



Flourishing ministries

Multifaith summit strives to help congregations refocus, reach potential

By Rosa Salter Rodriguez

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Susan Weber is talking about how people talk about their churches.

In her audience, at Grand Wayne Center in downtown Fort Wayne, are about 200 people representing their churches.

“If you point your congregation to positive language and images, which way will they go? In a positive direction,” says Weber, a Roman Catholic layperson who is an expert in church dynamics.

“If you point towards negative language and images, which way will they go? Out the door.

“What we focus on,” she continues, “becomes our reality.”

Weber’s point was a main message of “Flourishing Congregations: Moving from Dreams to Reality,” a one-day multid denominational conference sponsored by a new member of the area’s religious community.

The Fort Wayne office of the Indianapolis-based Center for Congregations hosted the event in late April as one of its first forays into the Fort Wayne region. The office was established in 2006.

The center’s mission is helping churches advance into a future they design for themselves, says Brian Witwer, a retired United Methodist pastor and the center’s director.

Affiliated with the interfaith Alban Institute in Herndon, Va., and funded with grants from the Lilly Endowment, the non-profit center doesn’t just talk a good game. It’s putting money behind it.

Following the conference, attendees were invited to apply for a \$10,000 matching grant to use the center's approach in strengthening their own congregational life.

Five applications for the grant are under way, Witwer says, and congregations later may have the opportunity to apply for additional money to accomplish a specific project they've chosen.

Projects being envisioned so far, Witwer says, include starting a day-care center at a church on Fort Wayne's southeast side and sponsoring an initiative in Angola to combat racism.

One Fort Wayne congregation would like to help the city's Burmese immigrant population access services for children and youth. A congregation in Decatur wants to revitalize after a pastoral change.

At the conference, participants learned techniques such as asset identification, or naming the things they have historically done well, and **appreciative inquiry**, which employs questions to learn about people's perceptions of their church, including its problems.

During one exercise, people were asked to describe what their church would look like when "flourishing." They weren't given a definition of the word but were told it was whatever they imagined.

Connie Bush of Dupree Memorial Church of God in Christ, Fort Wayne, said she envisioned her small church at 1231 Hayden St. as a place where young people would find a home, as she did as a young person.

"The people were so friendly. It was like a family church because the congregation seemed at one accord, with a lot of elderly people who were rooted and grounded in the church and younger people who were encouraged," said Bush, wife of the church's pastor, Lester Bush.

At another table, Gail Zdilla, 29, of Our Saviour Lutheran Church in West Lafayette, and Ruthann Vandebosch, 37, of Northeast Christian Church in Fort Wayne, were joking that two women who work in youth ministry in far-flung areas of a large state had providentially found each other in a large room full of people.

Vandebosch imagined her church starting mission trips for adults as a way to "flourish."

When she accompanied a group of college-age young people from her church on a mission trip to Mexico, she said, she saw the whole church engaged in supporting them financially and in prayer. And, she said, she saw the trip's participants become more committed Christians.

"It pushes them so far out of their comfort zone that they come back as different people," she remarked.

Vandenbosch began trading ideas with Zdilla about how to connect college students with local congregations. Zdilla's church is about a block from Purdue University and has an outreach to the campus.

“With us being so close to IPFW, I just so much want to see kids plugged into a local church,” Vandenbosch said. “My dream is to be a church home for kids away from home.”

Witwer, who led Aldersgate United Methodist Church in Fort Wayne for 22 years, says about 50 congregations attended the conference. The center plans other events similar to ones that have been held in the Indianapolis area.

One popular offering, he says, has been one on sacred spaces, which helps congregations find structures to fit their mission.

“Lots of times churches build buildings because it's a fashionable thing to do,” Witwer says. “Family life centers were big a few years ago, and now they (churches) have them and don't use them and are kind of stuck with them. We see a lot of them that are underused, and one of the things we have done is help churches repurpose them.”

Other programs have been on congregational dynamics and computers and specialty software for churches.

The center, Witwer says, can serve as a resource for any area church with an issue or problem – there are no membership requirements, he says. While the center charges for conferences, other consultations are free.

A pastor or other leader can call the center, and staff members will direct him or her to whatever's needed, he says – whether it's someone who restores stained-glass windows or someone who knows how to deal with a member who is a convicted sex offender.

Center services are not offered exclusively to Christian churches, Witwer says. Buddhist, Muslim and Jewish congregations are welcome. “We don't want to leave anybody out,” he says.

Witwer says Fort Wayne-area congregations are remarkably vital and diverse.

“Some are growing and some are struggling. I don't think, taken as a whole, they are in survival mode. I think most are in the growing mode or the interested and wanting-to-grow mode,” he says.

“One of the things we've learned is that every faith community is unique. Another thing we've learned is that large churches and small churches deal with the same kinds of issues. They're just focused differently. It doesn't matter if they're financial or missional or leadership issues – everybody has the same issues.”

And everybody can learn to do something better, says Bush.

“We’re always open for new and better ideas,” she says. “We want to lead our church in the right way.”

rsalter@jg.net