Response to external pressures**  
(change, declining population, new people moving in.)
  
- \_\_\_ **Provide a mutual support group for pastors**  
(develop a group or team ministry)
  
- \_\_\_ **Cooperation is a good and sufficient reason in itself**
  
- \_\_\_ **Secure more or better clergy leadership for our church**
  
- \_\_\_ **Enable clergy to specialize and develop skills in areas of greatest competence**
  
- \_\_\_ **Save money, reduce expenditures, share rising costs**
  
- \_\_\_ **Provide a more efficient base for best level of services**  
(efficiency and economy)
  
- \_\_\_ **Minister to people more effectively with broader program**  
(performance not economy)
  
- \_\_\_ **Open the door to new opportunities in mission not available to individual congregations separately**
  
- \_\_\_ **Serve a natural sociological or trading area more effectively by a cooperative approach**
  
- \_\_\_ **Make better use of resources**  
(staff, lay leadership, buildings, money)
  
- \_\_\_ **Survival of congregation that is threatened with closing**

## THIRTEEN PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESSFUL COOPERATIVE MINISTRIES

- 1.** Widespread *lay involvement* in *all* aspects of cooperative ministry, from development to planning to carrying through.
- 2.** Strong and consistent assistance from the denominational executive, such as a United Methodist district superintendent.
- 3.** Adequate time taken for planning, building, and development; in most cases, at least from six months to two years goes into the formation of the ministry.
- 4.** Research to assist in building a sound basis for forming the ministry.
- 5.** All professional staff are thoroughly informed concerning the structure of the cooperative ministry and each person's responsibility in it.
- 6.** Assurance from denominational leaders of continued support, especially when changes in leadership are made.
- 7.** The cooperative ministry is confined to a natural, sociologically homogeneous area.
- 8.** All of the congregations in the area, large and small, are a part of the cooperative venture.
- 9.** Financial support from the denominations involved is available to assist with beginning the cooperative; usually it can become self-supporting in three to five years.
- 10.** Each congregation feels that it "has its own pastor," even though the staff might serve the entire cooperative ministry.
- 11.** Program planning is done by laypersons along with professional staff.
- 12.** In a multiple staff ministry the staff builds strong leadership in worship, planning, and fellowship, and families of staff are involved.
- 13.** In all planning several principles of leadership are observed:
  - a)** Where people are affected by a decision they are involved in making the decision.
  - b)** People tend to support ideas they have had a share in formulating.
  - c)** People tend to reject ideas they have not had a share in formulating.
  - d)** People tend to accept new ideas if they feel they are to their advantage.

*(Adapted from The Multiple Staff Ministry by Marvin T. Judy)*

## COOPERATIVE PARISH DEVELOPMENT MODEL

### *Stages of Parish Life*

*This process may take up to eight or more years.*

<b><u>EXPLORATORY</u></b>	<b><u>PROBE</u></b>	<b><u>STRUCTURING</u></b>	<b><u>OPERATING</u></b>	<b><u>RECYCLING</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin building trust</li> <li>• Experience some “winners” in cooperation</li> <li>• Observe and evaluate levels of readiness for cooperation</li> <li>• Involve laity on a wide scale</li> <li>• Discover and articulate needs and hopes of local churches</li> <li>• Develop a theological understanding of local church’s primary tasks; “What are we really here to do? – to be?”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff modeling and theologizing about cooperation</li> <li>• Develop higher levels of readiness for cooperation</li> <li>• Continue “winners” so group can also “fail OK”</li> <li>• Continue discovery of hopes, needs, and resources</li> <li>• Develop Covenants</li> <li>• Definite time commitment (3 years)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop parish Council and operating models (task forces, committees, etc.)</li> <li>• Build “larger team” of Parish Council and staff</li> <li>• Develop policy, especially for “entering” and “leaving” Parish for churches and for staff</li> <li>• Let forms follow function</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recheck the theological basis for ministry</li> <li>• Test and evaluate methods and forms of operation</li> <li>• Envision the future regarding Parish purpose and staff</li> <li>• Do effective ministry that can be pointed to as making a difference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major self-assessment after at least 5-8 years</li> <li>• Staff change in skills, style, and personnel</li> <li>• Renegotiate the Covenant as a guideline for evaluation and dynamic process</li> </ul>