

## Northern Illinois Conference 2019 One Matters Award

### St. Charles: Baker (Aurora District)



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

If you read the statistical reports for Baker Memorial United Methodist Church, you might get a negative impression of their membership. The report shows that in 2012 there were 1013 members; in 2018, that number had shrunk to 714. However, the real story is underneath those statistics.



After staff invested countless hours conducting a long overdue membership audit, Baker Memorial UMC gained clarity on their membership situation. While there were typical losses in membership, such as charge conference action, database maintenance, and member moves, there were some important gains.

Over those five years, 90 adults have joined by profession of faith. Others have transferred membership and still others have been confirmed. Many attend who are not yet members, but hopefully will decide to profess their faith and join in the future.

Gaining clarity on our statistics enabled Baker Memorial to continue to seek the next answer to the ever-present question, “How can we be a more faithful church in this age and this place?”

In many ways, the church has made small changes to answer this question. They began by studying the book *“Shift: Helping Congregations Back Into the Game of Effective Ministry”* by Phil Maynard, helped the Church Council begin to wrestle with the mindset transition from “Membership to Discipleship.” And the church made subtle changes as a result of this transition.

Rather than inviting people into membership, they invite people to come and learn how to become a disciple and then become a member if they are interested. They invite all new attendees to a six-week small group that teaches the Wesleyan General Rules and understanding of Grace utilizing the book, *“A Blueprint for Discipleship”* by Kevin Watson. So far about 80 people have participated in that study, which provides a positive small group experience, deep connections with other people in the church, and a serious look at what it means to be a Christian in the Methodist tradition. Before joining the church, they ask each prospective member to write down how they intend to fulfill the membership vows of supporting the church with their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness.

About three years ago, Baker Memorial ran their first congregational assessment utilizing Readiness 360, a simple tool that assesses how ready a congregation is to grow. The answer came back that the church was not ready in any of the dimensions assessed, so they decided to focus on increasing spiritual intensity, reasoning that attending more to Christ in their lives would lift up all the other elements. Again, the changes were not large, but they were fundamental. The congregation is more intentional about devotionals and prayer during and after meetings. Everyone is invited into either Bible study or spiritual formation groups, and the congregation is engaged in trading prayer requests on the first Sunday of the month so they can pray for one another directly. They took the assessment again roughly a year ago, and all aspects have improved. They still have room to grow, and almost certainly always will.

A final element has been to focus more intentionally on service, especially by opening their building to local community groups, as well as a day guest ministry that serves lunch and provides fellowship twice a week to people struggling to make ends meet or experiencing homelessness. This ministry has opened their eyes and hearts to people in the community who are often invisible. They also serve as a vocational training site for our local special education cooperative every day of the school year. Being part of these youth's lives has been a blessing. Both of these ministries have stretched the congregation's love, care, faith, and connections to the community.

The congregation and staff believe that all they do is plant the seeds and water and God brings the growth. This was made clear recently as they began a new 8-week program built around the series called the *Immerse Reading Bible* in February 2019. More than 100 people are attending or facilitating the many groups. The people of Baker Memorial United Methodist are growing in faith, discipleship, and relationship as they read and discuss the Bible together in small groups.

The church knows their work has only just begun. Being Christ's Church today is a work of constant prayer, ongoing assessment, and creative imagining of what God might want to do among them next. In the coming year, they are beginning remodeling work to make the building space more conducive to fellowship, seeking to expand their outreach and evangelism, and reorganizing their committee structure to focus even more intentionally on our true mission: Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World. With God's help, they will continue to grow in faith, number, and discipleship.