

The United Church of Christ Resource Center as an Evangelism Tool

MARY SICHER



THE CHALLENGE: To see and use a United Church of Christ resource center as an evangelism tool for local congregations.

Initially, this does not seem like much of a challenge. As I sit in the resource center at the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference church house, I can see a series of shelves labeled “Evangelism.” On those shelves are a variety of resources that a local congregation’s pastor or evangelism committee chair or member could use to learn about current evangelism programs, theory, and theology. I can see a stack of this resource, “the e.word,” published by the Evangelism Ministry Team of Local Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Next to those resources are several resources published by Net Results in Lubbock, Texas. They are joined by a new month-long video curriculum available from Logos Productions entitled *Hospitality Evangelism*. Along with these resources are a number of other resources on new church starts and church growth and development that would be a most useful tool for local church evangelism. But these resources make up only a very small fraction of the resource center. How about the other resources that are not directly related to evangelism? What about the center as a whole? Is there anything about the resource center ministry in general that has potential for use as an evangelism tool? The answers to those questions pose a greater challenge.

To meet that challenge, let us begin with the resource center as a whole. It is my understanding that one of the surest ways to get and keep new members in any local congregation is to get that person interested in membership connected to the life, ministry, and mission of the church in a meaningful way. After discerning what that member’s interests and talents are and finding a ministry of service for them in a local congregation, a trip to the nearest resource center or a browse through the resource center’s catalogue would be a wonderful way to show a person his or her ministry is sup-



ported in the wider church. Seeing programming support for their interest and ministries in works produced by national denominational staff would encourage the potential or new member of a congregation to say, “Yes, I belong here. Yes, here I will find a community of God’s people who will share my ministry, who will support my ministry, and who will have an interest in my ministry.” And seeing a host of other resources that provide opportunity for growth and learning in that particular area of the ministry would encourage that person to feel valued as someone with potential for greater endeavors in that ministry and thus even greater service to God and God’s people.

New and potential members of the United Church of Christ might come to a local congregation unsure of where his or her ministry lies. If they are unchurched for a long period of time or only recently called to recognize the potential for discipleship with which we are all born, the wide variety of resources available in one of our denominational or ecumenical centers would be an inexpensive and concentrated way to introduce a person to the discipleship possibilities available to church members. A solid look at the church school curriculum samples might go a long way in helping a person decide if a call to teach Sunday school is a valid one that fits the gifts and longings they already have. In like manner, programming resource for women’s groups might help a person

decide that she is capable of a leadership role on that committee. Similar results could happen in a wide variety of areas of ministry. An open and welcoming environment at the center can enhance all of these results. For me, as well I am sure for a number of other people, there is nothing like a leisurely browse through shelves of books, video and audio tapes, periodicals, and current, attractive resources to open me up to new areas of ministry, new ideas for service, and new opportunities for discipleship. The words, "I never thought of that before," have wide-ranging potential for ever-clearer calls to vocation.

And speaking of periodicals, this might be one of the most hidden resources for evangelism tools that exist in any center. Many, many periodicals not strictly devoted to evangelism contain articles that deal specifically with church growth and new membership issues. Some periodicals devote all of their pages to church growth and not just numerical growth within a congregation. Periodicals that enhance leadership in the church and that provide suggestions for vital congregational worship, outstanding faith formation opportunities, and tell stories of mission and ministry throughout the world also speak of evangelism as they encourage creative ways to tell the good news of the gospel to a variety of people, who best hear that good news in a variety of ways. A pastor or other local-church leader can preview these periodicals at the resource center and decide which periodicals are the most valuable for them to subscribe to, either as individuals or as a congregation.

If it sounds like almost any resource in a Conference or Association resource center could be an evangelism tool, that probably sounds about right. Hidden in the many print and audio and video resources are nuggets of evangelism tools—chapters, clips, and segments that, with a little help and a little interpretation, become gold mines for local-church pastors and evangelism committees. The presence in the center of a person, a director with knowledge of these pieces of wisdom, is the most efficient way to ensure they are made available

to the people who can best use them. And while we are talking directly about evangelism in this article, it is important to point out the good stewardship of the resources that takes place by housing them in one place with a knowledgeable person in that place trained to use them to their fullest.

One final thing about the resource center ministry and how it can be used as an evangelism tool. Seeing the work or vocation of resourcing as a ministry is an evangelism tool in and of itself. I am blessed in Pennsylvania Southeast Conference to be in a position and in an environment where that is the case. Literally no fees or restrictions are placed on those who use the center. The local congregation's contributions to Our Church's Wider Mission offerings make that possible. When I first began my ministry about ten years ago I used to say, "I serve almost 200 United Church of Christ churches in Southeast Pennsylvania." With the advent of e-mail I can say, "I serve anybody who has my e-mail address and access to a computer." That is a fact regardless of denominational affiliation. Through e-group affiliations, I have sent resources all over the country to be used in those local congregations. Anyone who walks through the door of the Pennsylvania Southeast Conference church house is welcomed to browse and borrow resources. In this way, the good work of the denomination and the good news of the gospel, the evangelizing we are called to be a part of in our call to discipleship, is spread beyond where we can personally be.

The challenge is to see the United Church of Christ Resource Centers as evangelism tools for local congregations. When met, that challenge becomes an effective way to combine a ministry of evangelism, stewardship, education, and social action to the benefit of the local congregation and the wider church and to spread the good news of the gospel on a daily basis. With these thoughts, I see packages of resources waiting to be mailed to the many users addressed very simply, "Go forth into the world and as you go, make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).



For additional information, please contact:

Mary Sicher
Pennsylvania Southeast Conference
505 S Second Ave Box 26400
Collegeville PA 19426

Phone: 610.489.4058 • E-mail: mary@psec.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this article.

