

The special way your church **sends forth the gospel** is its mission. That's what mission means, because it's from the Latin word meaning **sending forth**. Your church's mission is its central organizing concept--its purpose, direction, essence. It is why your church exists in its place, and it informs everything your church does. It is determined by the theological beliefs of the members; history and tradition; the skills, interests and experiences of the members; the needs and opportunities in the community; needs beyond the local community; and the church's resources--the number of members, its facilities, and finances.

## History and Background

The mission of the church is rooted in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke of his own mission in his hometown synagogue: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus invited his disciples to share his God-given mission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21) and commanded them to "go into all the world" (Mark 16:15).

The mission of the church throughout history also has been influenced by the culture around it.

There have been five ways the church has related to the culture according to Richard Niebuhr:

- Christ **against** culture, which we see in primitive Christianity that condemned Roman society and lived apart from it.
- Christ **of** culture which is the opposite of the above, where Christ is seen to be totally involved in our maturing civilization.
- Christ **above** culture, in which Christ enters our present world, reconciling it to himself.
- Christ **and** culture, a paradox where the Christian owes allegiance at different times and in different ways to Christ and Caesar.
- And Christ **transforming** culture, where Christ can, must and will completely convert individuals and society.

Niebuhr believed that each point of view contains truth, but none is the whole truth. There is no one answer, but there is an answer for each individual Christian. As you look at your church and at the United Church of Christ, which understandings do you see? How are these understandings indicated?

## Common Practices

Most churches have a statement of their mission in their constitution or covenant. That statement has meaning only if it is known and accepted by the church members. Sometimes the conditions that affect your church's

mission change, so it is helpful to review and modify the statement occasionally.

Many churches begin with their mission statement and set annual goals that help them translate the broad purpose into specific tasks that can be accomplished. Those goals are more likely to be accomplished--and your church's mission fulfilled--if everyone in the church has an opportunity to help determine the goals. Each person, as Paul told us, is "engrafted" into the body of Christ, and each therefore is part of, and needs to be responsible for, the mission of that community.

## Ways to Discover the Mission of Your Church

It can be helpful to review the history of your congregation, both written history and the living memory of your church's members. What were significant points of change? What was going on at that time? What were the conflicts and opportunities? How did the church respond? How did the church state its mission in the past? What did the congregations actions say that it valued?

Each church's mission--or its call--is unique. Reinhold Niebuhr speaks of several different elements of call for individuals. Some are helpful ways to think about God's call to a congregation, too.

- The **providential call** has to do with the "raw materials" God has provided. God has given us what we

need to answer our call, so we can find helpful clues to the nature of our mission by taking stock. For example, your congregation may have a large building unused during the week; a spectacular choir; lots of kids needing after school accommodations; or a certain kind of neighborhood with certain needs. Remember that your needs as well as your assets may be gifts from God. Keep them all in mind as you discuss, dream and plan.

- Another aspect is the **communal call**. For individuals, this means that the gifts and graces for a particular form of service (like ordained ministry) are recognized and affirmed by the community in which the call will be answered. For a congregation, the call of the community may be expressed by the expectations and the needs of the surrounding neighborhood. It may also be seen in the understanding and witness of other churches in the association or conference. When a church canvasses its community it is not doing "marketing"; it is seeking to live out the vocation which will make it most vibrant and tuned to its true nature. (Of course, this in turn will bring growth.)

You may want to use the book **Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations** by Alice Mann and Gilbert Rendle. Engaging the spirit can be a great way to get out of our ruts, too. From the Alban Institute at [www.alban.org](http://www.alban.org).

Study the nature of the church through sermons or discussion groups to inform your work. You could use the following or other scriptural bases:

- Luke 4:16-21. Is the church to carry on the same purpose of ministry that Jesus claimed for his ministry?
- Matthew 22:34-40. How can the church enable people to fulfill these commandments?
- Matthew 28:16-20. What kind of witness helps make disciples today?
- Acts 2:43-47. How does the sense of community relate to the other tasks of the church?

## Suggested Processes for Discerning Your Church's Mission

Use one of these suggested ideas for understanding and accepting your mission.

### Idea A: Covenant Groups

1. Divide the church into cluster groups that meet regularly in homes for a specific length of time (six to eight weeks) under the guidance of specially trained leaders. Each group seeks to understand the mission of the church by studying one or more passages of scripture: Matthew 6:1-21; Luke 4:14-21; John 17; Acts 1:1-8; 1 Corinthians 12; 2 Corinthians 3,4; Philippians 2:1-11; 1 Peter 1:1-9.
2. Invite each group to identify ways ministry might be accomplished in the world. The natural tendency is to be

quite local, but the challenge must always be present to extend the perspective to the national and world communities.

- What do you understand to be the mission and purpose of the Christian Church? Our local church?
  - What do you think God is calling our church to be and to do?
  - What does it mean to be a servant church today?
  - In what concrete ways do you feel we can express our faith more fully in our worship, our acts of reconciliation and our service to persons in need?
  - What does the Bible say about our relationships with other Christian (and non-Christian) bodies seeking to accomplish essentially the same objectives?
  - What does it mean to "accept the cost and joy of discipleship"?
  - What are the unique qualities and characteristics of our United Church of Christ that might help to shape our mission?
  - Which of Richard Niebuhr's understandings of culture are you trying to express in your church's mission?
3. Submit findings from each cluster to a coordinating task group for further sharing with the governing board for condensing and clarifying.
  4. Present the goals to the congregation.

### Idea B: A Retreat or Series of Workshops

1. Divide into small groups of six to

eight. In each group, do the following:

- On newsprint, brainstorm the biblical images of the church and theological concepts which group members find most important.
  - Take a break, walk around looking at other lists and then return and incorporate new ideas into your own list.
  - Talk about images or concepts your group finds most meaningful, select two and record them on newsprint. Evaluate your images based on Niebuhr's concepts.
  - In the large group, identify the two images or concepts and the reasons they were chosen.
2. In the same small groups, distribute three sheets of newsprint with one of these questions at the top of each sheet:
    - What world needs and issues of society should the Christian Church be concerned about today?
    - What needs and concerns of this community should our church be doing something about?
    - To what needs of persons in this church should our church minister?
    - Brainstorm responses to the three questions in the small groups.
    - Take a break and review the lists of other groups.
    - Complete the lists and identify the top four answers to each question.
    - In the total group, identify those four answers to each question.
  3. In the small group, review the lists from steps 1 and 2, and draft a clear,

brief statement of no more than a few sentences beginning, "The mission of our church is \_\_\_\_\_."

4. Designate one person from each group to read the group's statement to the total group. Then post the statements where all can see.
5. Ask each group to choose two persons (one person if there are more than six groups) to "fishbowl" in a session to work out a single mission statement for all groups. Post blank newsprint where the fishbowl group can work on a new statement. These people sit in a circle in the center of the room with two empty chairs. Members of the original groups sit next to one another in a larger circle surrounding the fishbowl group. Any person may move into one of the two empty chairs to ask one question or make a suggestion as the fishbowl group interacts and works out a single statement. Then he or she must move out. Every 15 minutes the designated people go back to their original groups for suggestions. The process goes on until a mission statement is agreed upon by the people in the fishbowl.

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