

Leadership Discipline White Paper No. Two: Enabling Systemic Change: Drawing the Right Blueprint

Definition: Systemic change starts with clearly and accurately defining a system's major parts. It continues as strategies that will improve the system are prayerfully discerned with other team members. I believe the time invested in drawing the right blueprint is well spent as it results in healthy environments and churches.

It is not every day that one has the privilege of providing leadership in developing a new United Methodist District. But that was the opportunity which I was given in June 1998 when appointed as the Prestonsburg District Superintendent. The Kentucky Annual Conference had officially united with the Louisville Annual Conference in 1996, forming a new Conference that included 12 newly defined Districts. The Prestonsburg District consisted of 53 churches from across 13 counties including segments of 3 former Districts. My task was to lead the charge of developing a new system called the Prestonsburg District.

How does one enable systemic change in such a situation? What is the starting point for forming a new system?

1) The first step involves clearly and accurately defining the system's major parts. This starts the process of drawing the right blueprint.

Since the Prestonsburg District was a new system, this presented an opportunity to create something from the ground up. This process had a variety of challenges that unfolded over a significant duration of time. Indeed over a period of several years we continued to develop the system's major parts. Those parts included:

- *A District Vision Team* consisting of clergy and laity that helped us to develop our identity and direction;
- *Local Pastoral Leadership* who effectively led their local churches in the church's mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world;
- *Vital Local Churches* consisting of laity and staff who were partnering with their pastoral leadership to move toward the mission of the church;
- *District Staff* who provided resourcing and tools for local churches desiring to experience revitalization;
- *A Leadership Team* of trusted and respected pastors in the District who developed a forum for relationship building and networking among the clergy;

- *A District Ministry Team* consisting of laity and clergy that helped to translate General Church and Annual Conference initiatives into the ministry context of our particular District.

2) After identifying major pieces of the system, systemic change continues as strategies that will improve the system are prayerfully discerned with other team members. The resulting blueprint will serve as a guide into the future as strategies are implemented that build and/or enhance an effective system.

As the major pieces of the Prestonsburg District system were identified, District leadership developed strategies to build each part of the system. This occurred in different ways depending upon the particular part of the system. However, general principles for development of the parts were consistent.

- Effective and capable district clergy and lay leadership worked together to develop strategies.

- Critiques of strategies were sought and welcomed between district leadership and experts outside of the system.

- District leadership continually communicated in formal and informal settings what we were doing and why we were doing it.

- We continually evaluated, allowing for subtractions and additions to our strategies based on measurable assessments and feedback from constituencies.

- We carefully developed the strategies before implementing them and then gave ample time and space for the strategies to work.

Some of the tangible outcomes of our work together included:

Intentional Church Growth- More than 30% of our local churches chose to participate in 1 of our District sponsored revitalization processes such as Natural Church Development, Hinton Rural Life Visioning, Shalom Zones, Percept Demographics and Spiritual Leadership Inc. (SLI) Leadership Incubators

Training + Core Competencies- Close to 60% of our clergy were part-time or full-time local pastors. More than 90% of these local pastors further developed their pastoral competencies and Wesleyan theology by participating in the Course of Study when ALPS (Appalachian Local Pastors School) accepted to our invitation to locate some of their classes in the District. This also enabled these local pastors to make progress in meeting their United Methodist educational requirements for continuance.

Collaborative Effectiveness- Opportunities were offered across the District for United Methodists to collaborate on everything from children's ministries to substance abuse ministries to lay leadership training.

Communication Effectiveness- Clergy isolation diminished, networking increased and District communication improved as 8 clergy covenant groups formed across the District.

Renewed Purpose + Identity- We evolved from a group of 53 churches, many which had been located geographically and emotionally on the fringes of their previous districts, into a system of churches proud of their district identity

Increased Capacity- A full-time Church and Community Worker (Rev. Julie Hager Love) who was also a Deacon joined the District staff. She provided leadership, resourcing and tools for local church and district development.

The opportunity to provide leadership in developing the system for a new United Methodist District does not happen often. But leaders regularly have the opportunity to facilitate systemic change in systems of which they are a part. Often the outcome includes growth and results. The right blueprint increases the likelihood of yielding the right results. The blueprint that the clergy and laity leaders of the Prestonsburg District developed did just that.