

April 6, 2006

Electronic
Newsletter



Charlotte District

E-Connections

Two weeks ago the focus of our message was upon the ways in which various churches within the Charlotte District are valuing diversity while practicing unity in Christ. This edition of *E-Connections* will highlight several testimonies from churches that are seeking to **teach and learn biblically-based discipleship and leadership**. This is indeed the mission of all our congregations. Thus, we shall benefit from an encouraging word of affirmation from four of our churches that are learning more about the depths of discipleship through small group ministries.

Rev. Beverly Copley—Associate Pastor at University City—is currently meeting with clusters of pastors in the Charlotte District in an effort to plan ways in which we can share resources among our congregations in order to provide all our United Methodist laity abundant opportunities to nurture a more profound depth of discipleship. When our churches work in isolation from one another, our smaller churches struggle to challenge those who wish to participate in a greater variety of spiritual experiences. Beverly will help us (from time to time in a consultative capacity) in the formation of cluster events that will provide opportunities of growth for all laity and clergy in our churches large or small. She will serve as our District Coordinator of Evangelism and Discipleship, teaching us ways in which we can proliferate opportunities for vital small group experiences in all sizes of congregations. Through cooperation (not competition) we shall grow the churches of the Charlotte District. In this spirit, we share four examples of individual churches and clusters that know the joy of Christian discipleship through biblically based small groups.



Reverend Beverly Copley

--George Thompson



Small Group Ministries...

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Small Groups and Plans for Cluster Sharing at Salem and Sister Churches

If you have ever been in a successful small-group ministry, you know the rewards: the feeling that your group is drawing closer to God and to each other; the familiarity of seeing people with similar Christian goals every week; and the opportunity to work together to reach out beyond the group and affect change.

Salem United Methodist Church in Denver, N.C., is a church with big plans for small-group ministries. Among the most innovative ideas is a clustering of five local Methodist churches. The members from each church can interact and learn from each other about everything from Methodism to parenting and from traditional Bible study to financial planning.



Pastors Jan Heermans and Gary Fulker serving at East Lincoln Christian Ministries

"We're really excited about this," said Jan Heermans, the pastor at Salem Methodist. "These will be short-term courses, but we feel like they will offer long-term benefits to everyone involved." Salem plans to partner with four other local Methodist churches -- Webb's Chapel, Hill's Chapel, Ebenezer and Fairfield Methodist. The pastors of these churches envision a time in which a variety of classes will be offered that will enhance the spiritual life of each participating church. The tentative plan is for different leaders to teach the courses at their home church, then to publicize them in all five churches and invite everyone to come.

Salem also has a range of other small groups operating at the church. In addition to Salem's regular Sunday-morning Christian education ministries, the church offers the following:

- *The Young with the Restless*: This Wednesday-night Bible study class for parents with young children occasionally features the "restless" kids playing in one corner while the parents talk about the challenges and joys of Christian parenthood.
- Several music ministries, including *the Messengers of Joy*, *the Hims of Praise*, *the Hallelujah Handbells* and the contemporary-Christian band *New Creation*, which plays every Sunday at 9:45 a.m. at Salem's contemporary service.
- A drama ministry called *Acts of Faith* which frequently draws full houses of several hundred people to its performances at Salem's Christian Life Center.
- Various Disciple Bible studies and a Mission Seekers Bible study will be shared in the cluster.

The pastors of the Denver Cluster met this week in order to expand upon these ideas for cooperation and encouragement. Many more opportunities will emerge as these churches discover creative expressions of cooperative ministries.

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Small Groups and Small Steps toward Revitalization at Hawthorne Lane UMC

At Hawthorne Lane UMC, the congregation has experienced the benefit of many things related to a changing urban environment. The Elizabeth and Chantilly neighborhoods, where the church is located, are attracting a younger population to move into its grand old houses. The city of Charlotte is also experiencing an influx of younger people moving back into the heart of the city. These two factors have given this 90 year old church the opportunity to welcome a new generation of people into the faith and fellowship of a vibrant congregation.

Another way Hawthorne Lane is benefiting from these external changes is the growing eagerness of the current membership to expand their opportunities to get active through the nurture of small groups. Currently, under the direction of the Education Committee and the senior pastor Dr. Mary John Dye, the congregation offers both short term and long term opportunities in Christian Education. Groups of Disciple I and II are held on Wednesday nights along with a short term option, which is currently Adam Hamilton's *Confronting the Controversies* and *Invitation to the New Testament*. The church also offers many hands-on and short term mission opportunities, from working with Room In the Inn ministry and Habitat for Humanity, to creating flood buckets and medical kits for UMCOR.



**Stained glass window
at Hawthorne Lane UMC**

It is crucial that Hawthorne Lane demonstrates to the people of this changing neighborhood that they offer hospitality to all people and that the members are eager to explore new expressions of ministry that focus upon the unique needs of young adults with children. The members seek to demonstrate to these brothers and sisters that Hawthorne Lane has a great future and that this neighborhood of young families is integral to that future. The leadership is doing this by providing a wonderful children and youth ministry. The church is now bustling with youngsters and this shows younger adults who are visiting the church that their family has a future within these walls. This was not the case twelve years ago, but Hawthorne Lane took a risk of faith and renovated the children's floor of the education building, creating a welcoming, interactive and attractive setting for children. Now the church is reaping the rewards of stepping out on faith and starting to look at doing the same thing for the youth ministry. The church has gone from around five children during the children's time in worship in the mid 1990s to currently having almost thirty, with six new babies on the way.

It is an exciting time to be in ministry in this area of Charlotte. As this historical landmark starts to receive a breath of fresh air, it is thrilling to watch what God is doing with the people in the congregation and those who live just outside its walls.

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ChristCare at Providence UMC



In 1999, Providence UMC enrolled in the Stephen Ministry ChristCare Series. This is a well organized and effective small group ministry program that can be administered in most of our churches. It provides materials to teach the techniques and practical skills for leading small groups (twelve members or less) and methods to establish groups in the congregation and to maintain continued support for the group leaders.

All these groups are designed to be Christ-centered, biblically-based, and mission-oriented. ChristCare groups are, thus, characterized by four activities: community building, prayer and worship, Biblical Equipping, and missional service. Community building happens as we share our combined humanity and faith generously; then God works on us through each other forming the Body of Christ. Prayer and worship keeps Christ at the center and as Christian friends lift each other up in prayer, we are given hope and assurance. Biblical Equipping is a Bible-study process developed to instill a reliance on Scripture in our daily lives. God's Word becomes personal and relevant as it deepens our relationship with Christ and our relationships in the group. ChristCare emphasizes that a healthy small group must include discipleship moving toward mission. As the group grows in Christ's love, we are naturally drawn to opportunities to reach out to others through acts of service.

On a personal note, the elderly parents of a member of my ChristCare group were trying to cope with the stressful changes caused by moving to assisted living. This member was going on a trip and, knowing her parents would miss her, another member brought note cards for each of us to write messages of encouragement to the parents while their daughter was away. I struggled with what to write until I realized that, even though I did not know these parents, I knew their daughter who had been a source of Christian encouragement and joy by sharing her faith and love of God in our ChristCare group. Then words came easily. When she returned from her trip, the daughter told me that both parents had been touched by these notes. Paul's shortest letter (to Philemon) is his most personal letter revealing some of the depth that he found in Christian relationships. We are discovering that the apostle Paul's message here interprets the heart of our ChristCare small-group ministry.

To get materials about beginning a ChristCare Small Group Ministry in your congregation, you can contact Stephen Ministries at 314-428-2600. The next ChristCare Series Equipper's Training Course is April 30 – May 6, 2006. If you want to know more about our experiences at Providence, you can contact me. My e-mail address is mattixsc@aol.com.

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Small Group Ministry at Good Shepherd UMC

Good Shepherd strives to move from a church *with* small groups to a church *of* small groups. We actively encourage the congregation to join a small group or Sunday school class in addition to their normal worship attendance. We believe that true spiritual growth cannot happen in one hour a week on Sunday morning. It takes fellowship, community, prayer, and diligent study of God's Inspired Word to truly grow as disciples. We believe this is best accomplished in the small group or Sunday school setting. In the past few years our small group ministry has grown considerably. We now have approximately 30 small groups and 10 adult Sunday school groups.

The growth of our small group ministry, while at the same time keeping the church's focus on one overall theme, can be attributed to our annual *Fall Spiritual Adventure*. Every fall we hold a church-wide study for 40 days in all small groups. The sermons are based on the Adventure topic and the small groups provide a way for the week's message to be studied, discussed, expanded upon and digested in a community setting.



A Good Shepherd small group

In October of 2005 we finished our Adventure for 2005, "Come Thirsty" by Max Lucado. The messages reflected the week's readings from Lucado's book and each small group session followed the "Come Thirsty" curriculum. Adult, youth, and children's ministries all participate in the Adventure and the worship each week consists of songs, drama, video clips, and other multi-media experiences designed to emphasize the necessity of having a continual thirst for Jesus.

Apart from the annual fall Adventure our small groups' topics are determined by each group's leader in cooperation with our Discipleship Pastor. While some groups choose to do curriculum-based lessons such as Beth Moore studies, "The Five Love Languages," or "Faith Lessons of the Bible," many of the groups simply base their studies on the biblical text. Group leaders who opt for this latter approach are given any background materials such as commentaries, bible dictionaries, or bible atlas information in order to aid in their understanding of the passages they will teach. This also equips them to answer questions which may arise during the week's discussion. Each leader is encouraged to schedule times to meet one-on-one with the Discipleship Pastor or the Small Group Ministry Leader as often as they would like. These meetings are usually informal (lunch meetings are popular) and provide a time for the leader to discuss any issues, questions, challenges or concern they may have with regard to their group.

Good Shepherd's goal for its small group ministries is to be a place where someone can easily get plugged into a small group of people who care about them and can help them grow in grace, knowledge, and love for our Lord Jesus. As the late theologian Stanley Grenz constantly emphasized, Jesus calls His followers to enter into community with God as well as with one another. The small group and Sunday school ministries at Good Shepherd are one of the main ways we equip God's people to fulfill our church's mission statement "**to know, follow, and make known Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd!**"

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