

Thriving Through Uncertainty: Building Resilient Leadership for United Methodist Churches

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In the ever-changing ecosystem of today's world, uncertainty can feel like a constant companion for church leaders. From shifts in geopolitical dynamics and economic stability to denominational disruptions and decline, the challenges faced by pastors and church leaders have grown in complexity. The task of leading a church today requires a focus on resilience and strategic planning that is both nimble and deeply grounded in our faith tradition.

As United Methodists, our Wesleyan theology reminds us to trust in God's grace, while also calling us to be wise stewards of the gifts and opportunities entrusted to us. This balance of faith and pragmatism can guide us in crafting strategic plans that help our churches not only survive but thrive during times of unrest. Creating a resilient strategic plan that aligns with the values of The United Methodist Church and prepares us for the unexpected is critical. Of course, this plan of action is most effective for those churches that are currently strong and vibrant with a keen eye toward the future.

Focus on Core Mission and Values

The first step in building a resilient strategic plan is ensuring that the plan is centered on the core mission of the church. As United Methodists, our mission is simple and clear – to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Most every decision made within a church's strategic plan should reflect this ultimate purpose.

When crafting a strategic plan, we need to avoid being overwhelmed by every potential challenge. Instead, focus on four or five critical goals that directly support the mission of the local church. These goals could include increasing outreach to the community, fostering deeper discipleship, enhancing worship experiences, or strengthening fellowship opportunities. By narrowing the focus, church leaders avoid spreading resources too thin and remain aligned with the central mission.

Our core values should always guide decision-making. United Methodists are called to love our neighbors as ourselves and seek justice for all. These values help ground the plan and provide clarity when decisions are difficult. For instance, in a time of financial struggle, the decision to prioritize support for various initiatives may be evaluated based on deeply held values like inclusiveness and justice.

Scripture Reference: Matthew 22:37-39

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Establish Guiding Principles

In times of crisis or uncertainty, many church leaders spiral into what I call “reactionary paralysis.” In contrast, as United Methodist leaders, we are called to trust in God’s guidance and respond with discernment. Establishing guiding principles is crucial to a strategic plan. These principles act as a spiritual compass, ensuring that decisions are rooted in our faith and values.

Guiding principles should be deeply connected to our theological understanding of God’s call in us. By setting clear guiding principles, church leaders will have a foundation to rely upon when circumstances change rapidly. These principles keep the church focused on its values and prevent decisions that may stray too far from our Social Principles and theological commitments.

John Wesley Quote:

“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.”

Engage the Congregation and Broader Stakeholders

Strategic planning within the church is not a solitary process. In the spirit of United Methodist connectionalism, it is important to engage a broad range of voices in the planning process. The local church is a community of believers, and input from staff, lay leaders, and the congregation can help ensure that the strategic plan reflects the needs, hopes, and aspirations of the entire community.

Co-creating the plan with stakeholders fosters a sense of ownership and collective responsibility. This step is an essential aspect of discipleship. Methods of engagement could include focus groups, surveys, town hall meetings, or visioning sessions, where all voices have an opportunity to contribute. By listening to the people of the church, leaders can create a strategic plan that truly reflects the needs of the congregation and remains relevant in changing times.

Scripture Reference: Proverbs 15:22

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers, they succeed.

Plan for the Unexpected with Contingency Plans

Jesus teaches us to “build our house upon the rock,” a reminder that we are called to be resilient in the face of trials (Matthew 7:24-27). In a strategic planning context, this resilience means preparing for potential disruptions and uncertainties by developing contingency plans. While no one can predict the future, having a “what-if” analysis in place helps the church remain agile when challenges arise. Church leaders should identify potential risks and create plans that allow for flexibility in response.

Additionally, United Methodist theology teaches us the importance of resilience through an outward focus and persistence. We are not called to avoid hardship but to grow through it. A resilient church is one that can endure difficulties and come out stronger on the other side. Contingency plans should reflect this commitment to persevere, showing how the church will continue to serve its community regardless of external challenges.

Scripture Reference: Isaiah 41:10

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Revisit and Revise the Plan Regularly

A resilient strategic plan is one that is reviewed and updated regularly. Uncertainty means change and change demands flexibility. Instead of locking the church's strategy into a rigid five-year plan, church leaders should commit to annual or quarterly reviews to ensure the plan remains relevant to the congregation's needs and external circumstances.

Theologically, this echoes the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification, which is a continual process of growth and renewal. As the church engages in regular reflection and revision of its plan, it stays agile and ready to adapt to new challenges while remaining faithful to its calling.

John Wesley Quote:

"Christian perfection is not the perfection of the heart that is never changed, but it is the perfection of love that is ever growing."

Empowering Your Strategic Planning Process

At the United Methodist Foundation of Michigan, we understand that creating a resilient strategic plan can feel like a daunting task, especially when navigating uncertain times. We offer a team of experienced staff who are available to assist churches in facilitating and resourcing this important process. Whether your church is in need of guidance for strategic planning, help with stakeholder engagement, or advice on managing financial sustainability, our Foundation staff is equipped with the tools and expertise to support you. We can help lead workshops, provide templates and resources, and offer customized consultation to ensure your church's strategic plan aligns with both your mission and the broader goals of The United Methodist Church. Our goal is to empower your congregation with the resources and support needed to create a plan that is not only resilient but also reflective of your community's unique calling.

End Notes

Crafting a resilient strategic plan is an essential exercise for church leaders in these uncertain times. By focusing on the core mission, establishing guiding principles rooted in our faith, engaging stakeholders, preparing for the unexpected, and

revisiting the plan regularly, we can ensure that our churches remain grounded, yet adaptable in a constantly changing world. With God's guidance, we can confidently lead our congregations into a future that may be uncertain, but one that is full of potential and opportunity to witness to the transformative power of Christ in our world.

Scripture Reference: Romans 12:2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Through the power of prayer, strategy, and faith, let us lead our churches into a season of growth, even in the midst of uncertainty.

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