

From Maintenance to Mission in the Wisconsin Conference

By Rev. Tisha Brown

Why Shift?

It's not big surprise to any of us that the ways of being church that we've known and loved for generations are no longer working. We have all experienced decline in one way or another. We are all struggling to figure out how to do ministry with smaller budgets and fewer people. And because of this much if not all of our energy is focused on maintaining what we have. These realities are symptoms of a larger cultural change that we cannot control or realistically influence in any significant way. What we can control and influence is how we relate to these realities and what we choose to do in light of them.

The Wisconsin Conference is filled with people who care deeply about God, their congregations and one another. Unfortunately, no one knows what to do to ensure the health and vitality of the churches we all love. Our tried and true methods and strategies are no longer as reliable as they once were and we are all struggling to figure out what course to chart to guide us safely into the next year much less the next decade.

Fortunately, we're all in this together and there are many among us who are getting glimpses, seeing possibilities, experimenting and taking risks in an effort to discover strategies and approaches to mission and ministry that will help us be faithful and effective in today's world. Where we are going is bound to look different from where we have been but by God's grace we can support and encourage one another on the journey.

The best days of the United Church of Christ in Wisconsin are ahead of us. There is still more light and truth to be discovered in God's Holy Word. God is with us like God was with the Israelites in the Wilderness and we are not alone. For these reasons, we are hoping that you and your congregation will join us in an exciting strategic initiative for 2016 that we are calling: "**Shift: From Maintenance to Mission.**" This initiative invites all of us – Conference staff, Board of Directors, Conference Committees, Pastors, Congregations – all of us – to consider what piece of making the shift from Maintenance to Mission is our next step.

What does it mean to shift from Maintenance to Mission?

- Letting go of the great lament and focusing instead on a hopeful future
- Remembering that death and resurrection are at the center of our faith story. Some things will die but our God always finds a way for new life to spring forth.
- Trusting that God is with us and we are not alone
- Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit who is the presence of God calling us to explore new possibilities, take risks and open ourselves to different models for ministry
- Recognizing that it is time to explore new ways of doing ministry, ways we don't yet know, and that this is o.k. and even a Gospel Imperative. Did the disciples know what to do after Jesus' death? No, but they banded together and figured it out and so can we!

Shifting from Maintenance to Mission also means:

1. Stop tweaking Sunday School and experiment with new ways of shaping children, youth and adults in faith. How might we transform lives with the Word of God if we shift from maintenance to mission?
2. Recognize the ways in which boards, committees and certain decision-making structures limit creativity, discourage new ideas and squelch enthusiasm. Seek a new way of structuring our congregations that encourages risk taking, accepts failure as inevitable and gives innovators

permission to try fresh ideas. What mission ideas and possibilities will emerge when shift from maintaining control to permitting mission?

3. Accept that focusing too much time and energy on buildings and budgets means missing out on the opportunity to transform our neighborhoods and communities with God's love and our generosity. If our only focus is paying our Pastor and keeping our building from falling apart are we really doing God's work in the world? What other ministry might we be able to do if we shifted our focus, even slightly from maintenance to mission?
4. Develop a willingness to consider a new model for ministry which might mean shifting from Pastor to Program size or merging with another congregation or selling our building and gathering in a different kind of space or moving to a part-time pastor or sharing our pastor with another congregation or combining efforts with similar sized congregations in our area or any other ways a shift in your model of ministry might move your congregation from Maintenance to Mission.
5. Get out of the building! God doesn't live in our buildings! Who are your neighbors? What do they need? What resources do you have to meet their needs? How can you join with them in healing and transforming the world?
6. Stretch beyond the mission budget. What social justice concerns in your neighborhood, community or the world are calling you to shift from sending checks to engaging active mission?
7. Some other shift you will identify or already notice that will enable your congregation to move from Maintenance to Mission in one significant way in the coming year.

Here's how the Conference is prepared to accompany you in making a shift from Maintenance to Mission:

First and foremost, we are praying for all of you. We know this is challenging work and that letting go is hard. We join you in that place. At the same time we pray for the Holy Spirit to strengthen the fire that burns within you to serve God and to give all of us the courage we will need to choose Maintenance over Mission.

Next, as the Conference's commitment to Shifting from Maintenance to Mission we are committed to providing the following support for Pastors and Congregations:

1. Trained and Certified Leadership Development Coaches who will be dispatched following annual meeting to accompany Pastors and Congregations undertaking significant shifts
2. Three additional Leadership Development Opportunities will be available to all leaders in the Conference in 2016 and hopefully every year following.
3. Teams of people throughout the conference will provide resources ranging from consulting, to written material, to curriculum support in at least four key areas:
 - a. Social Justice Efforts (especially focused on Immigration issues, Sexual Assault Survivors awareness and support, Environmental Justice, Prison Ministry and Reform, International Efforts in Haiti and Israel Palestine etc.)
 - b. Faith Formation for all ages
 - c. Shifting Models of Ministry
 - d. Strategic Planning including Appreciative Inquiry and other models for clarifying who we are and where we want to go next.
4. We will continue to offer these programs
 - a. Turn Around Church (Fall, 2016)
 - b. 5 Practices (Winter, 2016-2017)

c. Communities of Practice (ongoing)

We couldn't be more excited about this exciting endeavor and we are eagerly awaiting your enthusiastic participation in **Shift: From Maintenance to Mission**. Please let us know how we can support you as this initiative unfolds. Additionally, if you are already engaging a strategic shift initiative in your congregation we want to know about it! Call or email us and let us know what you are doing and the impact it is making on your congregation and your community.

Blessings on the journey!