

What can we learn from one another about effective ministry? How are we learning to be effective transformational leaders? How can we assist one another or work with one another in making more and better disciples? Are there any resources (people or printed) that can be shared? In some cases, cluster communities may choose to discuss a common reading as they seek to apply it to their ministry. This may include conference-wide suggested common readings.

What is the time table for starting clusters and cluster teams?

- Clergy should begin now to educate their congregation regarding clusters and to involve their leaders in discussions about with which churches God is calling them to cluster.
- All churches in the Florida Annual Conference should be in a cluster by September 30, 2005.
- Pastors in each congregation will work with the lay leadership committee to assist them in understanding the purpose of cluster teams and the expectations of cluster team participants. The lay leadership committee's nominees should then be ratified by the Church Council and shared with the district office by September 30, 2005.
- As lay participants are chosen, district superintendents can begin meeting with each cluster team for their initial meeting. During that meeting, the district superintendent will review the purpose of cluster teams and the role of the cluster leader. The district superintendent will then assist the cluster team in selecting their cluster leader, if one has not already been selected. All clusters teams should have their initial meeting and select their cluster leader by October 31, 2005. Initial meetings can begin in September or even late August, 2005.
- The initial cluster team leader training will occur in an overnight, 24 hour experience during early November, 2005.
- In preparation for the November cluster team meeting, all participants will be asked to read Fire in Coventry, by Steven Verney.
- Cluster leaders will meet periodically with the district superintendent for supervision, continued training and support.

How will we know if clusters and cluster teams are achieving their purpose?

Generally, we anticipate clusters and cluster teams bringing growth in three areas over time: 1) in the horizontal connection between congregational leaders who see themselves increasingly as being in ministry in a community that extends beyond their local church; 2) in a fresh focus upon Christ's essential commission to His church to make more and better disciples; and 3) in a new accountability to and effectiveness in being fruitful in ministry.

Since God is the fountain of creativity, we assume that cluster communities open to God will be vastly different one from another when actually discerning and following His leading. In Fire in Coventry, Steven Verney described the multitudinous ways the Spirit self-expressed in their parish groups: "the outstanding impression is of a glorious riot and confusion, like spring bursting in a thousand different patterns out of bulbs and roots and twigs. Nothing that happened in one [cluster community] was quite like anything in another. All you could say was that it was the same springtime." Such a spiritual springtime in the Florida Annual Conference is the objective of clustering. Since the source of this "springtime" is certainly not our frantic human institutional efforts, but rather openness and obedience to the fresh leading of the Spirit, the heart of cluster communities must never be programmatic activity. Their heart must always remain discerning -- and then following -- God's call to servant leadership of effective ministries.

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Florida Annual Conference Clusters Q & A

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Members of the 2004 Annual Conference overwhelmingly passed "Connecting for Transformation" which called for, among other things, the establishment of congregational clusters starting in July, 2005.

"Clusters Q & A" is an effort to answer the many questions being asked about the implementation of clusters in our conference. The implementation of clusters will be a significant topic at our upcoming Annual Conference. Please see the conference web site (<http://www.flumc.org>) for additional information.

What is a cluster?

A cluster is a natural association of 4-7 churches gathered around a common disciple-making mission. Every local church is expected to be in a cluster as an extension of its congregational life. Conference sponsored extension ministries (such as outreach ministries or Wesley Foundation campus ministries) can also be part of a cluster. Clusters are a reflection of the connectional nature of the church and of our shared accountability to Christ for fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

What is the purpose of clusters?

The general purpose of clusters is to improve the effectiveness and health of our United Methodist ministry in the state of Florida as measured by our annual conference's vision and mission statements and by Jesus' Great Commission.

What are cluster teams?

Cluster teams are small communities of congregational leaders (usually 8 – 12 persons) from each church of a cluster accountable for fulfilling Christ's Great Commission and committed to discerning and following the ever-fresh leading of the Holy Spirit in their disciple-making ministries. A cluster team meeting is a corporate spiritual discipline that expresses our connectionalism.

What is the purpose of cluster teams?

The purpose of cluster teams can be summarized as "Drawing Together -- Seeking God's Heart -- Touching our World."

The first purpose of cluster teams is "Drawing Together" to "strengthen our horizontal connection" (Bishop Whitaker). Each congregation and every believer has their ministry from Jesus together with other congregations and believers. We are not called to be heroic lone rangers; we are called to be in ministry together.

Therefore, we need to share our struggles with one another, acknowledging that Jesus sends us out warning of the difficulties of ministry. We need to share with one another what we are learning, to look for ways to assist each other and to be open to the Spirit leading us to work collaboratively.

The second purpose of cluster teams is “Seeking God’s Heart,” recognizing as Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). In the day-to-day work of ministry, it is easy to forget the One who brings focus, guidance and power to our ministry. When Jesus gathered the disciples back together after sending them out in ministry (Luke 10), he reminded them of the Kingdom significance of what they were doing. We have a part to play in what God is doing to bring about God’s Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.” We need to help one another stay focused on being about the Father’s ministry, not “our” ministry or “our church’s” ministry. And like the churches in Revelations 2-3, we need to listen to the Spirit’s fresh guidance for our ministry. Cluster teams will seek to discern God’s fresh leading for their congregations.

The final purpose of cluster teams is “Touching our World.” It is clear in Scripture that we are called not just to be faithful, but to be fruitful. “I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last” (John 15:16). As disciples we are sent out to impact our communities for Christ. We are sent out to make more and better disciples. We are sent out to alleviate suffering through justice ministries. While it is not assumed that all clusters will sense God’s leading to enter into a collaborative ministry, it is assumed that all congregations are called to effective ministry. The third purpose of cluster teams is to encourage fruitful ministry in the congregations of their cluster. This may involve mentoring or the sharing of learnings or best practices. This may also involve focusing upon a common resource (person, book, or tape) in order to discover how to be more effective leaders of fruitful ministries in our particular contexts.

How are clusters formed?

Church leaders, lay and clergy, can now begin thinking about which churches they feel God is calling them to cluster. Clergy are expected to educate their members about clusters and to involve their leaders in decisions about cluster formation and the selection of lay participants. In order to insure that no church is left out, the district’s leadership council will have final authority to set the congregations in each cluster. All churches in the Florida Conference should be in a cluster by September 30, 2005.

Congregations may associate in a cluster for a variety of reasons. Some congregations may choose to cluster because they are simply geographically close. Congregations may also choose to cluster because of other commonalities. For example: they are of similar size, they are new congregations, they are targeting Hispanic persons, or

they are targeting families with young children. A couple of “transforming” congregations could agree to mentor several “maintaining” or “declining” churches. The most effective and natural association of churches in a cluster may have a combination of these factors: the congregations are relatively proximate, share some significant commonalities and include transforming, maintaining and declining congregations.

Who will participate in the cluster teams?

All appointed clergy and laity in equal number are expected to participate in of a cluster team. No more than 4 persons from any one church will be involved in a particular cluster team. Churches with more than two clergy (elders, deacons or extension pastors relating to them) will participate in more than one cluster team.

What is expected of cluster team participants?

All participants are expected to be mature disciples of Jesus Christ:

- Committed to their congregation fulfilling Christ’s disciple-making commission.
- Open to the development of community among participants on the cluster team, both lay and clergy.
- Open to discerning the fresh movement of the Holy Spirit and obedient in following the Spirit’s leading.
- Willing to think creatively about fruitful Kingdom work in their local community, rather than institutionally about maintaining their church.
- Committed to communicating back to their congregation’s resident leaders what they hear the Spirit saying to the cluster team.

How will lay cluster team participants be chosen?

Lay participants will be selected prayerfully by their congregation’s lay leadership committee and approved by their congregation’s administrative council. The selection of lay participants is crucial to the vitality of cluster teams and should reflect the expectations of all cluster team participants.

How are cluster leaders chosen?

Because of the diversity in districts, district superintendents may choose to do this differently. In some districts, the district superintendent will be asking pastors to become cluster leaders. In other districts, cluster leaders will be chosen by the cluster team during their first or second meeting in consultation with the district superintendent. In most cases, cluster leaders will be elders; however, there may be situations where the best leader among a cluster team’s participants is a local pastor or a lay person. All clusters will be selected by October 31, 2005.

What is the cluster team leader’s role and how will they be trained?

A cluster leader is a pastoral servant of the cluster team’s participants, purposes and processes. They help facilitate development of community among the participants and discernment of the fresh movement of the Holy Spirit. In some cases, a cluster leader may be able to play a mentoring role to less experienced church leaders.

Cluster leaders will receive their initial training in a 24 hour, overnight event in early Nov. 2005. They will receive a resource suggesting themes and material for each cluster meeting. Cluster leaders will be supervised by the district superintendent and will meet with her or him periodically for support and continued training. Cluster leaders will not be involved in appointment making.

How often will cluster teams meet?

Cluster teams are asked to meet a minimum of six times per year during the months of Jan., Mar., May, July, Sept. and Nov. Cluster teams may choose to meet more often than this, however, as they seek to be obedient to the leading of the Spirit.

What will a typical cluster team meeting be like?

We hope to steer between setting cluster teams aimlessly adrift without a compass and so carefully scripting the meetings that we usher the Spirit right out the back door. The following signposts should assist in opening persons to the obedient discernment of God’s leading:

Prayer and Worship

There should be a significant – both in time and in meaningfulness – portion of the meeting given to prayer and worship. This should not consist of one person giving a sermon between bookends of prayer. It should be highly participatory with different persons reading scriptures, leading songs, sharing devotional thoughts, lifting up prayers and inviting one another to simply listen to and share what they hear the Spirit saying.

Witness and Sharing

There should be time for people to share what God is doing in their life and in their congregation. Persons might answer such questions as: How is it with your soul? What is Christ teaching you recently? Where have you seen God at work in your community since we last met? How do you sense the Spirit’s leading in your ministry recently?

Learning and Growing

Here the focus moves to being obedient in following the Spirit’s leading toward fruitful ministry. How can we encourage one another to be more effective in fulfilling Christ’s Great Commission?