

Presentation to the Clergy, Spouse, and Lay Professional Conference on May 5, 2010 by the Rt. Rev. David C. Jones

My topic this morning is “strengthening congregations through a ministry of encouragement.”

My remarks are founded on the assumption that faithfulness to God’s mission is central to the life of the Church. We have been given the Great Commission to make disciples and the Great Commandment to love our neighbor. We have been sent – sent into a world profoundly loved by God – bearing Good News and caring in the name of Christ.

The question of whether we are called to grow the Church is not up for debate. It is our calling from God. So when I am thinking of strengthening a congregation, I am also thinking of growth.

My observations are personal and are certainly open to challenge. But based on what I have seen and heard, I will suggest five essentials of strengthening a congregation. Then, I will turn my attention briefly to the matter of tactics – of strategies for strengthening and growing our congregations.

I begin with five basics:

1. We strengthen congregations through constant, effective teaching of all its members.

We cannot assume that a child’s Sunday School education is a sufficient foundation for adult membership and participation in the life of the Church. Lifelong formation is essential.

We have some congregations in our diocese where there is no apparent interest in adult formation. Many of you have told me, “They just are not interested.” While I would accept the truth of that statement, I do not for a minute think that it excuses any of us from our role as teachers.

So in the case of the small congregation where there is no interest, I would ask another question: who in my congregation is paying attention to my preaching? What one person or two or three or four people are ready and serious about growing in their faith? Or I would ask another question: who are my disciples – the three or four who would benefit from concentrated teaching and encouragement?

Where there is no apparent interest in education or formation, I would encourage a leader to intentionally reach out and teach and encourage the few, even the one, who is interested. One person may need to start from the beginning in the basics of Christianity. Another may benefit from reading or a program of study. While another may benefit from a formal program like DOCC, or EFM or Kerygma. The formation of that one person or small group will be a foundation for the next leader.

When a congregation sees that a leader is serious about adult formation, others will eventually respond. The priority on formation, however, needs to come from the leader. He or she needs to demonstrate that it is important.

If a congregation is going to be strengthened, the members need to be growing. And members will not grow by themselves. They will just grow older. They will grow if they are taught basic disciplines.

2. We strengthen our congregations when we teach our people to pray.

We cannot assume that our members have been taught to pray. But we can expect our leaders to be people of prayer. The best way that I know how to encourage growth in prayer is through active participation in groups that pray. As uncomfortable as it may be at first, we need to nudge people to pray out loud in small groups as well as alone, and to invite people to pray with you and for you.

3. We strengthen our congregations when we encourage making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

We cannot assume that everyone has already made an adult commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Every congregation, large and small, needs to provide avenues for commitment to Christ. We cannot assume that people in our pews know the story or that they know the Master. Evangelism is an integral part of mission.

While I appreciate the formal process of confirmation, reception and reaffirmation, a congregation also needs an informal and pastoral way that a person can make a commitment to Jesus. And I cannot think of a more effective way of opening this subject than the avenue of sharing one's faith story in a small group of trusted friends or in a personal visit with one's pastor. For it in the telling of one's story and in the listening to the stories of others that are hearts are opened to make an even deeper commitment.

When it is assumed that all of us are on a journey of faith, that all of us have room to grow, we can encourage our brothers and sisters along the way to take that first step of faith.

4. We strengthen our congregations when we teach people to give.

When I was called to the Church of the Good Shepherd, Burke in the fall of 1977, I was invited, before moving, to come and preach the annual stewardship sermon. But I was asked by the chair person to please not mention the word "tithe." It makes people nervous, he said. We just don't like to speak of tithing. I may not have mentioned the word in my first sermon, but I certainly introduced the concept.

I have come to appreciate the direct connection between an expression of gratitude and the giving of our money to God. We are short-changing people by not teaching them and challenging them to give.

5. We strengthen our congregations when we provide multiple opportunities for service.

A few years ago, the Rev. David May wrote a very thoughtful article in his newsletter at Grace Church, Kilmarnock. Noting the large number of retired people at Grace who already had had successful careers, he observed how many people were seeking significance rather than position or power or money through their service in the church and in the community. Making money or being promoted had been replaced with making a difference. David touched upon a common thread that binds us together in the church – it is the heartfelt desire to *matter*.

I have observed that new Christians are not willing to take a seat in a pew as observers – that they want to be deployed again and again.

We strengthen our congregations when we tend to their roots – to the basics: to education, prayer, evangelism, giving and service. But congregations grow at the edges.

I now want to suggest some basics for *growing* our congregations: These fall under the rubric of tactics and they assume education, prayer, evangelism, stewardship and service.

1. Congregations grow with knowledge of who they are trying to reach.

This principle is especially true for an established congregation. It is possible for a congregation to plant a new congregation within itself by opening its doors to new programs. This requires space, staffing, financial support and, most importantly, enthusiastic support from the leadership.

2. Growing a congregation requires intentional inviting.

The day that the Diocese of Virginia purchased a Baptist church to become for a free-standing Latino congregation in northern Virginia, I asked the Rev. Jesus Reyes to arrange for me to celebrate the Holy Eucharist in the new building. I wanted to claim it that day as an Episcopal Church. I also asked Jesus to invite some of his parishioners at San Jose to join in the celebration.

Following a glorious evening service followed by a dinner, a man offered to help me carry my vestments to my car. As we walked out the door of the church, the man paused and said, “I learned to speak English in this church. I live over there, across the street. But this is the first time that I have ever been invited to worship here.” He had tears in his eyes. Being invited to attend worship had meant everything to him. I didn’t know until later that he had been told, “The bishop wants you to come!”

We can never forget that the primary reason that people will come to a church is that they have been invited to come by a relative or close friend. Intentional inviting is much more effective than any amount of advertising.

2. Growing a congregation requires creative, intentional planning.

We have learned in Church Planting to invent reasons to invite people to church. Since we don’t have buildings, we need to rent or borrow space.

Events are planned and organized to attract newcomers. We call these events “Taste and See Offerings.” These have included a Jambalaya feast in a pastor’s front yard, a program on parenting in the community room of a supermarket, home Bible studies and participation in the county fair.

3. Growing a congregation requires setting additional places at the table.

Every congregation needs at least one activity or program that is intentionally offered for those outside the church fellowship and family.

One congregation has invented a program on Friday evenings for families who are embarrassed to take their children to restaurants. Members of the congregation are encouraged to bring their friends to an intergenerational program and dinner.

An African American Congregation recently had a hip hop mass. They experienced the highest attendance in recent memory.

Another congregation honors groups in their community who serve the common good. I visited on a Sunday when firemen were being honored. A fireman in uniform carried the American flag in the procession.

We need to think outside the box in inventing ways to invite people to our congregations. We need to set additional places at the table and then invite people to come.

4. Growing a congregation requires multiple doors of entry.

At the heart of growing congregations is providing more and more ways to come in. Offering a service of worship may be effective in attracting seasoned Episcopalians. But it takes other means and methods to attract an individual not familiar with the liturgy or not involved in a faith community.

The best doors of entry are informal, personal and attentive. Doors of entry can be neighborhood Bible studies, programs on current issues and concerns and receptions after funerals. We need to open as many doors as we can.

5. Growing congregations requires open windows.

For a congregation to grow, people need to be able to see into our windows. Often on Saturday, I will visit the Web site of the congregation I am about to visit the next day. I appreciate the hard work that so many of our congregations have devoted to opening this window. It really matters.

It is especially helpful to see pictures of parishioners and of programs. It is thoughtful to post audio versions of sermons. One of the most creative methods of welcoming people I have ever seen was at a church in Cincinnati. In a prominent place in the driveway was a welcome board covered with plastic that displayed information about the church. Then, in plastic holders, literature about the congregation was available to anyone day or night. Not only was I able

to learn the service schedule, but I was also able to capture the spirit and energy of the congregation.

We need to invent multiple ways that people can see through the windows of our churches.

6. Growing churches help people make friends.

As I visit small congregations, I hear two distinct messages. From those on the inside, I hear how friendly and loving the congregation is – how close everyone is – and how people care for one another. But I often hear a contradictory message. Some tell me that they can't break in and are looking for another church.

I would suggest that friendships are rarely formed at coffee hour. Rather, they are formed outside coffee hour through working and studying and playing together. Coffee hour is a good place to greet one's friends.

What is needed are opportunities for new members to engage others in mission. A new small group, a new Bible study, a new mission team or a new bridge group can provide new opportunities for friendship building.

Research has shown that a person who can identify at least six friends in a congregation will be highly unlikely to leave. But the person who cannot make friends is likely to leave.

Resistance to new groups in a church always appears. Old timers will say, "We are one happy family. A new group will be divisive." But the opposite is actually true. What is ultimately divisive is a closed system, even if it appears to be very happy. It is not happy at all for the person on the outside.

We know that close friendship requires a lot of time – every day. It means sharing one's feelings and dreams and hopes and sorrows. It means listening and listening – taking time to truly be a friend.

7. Growing congregations have accessible worship.

If we really want newcomers to be part of our worship, some concessions need to be made by those on the inside.

Worship needs to be planned with the visitor in mind if there is any hope of that person returning. Directions need to be given, even if they are annoying to the liturgical purist. We cannot project an attitude that the visitor should know what we mean by BCP and HE II.

In summary, to grow congregations, we need to develop eyes of a fisherman. When Jesus called his disciples, he said that he would teach them to fish for people.

To fish for people, we need to be near the water and we will need fishing equipment. We will need bait and we will need to bait the hook. We won't catch fish if the worms stay in the can.

We will need to fish in the right waters, and we will need to be patient. And God will give the increase.
