

One Matters Award
Grace United Methodist Church
Naperville, Illinois

Senior Pastor at Grace UMC in Naperville the Rev. Cindy Marino says their church is seeing a turnaround. “Over the last 28 months approximately 62 people have become Grace family members,” said Marino. “We are presently working with another 15 family units that we believe will become members over the next 90 days that would equate to approximately 25 new Grace family members.”



Naperville Grace once worshipped 900 congregants weekly Rev. Marino recalled. She said, “As a larger Methodist congregation Grace has been slower to feel the decline experienced in many churches, but the decline is just as real.”

She said the people of Grace have employed three one-on-one strategies to address a changing culture that no longer sees church attendance as a priority.

1. The first shift is to change focus from programs to people: just as everything in culture is now customized. From lattes to the online shopping experience, we can’t assume great programming will bring people to church or to Christ. We are learning to focus less on programs and more on new ways to facilitate relationships of trust and transparency.

2. Through trusted relationships a second shift begins, the shift from education to faith formation. Learning has always been important to this congregation, but learning about God doesn’t always bring us to be formed as a disciple in the image of Christ.

3. Faith formation leads to the third shift: moving from an inward to an outward expression of faith. The people of Grace have always been community-oriented and active in issues of justice and mercy. Renewing our inward faith reignites our outward passion for love of God and neighbor.

According to Rev. Marino, offering a one on one conversation with a pastor as the first step—from program to people--which provides the basis for deeper connection. A pastor offers a safe place to wrestle with issues of faith and life and allows people to move confidently into participation.

One-on-one meetings are easier to schedule than a class and give newcomers needed support in a personal and timely manner. We are scheduling persons to join as they are ready and not when we have reached critical mass for a class.

Meetings with newcomers are scheduled with the pastor within the first week of their first visit. Most meetings take place on Sunday mornings, when newcomers are likely to be available. Rarely have they turned down the offer to meet.

Out of these conversations we find pastoral care needs and the passions and gifts of the newcomers. We can connect them with others accordingly and they see familiar faces when they return on Sunday. Along with this one on one care for newcomers, we also have begun what we're calling Church Community Builders.

The idea is to gather a group of at least six persons who will each meet with one other member of the group over a five-week period. The sixth week there is a gathering of all six members, who now have spent one-on-one time getting to know one another. With several groups meeting on an ongoing basis, we're seeing new relationships and new connections growing.

There are no perfect or grand programs that will 'fix' the church. We are seeing the need for adaptability, collaboration and trial and error, and will continue to do our best to discern God's call to reach out to those who need to know the love of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, Rev. Marino said.