

What we learned from 1988-2002

*The Partnership for Missional Church
Partnership for Congregational Renewal
Project for Worship and Evangelism*

Background

1988-1990

Beginning with 13 congregations in very diverse parts of the metropolitan Baltimore area, the Project for Worship and Evangelism (PWE) was born.

1990-91

After a modestly successful first year, 14 congregations from the Lower Susquehanna Synod and an additional 15 congregations of the Delaware Maryland Synod joined the original 13 congregations, giving us 42 congregation partners.

1991-92

Local leaders from PWE were hired to part time or full time Synod staff positions in each of these two synods. PWE reorganized into the Partnership for Congregational Renewal (PCORE).

1993-94

PCORE in the original synods was integrated into the life of the synods. We began to receive invitations to develop PCORE in other synods.

1994-1998

PCORE expands too fast in several synods, taxing available staff and lowering quality of the process. This expansion included clusters in Southwest Texas, Northwest Texas, Manitoba, Southern California West, Pacifica, and Northeastern Ohio, giving us 84 new congregation partners, 126 congregation involved in all.

1998-99

We applied to AAL for an innovations grant to help build staff and resource capacities. PCORE continues working with aforementioned congregations and synods and adds clusters in Northeastern Minnesota and Southern Ohio, giving us 27 new congregation partners, 153 in all.

1999-2000

PCORE continues to work with Northeastern Minnesota and Southern Ohio synods and adds clusters in Southern Ohio, Northeastern and Northwestern Ohio, giving us 45 new congregation partners, 198 in all.

2000-01

Southern Ohio and Northeastern Minnesota project work is integrated into the life of the synods. Church Innovations/Lutheran Innovations calls a halt to starting new clusters in order to engage in a thorough review of the decade-long work, evaluate the PCORE model from a number of perspectives, and then give a report to the Board of Trustees of the Institute.

2002

Review of PCORE brings about a major change that produces a substantially different approach, meriting a new name: The Partnership for Missional Church (PMC) to be launched in 2003.

Our Objective:

To innovate congregational capacities for participating in God's mission sustainably in high social stress and change environments

What we knew was necessary for congregations entering the process:

Attitudes and Beliefs

- God has a preferred and promised future for your congregation, and God gives all the necessary gifts to accomplish this future
- Being faithful relates as much to God's preferred and promised future as to tradition, the living faith of the dead
- Discerning and trusting the work of God in and outside the congregation, each congregation and its neighbors can innovate God's preferred and promised future
- Congregations are learning organizations and living cultures
- Conflict can provide energy for God's mission

Minimum Knowledge Base

- Scripture regarding God's work in congregation and community
- A congregation participating in God's mission is about Relationship x 4:
 1. The individual with God in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit
 2. The individual and the immediate community of the faith, especially significant relational groups
 3. The immediate community of the faith and an identified and numbered group of persons whom they are serving in missional outreach
 4. The immediate community of the faith and the immediate environment
- Demographic, psychographic, and cultural patterns of immediate environment of congregation
- Realistic assessment of the congregation, especially as to
 - worship attendance patterns
 - who actually participates in congregational life and why
 - the Christian imagination of key leadership and general membership
 - attitudes and skills regarding conflict and mission
 - existence or absence of core message and values as well as the how that message and values are embodied for those whom the congregation chooses to serve in mission.
- Seeing the congregation as a culture and an organization
- Modest understanding of post-Christendom
- Modest understanding of organizational systems
- Modest understanding of healthy conflict

Skills

- Listening leadership skills for community building
- Assessing demographic, psychographic, and cultural data regarding potential persons served in mission
- Leadership skills for visioning and planning
- How to keep focus on a small number of Big Rocks (prioritized concrete objectives) over a 3-5 year period of time

- Dwelling in the Word and spiritual discernment skills
- Creating a SMART Plan of Action
- Identifying learning goals and achieving them

Enduring, Pass-on-able Behavior (Habits)

- Spiritual Discernment
 - Dwelling in the Word
 - Prayer and Planning
 - Envisioning God’s preferred future
- Maintaining focus on Big Rocks
- Political skills for establishing Big Rocks
 - Regular assessment of all congregational activities focusing on Long Range Plan and its Big Rocks
- Increasing numbers of leaders and types of leadership related to God’s preferred future
- Practical attention to gifts assessment and deployment
- Regular assessment of the changing immediate environment in relationship to God’s preferred future
- Practical habits for connecting conflict and mission

Activities each cluster took part in

4 specific PCORE training events yearly in each cluster, attended by all congregations in each cluster
Bi-monthly phone loop, when a trained consultant makes a pre-arranged phone visit with the pastors and lay leaders from each participating congregation, seated around a speaker phone, talking and praying together about their work
Monthly clergy and lay leader meetings to connect in prayer and Bible study around their mutual work in the cluster
Yearly synod/region-wide training events exploring new or expanded capacities such as worship, small group ministries, conflict and mission, and sharing the faith

Table of Participating Clusters	Centered in but not limited to	# of congregations
Delaware/Maryland	Baltimore	13
Lower Susquehanna	Harrisburg	14
Southwest Pennsylvania (2 clusters)	Pittsburgh	27
Greater Milwaukee	Milwaukee	12
Southwest Texas	San Antonio	17
Northwest Texas	Abilene	15
Manitoba	Winnipeg	12
Southern California West	Los Angeles	14
Pacifica, California	Orange County	12
Northeast Ohio	Cleveland	14

Southern Ohio	Dayton	15
N.E. Minnesota	Duluth	12
Southern Ohio	Columbus	15
Northeast Ohio	Akron	15
Northwest Ohio	Toledo	15

Impact

Here is the **impact** of these activities on project participants and other constituents, the indications of actual movement and success

- 23-25% of congregations drop out by 24th month; 75-77% stay in
- 17% median growth in worship attendance over 5 year period in congregations who stay in
- high correlation (77%) between congregations who stay in and longevity of pastorate
- high correlation (64%) between congregations who stay in and growth in adult conversions
- high correlation (74%) between congregations who stay in and increased lay leadership base
- high correlation (73%) between congregations who stay in and increased participation of young adults after confirmation and high school
- high correlation (62%) between congregations who stay in and developing new constituency base in situations of high social change
- higher participation in other mission-oriented activities and continuing education

Four Key Conclusions from 15 years of Partnership for Congregational Renewal

1. Clustering congregations, when done wisely, synergizes innovation of missional church more than working one congregation at a time.
 - a. Previous studies had said the level of change necessary to create missional congregations required working one congregation at a time. Not true; the level of change surely requires very intense work unique to each congregation, but it is done better with congregations working with each other.
 - b. Clusters designed around geography as their primary criterion seldom work.
 - c. Clusters designed around similar size work well often but not always; e.g., mid-size projects in ELCA worked better than solo approaches and geographical cluster approaches.
 - d. Clusters designed around having diverse levels of an established set of patterns of missional church practice out-perform all other models of clustering.
 - e. Included in these diverse levels is an understanding of how congregations learn from one another and how to use teaching congregations.
 - f. The lay leaders of teaching congregations are often the critical resource for teaching other congregations.
 - g. Clusters that create pairings for accountability, support, and learning work many times better than those that don't create such dyads for accountability, support, and learning.

- h. Clusters that form a clear shared vision for mission that recognizes the unique callings of each congregation work much better than clusters that attempt to establish a clear shared vision that emphasizes some supposed shared calling of the cluster. Rare exceptions do exist.
2. External consulting that focuses on *innovating* the capacities of leadership in congregations more consistently leads to missional congregations than does consulting that focuses on *replacing* leadership capacities or leaving congregations to their own internal resources for change.
 - a. Most resources offered by church-wide denominational offices focus on quick-fix things to do to grow churches; these approaches see external intervention as mostly replacing capacities of leadership in congregations. Recent studies, even by church-wide research units, have demonstrated these approaches ineffective.
 - b. Most consulting models meet the perceived need of congregations to have capacities given to them; these models of consulting do bring about considerably more change than providing resources aimed at adding things to do, but they do not lead to consistent, enduring missional patterns in congregations.
 - c. Consulting that understands that the goal is to coach existing capacities and innovate upon them is consulting that leads to more consistent, enduring missional patterns.
 - d. The more congregations succeed in innovating their capacities for mission, the more those congregations seek external consulting to further innovate their capacities. Those who are doing the best job seek the most outside help.
 - e. Innovating lay leadership capacities and helping clergy to understand how to do so brings about higher levels of sustainable change in missional behavior.
 - f. Such a focus on innovating lay leadership capacities also leads to clearer pastoral vocational focus and longer pastorates that enhance the chance of long term growth of the congregation.
 3. Working in clear and direct partnership with mid-governing judicatories (District, Synod, Diocese, etc.) innovates the capacities not only of the initial cluster of congregations but subsequent generations of congregations.
 - a. Attempts to work with congregations directly without a clear and direct partnership with mid-governing judicatories too often creates resentment and dysfunctional anxiety in the systems that have great potential for systems change.
 - b. Working without such partnerships heightens the chance that subsequent leadership change will not focus on mission.
 - c. Working with such partnerships enhances the chance of economic and racial diversity in clusters of congregations; it also enhances the chance of working with new church development.
 4. Congregational conflict most often can be employed for mission.
 - a. Major social scientific scholarship on congregational change and conflict shows that conflict and mission come together; that is, there is a high correlation between successful adaptation and flourishing in new environments and high levels of conflict.

- b. Models of conflict management that focus on lowering anxiety and keeping the peace work best with levels of anxiety that have achieved irreparable division in a congregation. However, these same models when applied to congregations who are experiencing healthy conflict (the most common form of conflict in congregations) arising from questions of adaptation and mission in the immediate environment are *deadly* models. They manage the conflict but succeed in helping the congregations to die happy. They are at best the continuation of hospice ministry for Christendom's death.
- c. This deathly effect is especially true of those models built on family systems theory rather than more social and political models of conflict management.

So What Happens In A Partner Congregation?

The **Partnership for Congregational Renewal** helps congregations grow by developing:

- a God-centered, biblical vision for mission
- a greater sense of God's activity in their congregation and community
- ownership of the mission of the congregation by more members
- members committed to and capable of making disciples
- both a vision for mission and a practical plan of action to achieve it
- strengths of the tradition of the congregation
- practical skills for managing change and attending to conflict
- dramatic expansion of lay involvement
- a decision process for planning activities and budget
- a faithful and hospitable congregation
- relationships with other Partner congregations