

## WOMEN BY THE NUMBERS

# What is a Vital Congregation?

*by: Julie Kathleen Schubring*

By now many may have heard of the Vital Congregations Project. Just what is it and why are numbers so important to gauging the vitality and health of United Methodist congregations?

The vision of Vital Congregations is “to fulfill the mission of The United Methodist Church by equipping and empowering congregations to become vital and healthy congregations in their communities and in our world.”<sup>1</sup> The Call to Action report lists four key areas that drive the vitality of a congregation, and these are consistent across all sizes of congregations. They are: small groups and programs, worship service, pastor and lay leadership.

Vital congregations make up about 15% of United Methodist congregations in the United States. These congregations stand out in their vitality because they have focused their ministries around the four key areas listed above that flow into 16 key ministry strategies. So what is a vital congregation? Information from both the Vital Congregations project and the Call to Action Report has this to say:

A vital congregation IS:

- » GROWING (Over the past five years has shown statistical data of growth in average worship attendance and professions of faith.)
- » ENGAGING PEOPLE (Over the past five years has shown congregational engagement in multiple ministries including small groups, mission and outreach.)
- » GENEROUS (Over the past five years has shown increases in stewardship and giving within and beyond the local church.)

A vital congregation HAS:

- » Inviting and inspiring worship
- » Engaged disciples in mission and outreach
- » Gifted, equipped and empowered lay leadership
- » Small groups that include children and youth designed to encourage, support and hold disciples accountable in their Christian walk.<sup>2</sup>

Over the Labor Day Weekend I had the opportunity to visit a United Methodist church in Illinois. My family and I were impressed with this congregation, and felt very welcomed even in the midst of personal grief. Since I had recently learned about the Vital Congregations Project for this article series, I mentally went through the

<sup>1</sup> Vital Congregations Website, [www.UMCvitalcongregations.org](http://www.UMCvitalcongregations.org), accessed August 29, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

checklist and found that this church could be labeled as an active vital congregation.

Before we delve into the “numbers” part of the Vital Congregation Project, we first need to understand what vital congregation means. With the above description of a vital congregation, how would you measure it? For example: Would you ask about attendance? Membership? Would you ask about small groups? Sunday School? Years of service of the pastor?

What type of questions do you have that does not require a “number” answer but an explanation? How would that be measured? We will explore this topic more fully in the November 2011 issue of the *FLYER*.

*A student at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, **Julie Kathleen Schubring** is currently serving as a summer intern at GCSRW. She is also a commissioned Bishop W.T. Handy Young Adult Missionary.*