



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

Next Steps?!

by Alan C. Miller, Conference Minister

The evaluation sheets from the 2010 Annual Meeting of the Penn Northeast Conference held April 24th at the Northampton Community Center gave our keynote speaker, Gil Rendle, an A+. The only criticisms that we received were two-fold: 1. "We thought Gil would spend more time evaluating the data that we collected at the 2009 Annual Meeting." 2. "We thought Gil would give us the next steps --- what do we do to fix our congregations, many of which are dying?"

For those of you who were unable to attend either meeting let me give a brief overview to help you understand these critiques. Prior to the 2009 Annual Meeting we asked each local church to complete survey forms in which they identified how they spent their money and time as they sought to be the church. As might be expected, most identified that most of their time was spend talking about money problems, fund-raisers, building maintenance, and personnel issues. Very little time was spent talking about spirituality and faith formation, mission, Christian education, and evangelism. At the 2009 meeting, we spent the day in small groups identifying the roadblocks that stand in the way of many of our congregations' ability to change. All of this data was collated and sent to Gil Rendle prior to the 2010 meeting.

Gil did respond to our data, however perhaps not in the way that many of us expected or wanted. The data reflected the same trends that he is seeing in many Christian churches today. In addition, his prescription for what to do was not an easy fix; rather it was a whole new way of understanding church.

Early in his presentation Gil made the comment: *The mission of the church is not to satisfy its members. The mission of the church is to make disciples.*

This statement requires us to think about the church in a way that is contrary to both the manner in which many of us have been conditioned to think about the church and the mindset of our society. Many of us were taught that the church is the place where we go to learn right from wrong, put our time in getting through confirmation so we can be allowed to take communion,

having a pastor who is available to us when we run into one of life's crisis, and participating in fun social events that occasionally raise money to help some charitable cause. Basically for many of us, our understanding is "the church is the place to take care of me and meet my needs." Likewise, our society has taught us to be consumers extraordinaire – even to the point that a new term was invented to describe this activity in relation to church: *church shopping*. So now people look for a faith community that has the right programs to meet their needs for fellowship, education, and in some cases even entertainment.

But the beginning of the church was marked by Jesus' command to take his message to the ends of the earth, making disciples of all who respond to the Good News. In other words, church is not about being a service organization that provides our needs for fellowship, weddings, baptisms, funerals, and pastoral care, but a community that helps us to discover what it means to be Christ's disciples and to live a life of service to others in Christ's name.

To move from this old understanding of church to this new understanding does not happen quickly or easily. Gil suggested that the way to make this move was to begin by having much better conversations at our church council meetings. Instead of spending all of our time talking about money problems, fund-raisers, building maintenance, and personnel issues, Gil suggested 3 questions that we need to be asking and prayerfully discussing:

1. *Who are we now?* Many of our churches answer this question by talking about who they were in the past, rather than asking the hard question: *Who are we now?*
2. *What has God called us to do?* Many of our churches operate out of scarcity rather than abundance, thus they spend a great deal of time talking about what they can't do due to their limited resources rather than asking: *What is God calling us to do?*
3. *Who is our neighbor?* Where are we located; which part of the kingdom has God given to us?

Last week I attended a meeting in which 2 pastors reported that their church councils had started talking about Gil's 3 questions. One noted: *We started talking about the first question and it has led to so much thought and conversation that we are expecting that it is going to take us at least 3 meetings before we are ready to move to the next question.*

Could it be that this council has discovered that the next step is to return to the first step, the one given to us by Christ, asking: *What does it mean to be Christ's disciple?*