

The District Superintendent as “Chief Missional Strategist”

The 2012 *Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church added a new expectation to the office of District Superintendent: to be “chief missional strategist.” Other than mentioning it as an expectation of the Church in ¶419, the *Discipline* does not spell out explicitly the work of a chief missional strategist. Yet, implicitly, through other directives regarding superintending and with the help of District Boards and/or Strategy Committees, one can put the pieces together for how this can be done.

The following is Path 1’s attempt at doing just that.

The Purpose of Superintending

According to ¶401 of *The Book of Discipline* 2012, “The purpose of superintending is to equip the Church in its disciple-making ministry. Those who superintend carry primary responsibility for ordering the life of the Church. It is their task to enable the gathered Church to worship and to evangelize faithfully.” **Superintending** refers to Bishops and District Superintendents, the latter whom serve as an extension of the office of Bishop. The same paragraph goes on to say, “It is also their task to facilitate the initiation of structures and strategies for the equipping of Christian people for service in the Church and in the world in the name of Jesus Christ and to help extend the service in mission . . .” (*The Book of Discipline* 2012, ¶401).

As we look at the District Superintendent (DS) as chief missional strategist it is important to be clear about the overall purpose of the position. Everything flows out of the mission of the Church, which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Superintending equips the church for disciple-making.

Missional Mindset

The term “missional” also picks up on a movement that seeks to help the church transition from an attractional mode of being to a more outward-focused *missional* mode of being. Much has been written recently to help the Church embrace this shift. Many of us grew up under the old paradigm that is often characterized by the phrase, “We go to church.” The church was something we went to: to be nourished in the faith; to hear the word of God preached; to be inspired by good music; to ensure that our children were instructed in the ways of God. There is nothing wrong with any of these reasons for *going* to church. However, the *mindset* of this outlook places the Church as one more object of a consumeristic society. The church is construed as a provider of religious goods and services, and thus we go “shopping” for a church and if the preaching is not to our liking and the music doesn’t move us, we go to another place of worship that meets our needs better.

The challenge for all of us is to help the Church move toward the phrase, “We are the church.” The church in this sense is the body of people who are sent on a mission by God. We still gather for worship to hear good preaching, music, and instruction. However, the *mindset* becomes “both/and” where in addition to having our own souls fed, we become the living hands and feet of Jesus engaged in the community to make a difference in peoples’ lives and thus to be instruments of God for the transformation of the world.

An Opportunity to be *Strategic*

The conversation of the District Superintendent as Missional Strategist provides an opportunity to be strategic. Under the section of the *Discipline* that outlines the “Specific Responsibilities of District Superintendents” (Section VI of Chapter Three, “The Superintendency”), ¶419 says:

The Church expects... That the superintendent will be the chief missional strategist of the district and be committed to living out the values of the Church, including a mandate of inclusiveness . . . And working with persons across the Church to develop programs of ministry and mission that extend the witness of Christ into the world.

Moreover, this section of *The Discipline* continues, “The superintendent, in consultation with the Bishop and cabinet, shall work to develop the best strategic deployment of clergy possible in the district, including realignment of pastoral charges when needed and the exploration of larger parishes, cooperative parishes, multiple staff configurations, new faith communities, and ecumenical shared communities.” (*The Book of Discipline* 2012, ¶419).

The Church expects... *a strategy*. It expects its leaders to come up with *a plan* to be about the business of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. With all the demands on a Superintendents time, how is she or he to develop such a strategy?

The Discipline provides ways to go about building a strategic plan. The DS can put together a District Strategy Committee or direct the District Board of Church Location and Building to fulfill the functions of a strategic committee. In either case the DS gives leadership to the formulation of a strategy.

Purpose of District Boards of Church Location and Building

District Boards of Church Location and Building serve to help churches avoid mistakes when they engage in building projects. A church brings their project plans to the Board and they review it, ask questions, and help assure that the church’s plan makes sense economically, structurally, and missionally. In this role, the Board is reactive to plans made by churches. It is an important role.

The essential tasks of the District Board of Church Location and Building include:

- Investigate all proposed local church building sites
- Approve plans for construction, purchase, or remodeling of local churches
- Make sure local churches analyze needs of church and community
- Project potential membership with average worship attendance
- Have a written plan of the church's program of ministry
- Work with District Superintendent on a District Strategy in the absence of a District Strategy Committee

This latter point allows for the District Board of Church Location and Building to serve a *proactive* role. Unless a District Strategy Committee exists, the Board can fulfill the role of strategy team along with the DS.

¶2520.2 of *The Discipline* 2012 states:

If there is a district strategy committee for parish development or a metropolitan commission in the district, the [District Board of Church Location and Building] shall consider its recommendations in planning a strategy for continuing the service of The United Methodist Church in changing neighborhoods. If no parish development committee or commission is operative, the board shall study the duties assigned to each and seek ways to provide continuity of service in parishes where there is a change in the racial, ethnic, or cultural character of the residents...

District Strategy Committee?

The Book of Discipline does not outline the responsibilities of a District Strategy Committee. Yet by acknowledging that they may be operative, a District Superintendent, in order to fulfill his or her task as “Chief Missional Strategist” could form such a committee to help get the work done. The bottom line is: come up with a plan! Either form a District Strategy Committee or ask the District Board of Church Location and Building to serve a strategy function and help you, the DS, to formulate the plan.

What should be included in District Strategy?

A District Strategy should include

- Plans for starting new churches
- Strategies for revitalizing existing congregations
- Identifying which churches should be encouraged to relocate
- Inviting churches to come together for a “Vital Merger” (where assets are surrendered to start a new church from the merging congregations)

- Encouraging churches to form cooperative parishes
- Which churches, if any, should be assessed for their potential according to the guidelines of ¶213 of the *Discipline*?

A District plan will prioritize the elements listed above. It will formulate a budget and identify income sources to carry out the plan. It will put the plan into a timeframe with clear goals and objectives. By prioritizing and focusing resources, Districts can employ good stewardship principles as they plan for the expansion and vitalization of mission opportunities.

Steps of the Process

1. The DS through the appropriate nominating process of the Annual Conference, forms a District Strategy Committee or convenes the District Board of Church Location and Building for the purpose of strategizing (Hereafter referred to as “District Team”)
2. The District Team engages in a strategy development process in order to produce a District Strategic Plan
3. The Strategic Plan will:
 - Thoroughly review the demographics of the District to identify churches in areas of transition
 - I. In areas where demographic changes have resulted in church decline, plan for the continuity of United Methodist presence through planting new churches or revitalizing existing churches
 - II. Seek ways to fortify existing churches through appropriate training so that they can better reach the changing demographics of the community
 - Prioritize the areas, costs, and timelines for starting new Churches
 - Identify churches for revitalization, relocations, mergers, cooperatives, and “vital mergers”
 - Provide timelines, money needed, and sources of finances necessary to implement the Plan, and, recommend a method and process for approving, updating and monitoring the Plan

Phases of the Process

1. Forming the District Team
2. Using Data for Planning
3. Make assignments for visitation of each church in the District.
4. Identify target areas for new church starts
5. Identify churches that could benefit from a revitalization process
6. Identify targets for mergers, relocations, cooperatives, and “vital mergers”

Data Evaluation and Creating a Preliminary Plan

Once sub-teams have scheduled visits to the churches of the district, have each report back to the entire District Team to present findings. Gather a picture of the entire district from the findings from the visits and demographic analysis. Draft a preliminary plan that aligns the District for maximum leverage of human, financial, and property resources to fulfill the mission of making disciples.

Invite input from others in the District about the preliminary plan. Revise the draft plan and finalize priorities based on available assets. Present the plan to the appropriate district or conference committees and then to the entire District Conference for a vote.

Be sure to organize “monitoring teams” who will assist with the implementation of the plan. Some churches will need guidance or coaching to fulfill the strategic vision. The District Superintendent, as ‘chief missional strategist,’ supervises the entire process.

Appointment making is a crucial part of the overall strategy. Reverend Sky Lowe-McCracken, a District Superintendent in the Memphis Annual Conference, underscored this importance in a blog he wrote entitled, “Missional Strategy and Mindset” (January 29, 2013). McCracken wrote:

Bishops and cabinets will have to be less tied to "salary sheets" and tenure when making pastoral appointments and see ALL appointments as MISSIONAL - putting gifts and abilities above tenure. As Gil Rendle has warned us, our "clients" are no longer churches and pastors - the MISSION FIELD is our client. If we're truly going to be missional, our clergy can no longer expect to be served by our congregations and our laity can no longer expect their clergy to simply keep them happy. Indeed, if clergy and laity are to lead together, both will find that we will be meddling in each others' lives and the lives of others. Being disciples means living a higher standard and expecting greater things. It also means that we adopt the shift toward making disciples rather than making "members." Membership in the Church doesn't have its privileges; it has responsibilities.

EVERYTHING we do must be geared toward mission, and should be - not just for institutional survival and relevance, but to fulfill our Great Commission, which is missional and not institutional: Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. The institution is a TOOL, but it's not the end-all.¹

¹ From the blog, “Missional Strategy and Mindset,” dated January 29, 2013 in [Kyrie Elieson: Pastoral thoughts from a United Methodist in Western Kentucky \(USA\)](http://kyrieelieson.com), by Rev. Sky Lowe-McCracken., <http://revdsky.blogspot.com/>. The Rev. Sky Lowe-McCracken serves as District Superintendent of the Paducah (Kentucky) District of the Memphis Annual Conference.

The DS as “chief missional strategist” may be new to the *Discipline* but the practice of thinking strategically for the overall mission of the church goes back to the days of Francis Asbury and John Wesley.

The DS does not have to do this work alone. He or she can organize a “District Strategy Committee” or empower a District Board of Church Location and Building to help with the task. The important outcome is to put into place a plan that leads the Church to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Path 1 Team includes strategists who can help District Superintendents fulfill the role of “chief missional strategist.” Contact us to help you put the process together for developing a District Strategic Plan. Call us at 1-800-899-2780 Extension 7130 or email us at Druffle@gbod.org.