



APOSTOLIC UNITED METHODISTS IN OUR TIME

“It’s the Book of Acts,” says Joseph Bishman, district superintendent of the Shawnee Valley District in West Ohio Annual Conference. He is referring to the frontier United Methodist mission work in Vietnam, in which his district is heavily invested. The Vietnam UMC has grown from about 4,000 folks to nearly 12,000 in the last four years. In their recent annual meeting with Bishop Bruce Ough, they expressed the goal of starting 100 new churches by year end 2012. Approximately 200 churches currently exist, nearly all of which were started since 2001. This is all the more remarkable given the cultural and political context of this arm of our church.

A small United Methodist presence existed prior to the arrival of United Methodist missionaries Ut Van To and his wife Karen. Their initial work was mostly under the radar and with house churches. However, around four years ago, trade agreements required the country to open up their stance on religion and offered more freedom, allowing for this growth. Of course, freedom alone does not cause this multiplication. Rev. Bishman observes that the primary factor is the driving focus of reaching new people for Christ. Their stated mission is “we exist to welcome people to Jesus Christ, equip them with a faith that’s applicable in real life, and send them out to make disciples of Christ for the transformation of the world.”

The strategy is well articulated:

- Understand that the class meeting or cell group is a gift that Methodism has been storing away from the whole Church, so it is time to resurrect the classes.
- Concentrate on forming and growing cell groups, and developing curriculum for cell leaders and trainers.

- Organize training programs for cell leaders and training courses for the cell ministry.
- Bring several people to Christ through the cell groups.
- Ask our bishop, the General Board of Global Ministries, conferences, districts, and churches in the US to support the vision and goals of the Vietnam Mission Initiative.
- Continue to follow up on the request to be officially recognized by the government.
- Continue to follow up on the application for UMCOR to be granted permission to operate in Vietnam.

On the ground, this all looks remarkably like early Methodism both in England and America. Trained leaders go to a new village or area and work on making relationships. This involves coordinating with government officials and often providing some kind of service, such as dealing with the impact of Agent Orange. As relationships are formed, someone is eventually led to Christ and then a meeting starts in that home. In the midst of the Bible study and fellowship, neighbors are invited. Eventually more come to faith in Christ and ultimately a house church develops. The intent from the start is to build an ethos of using this as a training platform to send out other leaders to do the same in other places. While this model is not new (see Luke 10), the distinguishing feature here is that they really do it. Furthermore, the method is only part of the picture. It is accompanied by an intense faith and prayer life that is immediately apparent to American visitors.

Another aspect of the rapid growth has been the support through Global Ministries’ partnership program, dubbed “In Mission Together.” This is a program where US churches can develop partnering relationships with

churches in the mission initiative program of Global Ministries, such as in Vietnam. Of particular impact here is a relationship developed between a district and the entire mission initiative. West Ohio bishop, Bruce Ough, challenged Shawnee Valley district superintendent Joseph Bishman to take this on. They have done so remarkably. While this district is in Appalachia and has unimpressive economic credentials, they have still raised more than half a million dollars over the course of three years for this ministry. The district has really owned this work, with many leaders traveling to Vietnam to participate in the work there. Rev. Bishman has even organized a stewardship motorcycle trip in which Americans went to Vietnam, purchased motorcycles there, toured the ministry, and then left the bikes for the Vietnamese pastors. The motorcycle tour also resulted in more than 300 baptisms along the way.

Rev. Bishman has challenged his district to be like the region which the Apostle Paul challenged to take up an offering for the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. Shawnee Valley district has made the saints in Vietnam their Jerusalem. In a fascinating next step, they have gone to Vietnam and presented the UMC there with the possibility of taking on a Jerusalem of their own. After much intense (impressively so) prayer and discernment, the Vietnamese church has now chosen to do the same for another mission initiative area in their part of the world. Not only does this fledgling church have evangelism DNA, they are also developing mission-minded stewardship DNA. This stewardship development is making amazing progress in another area as well. They are working toward self-sustainability, with decreasing dependence on the US church for their basic needs. Nevertheless, the partnership relationship with the US churches will continue, but with the support funds being used for outreach rather than the pastors' salaries and other traditional needs.

Of course, problems and challenges exist in this frontier mission field. One of the district coordinators characterized some of these: "A few churches in the district are growing slow, a few pastors has yet to have a strategy to actively grow the church....A few churches

have not found a permanent location....The cell group ministry is still slow in deploying and therefore have not resulted in the successful church growth....The development of a training program for pastors in the district is still slow and limited." He concludes, "Even though the district still have its challenges, its weaknesses, with unmet goals, therefore pastors and members still need to work harder in order to reap more result for the kingdom of God in the new year. A-men." The striking aspect of these shortcomings is the height of the bar against which the ministry is measured. The goal for 2011 is no less than to "multiply and divide the district into two districts." One cannot help but contrast this assessment with the typical situation in US districts, which likely have no growth standards or strategy to reach them.

It's certainly exciting to find this pocket of the UMC reflecting our roots and experiencing dynamic, vital disciple making. Hopefully the US church can become infected by the life of this portion of our denomination. One way to connect is to partner with mission initiative churches. At any rate, we can be encouraged and inspired by those places in our connection, both in the US and abroad, where God is moving in fresh and powerful ways to fulfill our mission.

Copyright © 2011
General Board of Global Ministries

Published by:

The Office of Research
General Board of Global Ministries
The United Methodist Church
475 Riverside Drive, Room 300
New York, NY 10115

Tel: 212-870-3840 **Fax:** 212-870-3876

Email: research@gbgm-umc.org

Website: <http://research.gbgm-umc.org>

Subscriptions: FREE via email, or \$14.00 yearly via US Mail

John H. Southwick, Editor