

October 28, 2008

We just had our Church Conference on Saturday and thought you might be interested in what we are doing with Vital Signs.

Actually, I bought the book because I "had to," and put it aside thinking it was just another thing the Conference was pushing with little useful information. But our lay member of Conference, Frank Barr, kept asking me if I had read it yet. So, reluctantly, I read it. And then read it again. The third time through I knew that this was something that could make a difference in our church.

So the first thing I did was tell our Leadership Council about it and we did the church assessment together. I had asked for 20 minutes, but we ended up taking over an hour. They really got interested in it.

Then I scheduled some discussion groups - three, actually, that lasted for three weeks. I figured I could keep them interested for three weeks and maybe leave them wanting more. [At] the first session we took the assessment and discovered that we were a decaying church. Without any doubt. We talked about what our church would be like in 10 years if we ignored these findings, and what it would be like if we did something about our decay. I asked them to read the chapters on the decaying church and start the chapter on the retrogressive church. I figured we weren't a dystrophic church, so in the interests of time I just gave it a passing mention.

In the second session we really examined the decaying church and saw how well it fit us. We only took maybe half the session on this, and then moved to the retrogressive church. By this time people were excited about the possibilities, but I wanted to slow them down a little by pointing out the problems in the retrogressive church.

In the third session we talked about the vital church, and what had to be done to get there. I made it a point to emphasize that it would take seven to 10 years to get where we wanted to go, and that it wasn't an easy road. But the alternative was to die.

At the end of the third session I gave each participant a 3x5 card, and asked them to commit to taking a "baby step," which was to choose something that would deepen their faith: 10 minutes daily of prayer, reading the Upper Room, a meditation walk, whatever. Their choice. And to ask someone other than their spouse to be an accountability partner, write it all down on the card and turn it in to me. This commitment is only for three months. Really baby steps, but we've got to start somewhere.

The second thing we are going to do is to have an All Church meeting after worship on December 7 and discuss how we want to be in mission here in Willits. And if we can come to a decision, then choose an outreach project that the whole church can/will participate in. That's the important part. In the meantime, I am asking some folks who seem to be particularly enthused about this new direction to join me in a weekly prayer/discernment group.

Oh yeah - at this All Church meeting in December I want to ask them if they want to go in this new direction, and if the answer is yes, as I hope/expect it will be, then we need to write that decision down. Commit it to paper, and keep it before them.

As a result of these discussion groups, so far people have asked if they could have a Disciple Bible study class, so I will be starting that in January. Others have spoken about the time when the church used to get together for "fun stuff," so if that is of interest we can talk about that at this December meeting too, if there's time. What they seem to have in mind is maybe an old movie night, a games and crafts night, a sing-along night, and/or a potluck night. We'll see what happens.

The important thing is that I want to make sure the people are with me before I take any further steps. This HAS to arise from the congregation, not from me. Somewhere along the line, if this gets firmly implanted in the congregation, we will need to create a Master Plan - especially since I am due to retire in four more years.

Anyway, that's what we're up to, and we're pretty excited about it.

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