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THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

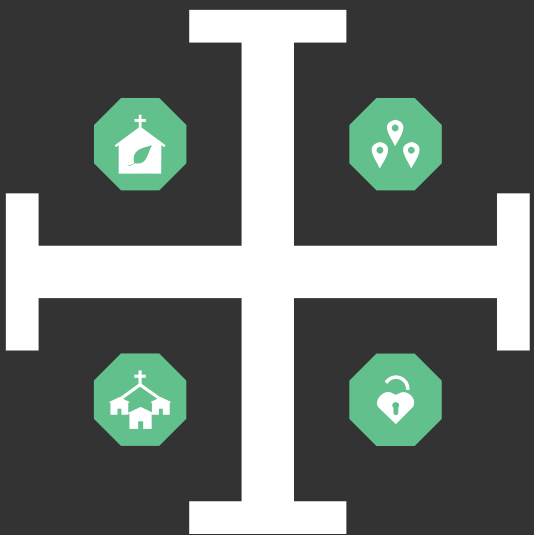
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NEW ROOM SOCIETY

Newsletter / September 2020

cooperative parish  
CONSIDER the ANTS

by Rev. Greg Moore

EO Wilson spent his life watching ants.

An entomologist by training, an agnostic by profession of faith, a sociologist by accident, he once noted, "The competition between two forces can be succinctly expressed as follows: Within groups selfish individuals beat altruistic individuals, but groups of altruists beat groups of selfish individuals. Or, risking oversimplification, individual selection promoted sin, while group selection promoted virtue."

Apparently, ants have figured out that competing against each other is the way that leads to death, but cooperating together for the good of all is the virtuous life. Each anthill is not an island unto itself, but an outcropping of an invisible, underground, almost endless network of cooperation. Leveraging that connection is the way that leads to life for the ants, each anthill, and even the ecosystem that they are in.

Here's the thing: the way that we have ordered the life of our local congregations is much more akin to individual selection than with group selection.

On the ground, each little anthill of a church seems to be competing with the church-shaped anthill across the yard for survival, and it's killing us.

The way we have judged success in our local churches has been a process of looking out for our own individual church's needs, trying to garner individual members and their money for our individual church's projects, our individual church's buildings and our individual church's programs.

If that means we are simply moving ants from one hill to another, so be it. The game is to make our little ant hill attractive and comfortable enough to entice as many as we can to come and make their home with us. And if the other anthills die along the way, that's just life on the prairie.

Even among people as connected as the United Methodists, we have found ourselves competing in a survival of the fittest posture towards one another.

The ants will tell us that this is no way to live.

*continued inside . . .*







THE REV'S. SHEREI & DANIEL JACKSON

DURHAM AREA CHURCHES

DIVERSIFY MISSION

by Rev. Sherei Jackson

The virus has enabled us to enter into a season of unprecedented listening; as I've begun the work of dreaming about a cooperative parish in Durham, I am getting to lean in and closely peer at the hearts of the UMC pastors in my area. I am delighted and deeply encouraged to share that God's Spirit has highlighted a myriad of ways in which churches in our community have been able to create particularized spaces of welcome for different people groups. I am calling this 'imago dei eyes'; it's the ways in which individual churches have eyes to see the divine spark in different groups of people; often those who are left on the margins or left out of the conversation. Trinity UMC and Open Table continue the work attending to the need of our unhoused neighbors, Asbury UMC and La Semilla are attentively caring for refugees in our community, while Duke Memorial has released a robust and intentional anti-racism response. I believe that the work of the cooperative, which we are calling the Durham Collective, presents an opportunity to highlight, celebrate, and partner the ways that each community living out a conviction to see the 'Imago Dei' in others. We are invited into a place where our difference becomes our strength and we trade our spirit of competition for a celebration of distinction. +

ANCHOR CHURCH COOPERATIVE

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

by Rev. Daniel Jackson

Being the new pastor of a historic downtown Methodist church can be overwhelming. We are nearly 200 years old and are considered the mother church of Methodism in Durham. Yet, like so many other downtown churches in the US, our heyday was many years ago. Older congregants share stories of when our beautiful sanctuary was full and a cacophony of noise could be heard from upstairs in the children and youth hall. Things have grown quieter for Trinity UMC in the past few decades. Now, during a pandemic, the halls are dead silent.

This pause has given us a chance as a community to reassess internally who we are called to be and what we might need to do to continue to be faithful to that call in the days to come. This reassessment has led us to look outside of our walls to our neighbors. How can we be a downtown church making disciples in and from our changing downtown landscape? How can we be a bridge with our location between East and west Durham? The challenges at hand are daunting - racial injustice, stagnant growth, and disconnection with the new residents of our Parrish. It is going to take a risk of faith to dream and believe boldly that God is not through with us. I have been encouraged by the willingness of our congregation to jump, but what do we do next?

I have witnessed something profound happen amidst these isolated Corona times: we discovered how much we need

each other. We can't do this alone. The beautiful thing is that when many of us looked up for support, we found that actually we are not alone. It takes extra intentionality and vulnerability to say to one another "I need you," but the result is the blessing of finding we are better together than apart.

This is my hope for the cooperative parish: that we would discover how much we need each other. Yes, it will take extra intentionality, but these times have taught us that we are better together than apart. Where one church has strength in evangelism, the other has strength in mission; where one has had a vibrant response to racial injustice, the other struggles to know next steps; one has live-streaming up and going smoothly - connecting to new people along the way, the other finds it difficult to adapt well with technology in during Covid-19. What if these strengths did not have to stay sequestered? We can share wisdom, prayer and resources for our common mission to our parish with greater impact and effectiveness together.

I can't wait to lead my church in humbly learning from and generously sharing with our neighboring churches through this intentional network of our cooperative parish to build the kingdom better for our city - to the glory of Father and through the power of the Holy Spirit who is uniting all things in the name of Jesus Christ, our hope. Amen. +

CONSIDER THE ANTS continued

Consider Cooperative Parish

Here's the good news: there is another way to live together.

Heaven (Trinity) and earth (ants) both proclaim that there is a more virtuous and life-filled way to be. Better, still, this other way of living is already among us. It is at hand. The Book of Discipline calls it, "Cooperative Parish."

The Book of Discipline for the United Methodist Church says that a cooperative parish is a community of local

churches, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that seeks to increase their missional impact through various forms of mutual cooperation and collaborative ministry.

In spite of the Discipline commending this work to us as a way that leads to life, in practice cooperative parish has often been a last ditch effort to keep struggling churches alive. In other words, being on a cooperative parish has been a sign of death, not life, an admission of weakness, not an expression of strength. Ants and their creator beg to differ.

Being in a cooperative is the way that leads to life, for the individuals, the communities connected, and even for the ecosystem where they are situated.

What follows is a beginning of us reimagining life together across our conference. These are stories of Cooperative Parishes popping up through the work of creative planters and practitioners among us. I commend these stories to you, and pray that, like the ants, and the One who makes them, we might cooperate for the good of all. +

