

Establishing Cluster Communities in the Florida Annual Conference

*Report of the Cluster Advisory Committee
To the Cabinet in Continuing Dialogue*

What is our current situation regarding Clusters?

An unusually astute laywoman recently described our situation in the Annual Conference vis-à-vis clusters in the following way: “There is curiosity, cynicism and confusion over clusters. The laity are curious, the pastors are cynical and everybody – including the Cabinet – is confused!”

Curiosity: There is curiosity about clusters in the Annual Conference – and not just among the laity. It is an energetic, even hopeful curiosity: maybe things can be different, even better. Most of us have lived our adult lives watching many churches, the Florida Annual Conference and our denomination wind down like an entropic top spinning ever more slowly. But, over the last two years, a realization is gathering that there is a fresh wind blowing among us. There is a new willingness honestly to describe our current reality and still to believe that God is not yet through with us. There is a willingness to ask difficult and fundamental questions, to invite people out of their silos of decision-making to a Conference Table where, with others, we can address the chronic problems that plague us. We have witnessed the necessary slaughter of some sacred cows. And we have seen the investment of a great deal of political capital personally by Bishop Whitaker and the Cabinet in a new plan for organizing our life together. All this stirs up a sense of expectant curiosity, that, like an incoming wave at the beach, offers us the opportunity to move forward if we catch and ride the wave or to just bob up and down in place if we miss it’s potential.

Confusion: The idea of clustering emerged in the Cabinet primarily as a strategy for thickening the vertical connection between local church leaders and other leaders in the Annual Conference. Like an hour glass, most connections currently run through the District Superintendent. If we almost double the size of Districts, this faltering connectional model will fall flat altogether. How can we reestablish “a vital web of interdependent relationships,” as the Discipline (paragraph 130) describes Wesleyan connectionalism? The notion of clusters emerged as a strategy for reestablishing horizontal connections in the Annual Conference. “Connecting for Transformation” sketched an impression of clusters without clearly drawing in exact details. Current discussions within the Cabinet, between pastors and among laity indicate that there is a variety of competing and, often, mutually exclusive conceptions of what clusters should be and do. In the absence of a clear definition, people have placed what they wanted into “clusters” or seen them as instruments of the status quo. Like empty kitchen drawers, “clusters” have been filled with all sorts of things.

Surviving a staggering series of storms has diverted our attention and our creative energy for a season. This fall we have deliberately experimented with a variety of “cluster models” for holding charge conferences. In the absence of

clarity about clusters, conversations have continued and confusion has spread further. Some see clusters as a new organizational level, as extensions of the District Superintendent's office and as a bonanza for disseminating institutional information. Some see cluster leaders as assistant District Superintendents involved in the appointment process. Some see cluster team meetings as primarily for pastors and as potential replacements for clergy covenant groups. Some see clusters as primarily for purposes of collaborative programming. Some see clusters as primarily for purposes of prayer and openness to the movement of the Spirit in our congregations. Clearly there is currently a lot of confusion in our Conference over clusters. And the seeds of all these vying conceptions were sown during our early discussions in the Cabinet, at the Conference Table and at the 2004 Annual Conference.

Cynicism: Many pastors and laypersons are skeptical, even disillusioned, about the possibilities of positive institutional change in our Annual Conference. "Systems resist change," they remind us, "defaults eventually kick back in." They have seen the quick-fix-of-the-month come and go. They have seen this year's renewal strategy exhaust itself struggling with the status quo. They assume that the stubborn realities of our corporate life will once again refuse to give way. Cynicism just seems realistic.

On the other hand, many pastors and church leaders have witnessed persons and families whose lives have been transformed by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. We can point to once dying churches where now the fresh signs of God's purpose and power are evident. And there are very real examples where denominational judicatories have been miraculously turned around as leaders opened themselves to the movement of Christ among them and followed with obedient expectancy. Stephen Verney relates how, in preparation for the dedication of the Cathedral of Coventry, England, church leaders opened themselves to becoming a people dedicated to listening to and following the leading of the Holy Spirit in their local ministries (Fire in Coventry reprinted with permission by Hyde Park UMC). Bishop Claude Payne also gives an account of the renewal of one Episcopal Dioceses in Texas: Reclaiming the Great Commission; A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). Paul D. Borden tells how an American Baptist region in California when from 85% of their 200 churches declining or plateaued to over 70% of their churches growing 5% annually in just seven years (Hit The Bullseye: How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation At the Mission Field, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.) Cynicism is not always so realistic.

There is, also, a theological problem inherent in cynicism. Hopelessness is not an option for people of faith in the God of the resurrection who opens up the future to His plans. This "realistic cynicism" betrays a lack of confidence in God's ability to bring about His Kingdom. To despair that we are stuck with the status quo is to believe that God is no longer at work in the world or that God's power is no match for hardened hearts and bureaucratic barnacles. Either way it shows a

lack of faith in the liberating God who frees slaves and brings new life. In the end, cynicism is a rejection of the living Christ.

What is a functional definition of clusters teams?

What some people understand one way, others understand another. So let's be clear about terms: clusters, cluster teams, cluster team leaders.

"Clusters" refers to a group of congregations that have chosen to associate.

"Cluster teams" refers to a gathering of the clergy and lay leaders selected to represent the congregations in a cluster. Sometimes also referred to as **"cluster leaders," "cluster groups"** or **"cluster communities."**

"Cluster leaders" refers to the leaders of the cluster teams.

Clearing up confusion about clusters teams in our current situation may first require removing the undergrowth of current misunderstandings about clusters teams and cluster leaders, so that their real meanings can emerge.

Clusters teams are not:

- Just another level of institutional hierarchy.
- An extension of the district superintendent's office.
- Primarily for purposes of disseminating institutional information.
- A life-raft for dying churches.
- Primarily about clergy coming together.
- A replacement for clergy covenant groups or laity small groups.
- A place to gripe about what's wrong with the annual conference.

Cluster leaders are not:

- Junior district superintendents
- Administrative assistants
- Involved in making appointments
- Intermediaries between pastors or laity and the district superintendent
- "Experts" about church leadership and effectiveness.

A Functional Definition: Clusters teams are small communities of congregational leaders 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.

"Small communities"

It is intended that a sense of community will develop among the participants of the cluster team. This community will not replace clergy support groups or small lay groups in local churches, but will hopefully become a community that

gathered around a common mission. Cluster communities should develop intentionally over time as persons get to know and trust one another. Cluster communities should be inclusive and respectful of the contributions each participant and congregation can make to God's Kingdom work.

"Of congregational leaders"

Cluster teams will be made up of congregational leaders, both clergy and lay. All appointed clergy will participate in the cluster team meetings. One lay person for each clergy person appointed to a congregation will be prayerfully selected by the Lay Leadership Committee of that congregation. All participants will be expected to work toward the establishment of Christian community, to be committed to faithfully and creatively fulfilling Christ's Great Commission in their local context, and to discerning and following obediently the leading of the Holy Spirit in their ministries.

"Accountable for fulfilling Christ's Great Commission"

Participants are brothers and sisters in Christ, commissioned by baptism and ordination to join with Christ in ministry to the world. Effective disciple-making ministry should invite new persons to justifying faith, encourage existing disciples to an ever deepening sanctifying faith and express itself in ministries of love and justice. All disciples are privileged to be asked to join Christ in His ministry and are accountable to Christ for doing so faithfully.

"Committed to discerning . . . the ever-fresh leading of the Holy Spirit"

Disciples assume that God continues to be at work establishing His Kingdom in the world – including in our churches and in our local communities. We are not called to establish God's Kingdom in our own way and by our own strength. We are called to follow Christ's leading, to sense the fresh movement of the Spirit, and to discern Christ's current calling to new forms of ministry in the changing contexts of our congregations. There must be a humble openness to discerning what God is saying to our churches today.

". . . and following the ever-fresh leading of the Holy Spirit"

There must also be a humble openness to letting Christ take the lead and set the agenda in each cluster community. 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 goal of clustering. Since the source of this springtime is certainly not our frantic human institutional efforts, but openness and obedience to the fresh leading of the Spirit, the heart of cluster communities must never become programmatic activity. Their heart must always remain discerning -- and then following -- God's call to His servant leaders.

What values are inherent in establishing clusters?

In establishing clusters and cluster communities in our annual conference we hope to embody certain values that need to be made explicit. We value:

Expectant openness and obedience to the Holy Spirit. The primary focus of clusters communities is on what God is calling us to be and do. We assume that God continues to be at work in the world. Therefore, we are called to listen for God's voice, to discern the movement of God, to join God obediently in what God is doing, to be open to God's power working through us and to expect to be amazed at what happens.

The development of Community. Through cluster communities, pastors and laity have an opportunity to establish and deepen collegial relationships. By reestablishing these horizontal connections, we get to know one another as brothers and sisters in mission with Christ in the world.

Inclusiveness. In cluster communities we seek to overcome relational barriers that divide persons: ethnic, cultural, primary language, generational, church size, worship style, age of congregation, education, and ordination.

Accountability that is spiritual, practical and local. Our fundamental accountability is to Christ's Great Commission: what does it mean to be faithful disciples on mission with Christ? This accountability is also local: what is Christ now calling our cluster congregations to be and do collaboratively and individually?

Focusing on Kingdom Work. A cluster community's primary focus is upon fulfilling the Great Commission in our ministry context – not on preventing local churches from dying or revitalizing the annual conference or renewing United Methodism in Florida. We are about Kingdom work, not church work.

Respecting the contribution of each congregation in making more and better disciples. Just as individual disciples are "God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good work," (Ephesians 2:10) so God calls disciples together in congregations with particular roles to play in reaching their community for Christ. No congregation should be made over in another congregation's image; their leaders should seek to discern the "good work which God prepares in advance for [them] to do."

The Wesleyan tradition. "Success is finding out what God wants you to do and doing it." (Bob Logan) This applies to individuals, to congregations and to denominations. John Wesley maintained that God raised up Methodists "to spread holiness of heart and life." We are called to be United Methodist – not Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals or Episcopalians. Just as God has prepared these traditions to make specific contributions to His Kingdom work, so God has prepared us to make our contribution. We should be about discerning and fulfilling these Wesleyan-style contributions within our ministry context.

A grass-roots, indigenous priority over against a top-down, hierarchical priority.

This local bias is expressed in the formation of clusters, the selection of cluster community leaders and the discerning of cluster community agendas.

What is expected of cluster community participants?

A cluster community is made up of conference appointed clergy in each congregation and laity in equal number. Lay participants should be selected prayerfully by their Church's lay leadership committee and approved by their congregation's administrative council. All participants are expected to be mature disciples of Jesus Christ who are:

- Committed to their congregation fulfilling Christ's disciple-making commission.
- Open to the development of inclusive community among participants from other congregations, both lay and clergy.
- Open to discerning the fresh movement of the Holy Spirit and obedient in obeying the Spirit's leading.
- Willing to think creatively about 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 community.

How are cluster leaders selected and trained?

What is their function and how do they relate to the DS?

While there will be some variety between districts, generally, Cluster leaders will be chosen by the cluster team during their first or second meeting in consultation with the District Superintendent. 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. Cluster leaders should be spiritually mature and able to help other participants discover and make their contribution to the team's development. Cluster leaders will be trained in Bob Logan's coaching model and in models of group Spiritual discernment. In most cases, cluster leaders will be elders; however, there may be situations where the best leader among a cluster community's participants is a local pastor or a lay person. Cluster leaders will meet with the District Superintendent periodically for support and continued training.

What will a typical, healthy cluster team meeting be like?

We hope to steer between setting clusters communities aimlessly adrift without bearings or a compass and so carefully scripting the meetings that we usher the

Spirit right out the back door. The following signposts are designed to assist in opening persons both to the development of community and to the obedient discernment of God's leading. Each cluster team's meeting should have the following elements:

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? How is Christ teaching you recently? Where have you seen God at work in your community since we last met? Where have you seen Christ changing lives in your congregation? 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 lead sensed by the cluster community. How can we encourage one another to be more effective in fulfilling Christ's great commission? 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, clusters communities may choose to discuss a common reading as they seek to apply it to their ministry. This may include one or more conference-wide suggested common readings.

What is a realistic chronology for establishing clusters?

- Prior to the Conference Table on February 26, 2005 congregational leaders will receive information through a variety of sources that will help remove misunderstandings and assist in bring clarity about the nature and function of clusters and cluster teams. This information will be redundant and will come via a variety of media. Interested persons will be encouraged to attend the Conference Table addressing clusters and other "Connecting for Transformation" issues.
- Following the Conference Table on February 26 Congregational leaders will begin receiving official printed and/or downloadable information regarding the details of establishing congregational clusters, cluster team meetings, cluster leader selection and cluster leader training.
- Congregational leaders should be encouraged to begin thinking about: "With which churches do we feel led to be in a cluster?" Pastors should talk among themselves and should also involve their resident leaders in

discussions about the particular constellation of churches in their cluster. Otherwise, persons may feel that their congregational cluster was forced upon them without their participation. We want people to have as much ownership in the formation of their cluster as possible. The District Superintendent of the nine new districts should be involved in these discussions and may set a date – perhaps by May -- when all pastors should share with her or him their thoughts. 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 Community by September 30, 2005.

- Pastors in each congregation will work with the lay leadership committee to assist them in understanding the purpose of cluster communities and the expectations of cluster team participants. The pastor will then share with the congregation's administrative council the purpose of cluster communities and the lay leadership committee's nominees for ratification. This should be completed by September 30, 2005.
- After the formation of the new districts July 1, 2005, 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. All clusters teams should have their initial meeting and select their cluster leader by November 15, 2005
- Once selected, the cluster leaders will begin training, even as cluster communities are meeting. Cluster leader training will involve a three day seminar and an ongoing coaching relationship with a trained person. Training in Spiritual discernment will happen in separate additional venue.
- Cluster leaders will meet periodically with the district superintendent for continued training and for support.
- District superintendents may also choose to visit cluster team meetings on occasion.

Members of the Cluster Advisory Committee:

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Russ Graves	Edwin Santos
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