

FOLLOWING OUR OWN SHADOWS

There's a modern parable, told by David M. Griebner in *The Carpenter and the Unbuilder*, about a man who had somehow fallen into the habit of following his own shadow. "Every morning when the sun came up, he began walking in the direction his shadow pointed. As the sun traced its slow crescent across the sky, he followed the subtle bending of his shadow. By the end of the day he had traced a rough oval and was nearly back to where he had started in the morning... It was familiar and comfortable, the only way he knew. Yet he also had to admit that it often left him feeling trapped and alone. Sometimes he wondered what it would be like to face the sun instead of always turning his back to it and walking the other way...."

Many congregations and pastors have formed the habit of following their own shadows—doing the same things over and over again, but hoping at the same time to get different results. Doing what they've always done, however, they find themselves walking in frustrating circles, getting what they've always gotten.

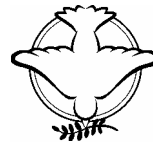
TURN AROUND! FACE THE SUN!

Turning around to face the sun is scary at first because we must turn our back on what is familiar and feels safe. But God does not leave us helpless. God, who gave birth to the church over 2000 years ago, has equipped us to do what must be done, and gave the Holy Spirit to inspire, empower, and encourage.

CHRISTIANS ARE A PEOPLE OF VISION

On the Day of Pentecost, God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the people who had gathered to worship and pray, flooding them with, among other gifts, *dreams* and *visions*. (Acts 2:17)

"Vision" is used sometimes to describe *eyesight* and *seeing*, but in the context of our Christian faith, it means *seeing the new reality God is revealing*. Persons with *vision* are able to see the *extraordinary*, supernatural, or divine in what to others appears to be ordinary events and things. For example, they see the "Christ" in the historical Jesus. They see divine victory in a wooden cross. They see the Holy Spirit in a dove. God's potential is always present in our world, and people of *vision* see it and proclaim it.



What is the God-given potential of this world in which we live? Of your community? Of your congregation? What words or phrases would you use to describe a potential that's really too big and too great for human language?

Symbols or word-pictures can be helpful as we "cast" or proclaim the vision. Isaiah spoke, for instance, of a *lion lying down with the lamb*—a picture of God's peace, shalom, saturating all of creation. Jesus preached about the *kingdom of God*—a powerful picture of God's future sovereign rule on earth.

United Methodists in Illinois Great Rivers Conference have pondered Isaiah's great *banquet table*—a picture of all the hungry and thirsty people of the world feasting together on the abundant and

life-giving blessings of God. These are only a few of the ways we could describe God's potential in our midst.

It is vital to any human creature or organization to have vision. Without vision, says Proverbs 29:18, "the people perish." If we have no vision, we are in danger of following our own shadow and going in lonely, tiresome, and ultimately self-destructive circles.

CHRISTIANS HAVE A MISSION

If a *vision* is a symbolic word-picture of God's potential in our world, then *mission* is the means by which Christians work in *practical* ways with God to make that potential a reality.

The scriptures are clear that the Christian's great *com-mission* is to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20).

The Book of Discipline of United Methodist Church (2000) echoes Matthew: "The *mission* of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ by proclaiming the good news of God's grace and thus seeking the fulfillment of God's reign and realm in the world." The Illinois Great Rivers Conference has further defined our United Methodist *mission* saying, we are called to make disciples *who will make disciples for the transformation of the world*.

We believe that if we fulfill our mission of making disciples, the vision (the potential) will one day, by God's grace, be reality.

STRATEGIES ARE IMPORTANT

So, how do we go about the mission of making-disciples-who-make-disciples-for-the-transformation-of-the-world? Each local church will need to consider strategies and initiate ministries that are appropriate to the community in which it is planted. No two communities are alike, so no set of strategic initiatives will be the same.

The leadership of the Illinois Great Rivers Conference has identified four strategic initiatives to help our conference *as a whole* fulfill the mission. Here's a summary:

1. **Keeping Our Eyes Fixed on Jesus**

We're committed to looking to the "Sun," Jesus, who lives again among us as we engage in faith-forming studies and relationships with others, face our fear of the stranger, and work alongside the least, last, and lost.

2. **Positioning The UMC for the Future**

We're committed to doing new things which are faithful and reasonable responses to a changed world: for example, plant new churches and help transform our existing congregations with articulated visions, focused mission, and strategies for getting the mission done.

3. **Forming Spiritual Leaders Who Live in Christian community**

We're committed to equipping clergy and laity to be *spiritual leaders* in an age that lacks faithful, focused, visionary,

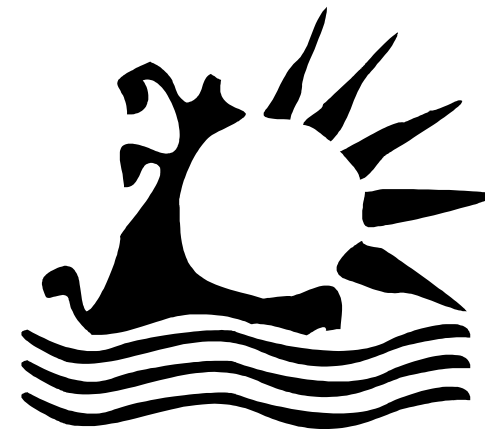
growing, hopeful, compassionate, servant-minded, leadership. We're committed, also, to reinvigorating our church with "Wesleyan DNA," the "genetic material" which made the Wesleyan movement one of the greatest evangelical movements of all time.

4. **Connecting the Connection**

The 1996 merger and changing times inspire us to improve the ways UMs connect with each other and with the global community to fulfill the mission. We are committed to connecting the connection through learning events, visions and strategies of working together to make disciples, communications such as this brochure, and modern technology.

BEWARE THE SHADOW!

Our shadows will be a constant temptation for us, because it is our human nature to transform even new ways into habits (shadows). Bondage and familiar paths always feel safer and easier than freedom and risk. Vision, mission, and strategies must continually be evaluated, tweaked, and changed, because the world turns and we need to keep turning with it if we are to keep the Sun—the Son-- the source of life, truth, and hope, always before us.



What's all this about Vision, Mission, and Strategic Initiatives?