

Section 5: Celebrations!!

We've had a lot of first-time guests to our congregations in 2021, both in person and online. And, although it's hard to gauge this, we think that our churches saw at least 3,892 first time guests. People are seeking! Do you notice the first-time guests as they join online or as they come into your building? Do you have a follow up plan so that they don't just walk out, and you don't see them again? We are utilizing technology on many fronts to better connect the church and its members with the communities they serve.

You have heard about Portico, our online educational platform. It can help empower and resource your mission and ministry. The United Methodist Foundation of West Virginia continues to help support and empower ministry. The Foundation empowers and gifts us with training and resources to help us connect to God's people out in our communities. Our communications team helps us connect by continually offering multiple opportunities to equip, train, and resource local church ministry.

Our conference has expanded its denominational connection, and this has helped to stabilize our budget by moving our Conference health insurance to Healthflex through Wespah for active pastors and their families. This has been a great move over the last year for our participants and our Conference. Although I know it's difficult to move from one insurance plan to another, the conference has been able to reduce the apportioned budget by almost \$1,000,000 by moving in this direction. Together we are trying to be the best stewards of our people resources, our church resources, our conference ministry and mission resources, and our administrative resources.

Let me share a bit about our mission field. If we are going to really connect, we need to know our context, our mission field. The total population in our conference area is down about 3.2% since 2010 and it's projected to remain flat for the next 5 to 10 years. The people in our mission field are white, they are black, they are Hispanic, and there are other races represented as well. Yes church, we do have diversity and while the majority of our people are white in our mission area, our churches and our conference, does not reflect the diversity that indeed exists in our area.

Bishop Sandra Steiner Ball 2022 State of the Church Address
West Virginia Conference of The United Methodist Church

Our churches need to begin to reflect, at least reflect, the diversity that is contained within our area of West Virginia and Garrett County Maryland, our counties, and our towns. We have work to do. The average age of persons in our conference area, do you know what it is? The average age of people in our mission field is 42 years old. Oh church, we have some opportunities and challenges in front of us because the average age in our pews right now is higher, significantly higher, than the average age of the population around us. We need to develop some new places for new people!

We have an opportunity to build new faith communities with people in our communities in different ways. Now is the time to dream! We are moving into a post COVID time. We've learned through COVID, that we can do things differently! We can adapt and we can change. We can do things in new ways and there is a whole group of people out there that need Jesus.

Go out there and rediscover, connect with your context. There are households that need Jesus. There are households with children under the age of 18 being raised by a single parent and these make up 33% of all of our households with children in our area. Church, there is an opportunity here for single parent ministry, single parent family ministry. Only 50% of people in our mission field over the age of 15 are married. We've got some singles out there that really need the love and joy of Jesus that we can generously and abundantly bring to them.

If you don't think there's opportunity for us to share the mission and ministry of Christ, realize this: out of our total population - 66.1% are not involved in an activity with a religious congregation or community. 66.1% are not involved.

Church, we do need to build bridges and make connections. We need to live into our baptismal vows. We need to live into our church vows of abundant prayer, presence, gifts, service, and witness. We have an opportunity to make a witness!

The state of the church is this: we have opportunities, abundant opportunities, even in the midst of the messiness. The love of God, the spirit of Christ, pulls us into these opportunities. This is the day, this is the season, for which we have been gifted. God has given us gifts and a spirit to move and bring God's dream, Christ's mission to fruition; to reach the people that are not here yet, to establish new faith

communities, and churches - every single church can create a new faith community of some kind! There can be new faith communities with your elementary children. There can be new faith communities with your shut ins. There can be new faith communities with those who have been so traumatized by COVID that they fear to get into large groups anymore. There are opportunities for faith communities around our 40-somethings, our single parent families, and those who are not married.

Reflection Questions

1. Are you noticing first time guests at your worship services or Church activities? What plan do you need to intentionally put into place so that you truly make a connection and help these guests to know – you and your congregation see them and really care about them?
2. Check out Portico if you have not done so already. Take a course! Better yet, use a Portico Course in a group setting to empower, train, equip, have discussions that will take you deeper into fulfilling both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Church Life Cycles is a good course to use with your leadership team.
3. Does your congregation reflect the diversity of your community? How might you or your congregation connect with and build discipling relationships with those who are different – different culture, different race, different age, different socio-economic situation, different job or educational background, differently abled? What study could you engage with that might help you and your congregation to become more inter culturally competent? Portico courses on MissionInsite, UMdata.org, Prayerwalking, and Church Self-Study [insert links] may be helpful for you and your leaders.
4. Every single church can create a new faith community of some kind! There can be new faith communities with your elementary children, shut ins, those who have been so traumatized by COVID that they fear to get into large groups anymore, our 40-somethings, our single parent families, and those who are not married. Can this become a conversation you begin with the congregation of which you are a part? Check out the Generative Ministry course catalog on Portico to help equip your congregation in this area.