

# Church Health Team Report on Passionate Spirituality January 2009 West Chester United Methodist Church

## Introduction: A Passion for Christ

Since 1816 West Chester United Methodist Church has endeavored to support the community of Christ by actively pursuing Christ's mission. Today, this is captured best in our current mission statement:

**We seek to be more like Christ: to call, equip, send, and support people to celebrate the faith (Psalm 150); receive others as they are and connect them with the faith (Luke 18:15-17); develop in the faith (Matthew 5-7); serve in the faith (Luke 10:25-37); and share the faith (Matthew 28: 16-20).**

After a period of discernment and soul-searching, this congregation made several historical decisions that are fundamental to our continuing mission. These were first, to stay in the Borough rather than move to a new location and second, to build an addition that would foster greater community programming and update the facility. We believe that this is part of God's calling for us.

Having responded to God's call for our congregation, West Chester United Methodist Church continues to seek after God's purpose for our community and bring it to fruition. We recognize that our spiritual growth within the Body of Christ is an on-going process. To that end we have consciously tried to study our spiritual health in order to fulfill God's mission for us.

### ***Learning From the Body of Christ***

Natural Church Development is a paradigm for understanding how Christian churches grow based on extensive global research.<sup>1</sup> The Institute for Natural Church Development is based in Germany and has analyzed churches of every size in a full range of denominations on five continents. With their assistance we used a survey to measure our congregation on eight dimensions. This was done first in August 2006 and again in July 2008.

---

<sup>1</sup> Additional resources on Natural Church Development are available at <http://www.ncd-international.org/public/essence.html> or in the booklet *The ABCs of Natural Church Development* by C. A. Schwarz (see Pastor Carolene Brubaker for copies).

---

### ***August 2006 Profile:***

*(average score 52)*

---

Empowering Leadership – 51  
Gift-based Ministry – 57  
Passionate Spirituality – 39  
Effective Structures – 51  
Inspiring Worship Service – 49  
Holistic Small Groups – 56  
Need-Oriented Evangelism – 51  
Loving Relationships – 65

---

### ***July 2008 Profile:***

*(average score 52)*

---

Empowering Leadership – 53  
Gift-based Ministry – 54  
Passionate Spirituality – 39  
Effective Structures – 50  
Inspiring Worship Service – 50  
Holistic Small Groups – 59  
Need-Oriented Evangelism – 43  
Loving Relationships – 67

---

### ***Members Contributing to the Church Health Team 2008-09***

---

#### **Health Team:**

Ann Behney	Truman Brooks
Carolene Brubaker	Tim Case
Joan Charles	Bill Kirkey
<u>Lisa Millhous</u>	<u>Pat Woodall</u>

#### **Contributors:**

Fred Crotchfelt	Debbie Jones
Lillian Kent	Paul Keogan
Roseann Brooks	

#### **Prayer Team:**

Joyce Anderson	Carol Bremner
Carolyn Cartright	Joan Charles
Carol Gress	<u>Carol McGinley</u>
Mary Beth Mytych	Walt Nagel
Tonia Williamson	Pat Woodall

[leaders are underlined]

---

### ***Passionate Spirituality is vibrant when church members...***

---

- Use the Bible as a guidebook for daily life
- Integrate God into all areas of their lives
- Talk about God's transforming presence/involvement in the different areas of their lives
- Are enthusiastic about our church
- Have a vision of God's desire for our church
- Believe firmly that God will work even more powerfully in our church in the future
- Spend personal time connecting to God
- Use prayer (personal, corporate) to empower the church's ministries
- Tell one another of prayer needs and give others' needs a priority

[excerpted from Natural Church Development materials]

Our Church responses were translated into a 100-point scale that compares us to 44,000 other churches worldwide. From this we determined that our church is typical on these dimensions with a particular strength in the loving relationships within our congregation. Over the 23 months between the two surveys there was little change, so we concluded that there was some merit to the scoring.

Research by the Natural Church Development Institute identifies these eight dimensions as those that distinguish growing churches from maintaining or declining churches. Their paradigm suggests that a church should prayerfully work on one dimension at a time to increase the health of the congregation. Although they advocate focusing on the lowest score, all eight dimensions are interconnected and those with the strongest scores are important resources for the process of growth.

In response to this information, a Church Health Team was commissioned to study passionate spirituality at West Chester United Methodist Church and identify a strategy for generating greater enthusiasm for our Church. Passionate spirituality is only one aspect as we respond to Christ's call for telling the good news. Our goal is foster openness so that God can transform our Church into greater spiritual maturity by focusing on one area at a time.

### ***Defining Passionate Spirituality***

Passionate spirituality exists when faith is lived out with commitment, fire, and enthusiasm. It is the conviction that God can make a difference and the energy to make it happen. In this type of church, members show evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in their lives, with both the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:27-30). Unlike the other dimensions measured in Natural Church Development, passionate spirituality is frequently hindered by barriers or traps that choke spiritual passion. [Note that the term "passionate spirituality" does not refer to a style of worship or type of theology.]

To learn more about passionate spirituality in our church the Health Team solicited responses to six questions from participants in both worship services over a three week period. Then the members of the team visited 23 small groups within the church and asked for their insight. This report is the result of our gathering of information and

discussing it within our group and with members of the congregation.

**The Church Health Team has been inspired and moved by the witness of members in our Church. It is our conclusion that the seeds for passionate spirituality are already present in our congregation, though they may not always be visible. Thus, our primary task is to create a nurturing environment where God can increase our faith to make it more visible to one another.**

The following report is divided into three parts. First, we report on how we found passionate spirituality and its presence in our church. Part Two describes our proposal for making this energy and enthusiasm for Christ more visible to those who walk in our doors. Finally, in Part Three we explain why seeking greater passionate spirituality in our congregation is a blessing for you, the reader. We invite you to travel with us on this journey in search of Christ's vision for West Chester United Methodist Church.

### **Part 1: Encountering a Passion for Faith at West Chester UMC**

The Church Health Team spent over a month gathering information from all sections of the church. We explained the importance of passionate spirituality during worship and provided participants with the opportunity to discuss their observations with others.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, we collected written responses to six questions asked over a period of three weeks in both services. Our analysis of this information is followed by a description of what we heard and experienced in small group interviews.

Responses to the first question, "What are the marks of a person who lives out their faith with passion and deep spirituality," revealed that we had a vision for this deeper spirituality. This question received the most responses (114) and also had the greatest diversity in the way responses were worded. Collectively, we described a spiritually passionate person in two distinct ways. First, that person has inner qualities that draw people to them – they are energetic,

<sup>2</sup> Additional information about the groups interviewed, questions asked, etc. is available from the Health Team.

#### ***Fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22)***

...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

#### ***Gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:27-30)***

...wisdom, knowledge, discerning of spirits, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, prophecy, faith, working of miracles, healing.

#### ***Our Congregation Responds:***

*1. What are the marks of a person who lives out their faith with passion and a deep spirituality?*

They are happy and smiling. (10)  
They walk the walk—they just do it. (7)  
They pray every day, many times. (6)  
They are positive and caring. (6)  
They have a peace about them. (2)

*2. What would our Church look like if we all lived this way?*

The Church would be overflowing with people. (25)  
It would be alive with energy. (7)  
The Church would be diverse but united in love. (6)  
The Church would be at work in the community. (5)  
The building would be never quiet. (4)

---

*“Meeting in small groups to pray, study, and reflect on the Bible brings us closer to God and strengthens our faith in a way that we can’t get in Sunday worship. We are committed to coming for ourselves and also to be there for one another.”*

---

*“Our group allows us to express our passion for helping others. We all have energy to work on outreach and mission and through our experience we also experience compassion, trust and commitment for one another. When we know we are doing Christ’s work it makes our time together special and very spiritually motivating.”*

---

*“When I participate in groups at this Church it lifts my spirit, I feel fulfilled. Through supporting each other I experience a connection to God. When I experience the spirituality of these other individuals I can see that we are powerful together as a group.”*

---

*“I can’t stay away from this Church – it is a part of me.”*

---

*“When I interviewed this particular youth group, I was amazed at their spiritual maturity. They could talk about their faith and the way they saw it in action – it was an incredible conversation!”*

---

joyful, creative, warm, compassionate, devoted, unselfish, positive, friendly, other-focused, accepting, hopeful, committed, dedicated, peace-filled, gentle, vibrant, contented, confident, excited, and kind – to mention a few of the adjectives.

In addition to the inner qualities, many respondents described this deep spirituality in terms of actions: passionate individuals are active, growing, working, giving, serving, caring, helping, reading the Bible; they listen, are involved, welcoming, worshiping, sacrificing, smiling, praising, and praying. The person who has enthusiasm for their faith does something about it.

Fewer people responded to the second question (86) but those responses were more similar: If we all had a passionate and deep spirituality, then our Church would attract more people and the response of that larger congregation would be visible in our actions.

This vision for a passionate spirituality emerged during the first week of our project. In the following weeks we focused on obstacles or solutions to increasing passionate spirituality. Our solutions will be addressed in Part 2, but we should note that some participants shared that they already experienced passionate spirituality in our Church and that they were not aware of any obstacles. Our discussions with the small groups bore this out.

Members of the Church Health Team, with the assistance of several others, visited personally with 23 identified small groups in the Church. This ranged from the Church Council, to Sunday school groups, to service-oriented groups. We also included youth groups and a few short-term Advent book study groups. In each group we engaged in a discussion about how they experienced passionate spirituality in their group, the obstacles, and solutions they could see.

Taken as a whole, the groups of the church reported feelings of closeness, connectedness and supportiveness that excited them and drew them to feel more dedicated to living out their faith in Christ. These feelings were closely connected to the activities that the group was engaged in. For example, some groups reported with enthusiasm their calling to pray for one another and the ways they had felt the results of prayer. Whether the group was making music, studying scripture, serving others, or exploring their faith through a

book study, the activity was an important part of passionate spirituality.

When the members of the Church Health Team convened to discuss their interviews we were inspired by the individuals we had encountered and their testimonies to passionate spirituality. Each of us felt blessed to have had the opportunity to meet these energetic and enthusiastic members of our church. We spent more than a third of the meeting sharing our experiences. Although the level of passionate spirituality was uneven, it was clear to us that the Holy Spirit was at work igniting members in our congregation.

While not wanting to make individuals uncomfortable, the Team wanted to share our sense of awe at the expressions of passionate spirituality we encountered. In all, we collected several pages of quotes, but a few of these testimonies are provided in the sidebar to give you a sample of how God is at work at West Chester United Methodist Church.

*“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows; though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain...” (Mark 4:26-29 NIV)*

The passionate spirituality that we found was firmly grounded in the loving relationships that members formed when they participated in the groups of the church. As one member put it, “[In this group] we serve others—but really we are the ones who get so much out of it. To see their faces and know Christ – it gives me such energy.”

In a number of groups the diversity of ages, worldviews, and beliefs were specifically identified as a strength and a way for people to grow in their faith. Several members said that their group allowed them to make friends of people they otherwise wouldn’t have met. These friendships have led to prayer partnerships, service opportunities, and faith conversations that built their enthusiasm for faith. One person remarked that, “The books our group chooses to study allow us to explore God’s will from different perspectives. We all approach the text from different places, and the text is often something we don’t all agree with. Our openness to diverse ideas deepens our experience of God.”

In summary, members reported that participating in prayer, worship (especially music), Bible study, prayerful service, and Christian fellowship energized them to live their faith. Doing these activities in a group gave them a depth and a level of commitment that they valued. Participating in faith activities gave God an opportunity to work inside of us, with transformation as the outcome. Having recognized the Holy Spirit at work in West Chester United Methodist Church, we turn now to our proposal for fostering the continued growth of passionate spirituality.

## **Part 2: Proclaiming our Enthusiasm**

After our experience in conversation with church members, the Health Team felt that our collective enthusiasm for faith could be more effectively communicated within the congregation. As one member put it, “It is difficult because we experience passionate spirituality in our group, but others [outside our group] don’t see it and we can’t spread it to others. The larger church is excluded from our experience.”

---

## **Church Snapshot January 2009**

---

1000 members on official roll  
 600 worshippers at Christmas  
 350 worshippers on a Sunday  
 190 pledge units

[numbers are estimates]

---

## **Richard Foster's Categories for Spiritual Disciplines:**

---

### Inward Disciplines

- Meditation
- Prayer
- Fasting
- Study

### Outward Disciplines

- Simplicity
- Solitude
- Submission
- Service

### Corporate Disciplines

- Confession
- Worship
- Guidance
- Celebration

We believe that God inspires us to grow in the faith when the participants of our faith community share their enthusiasm. The focus of this effort is on those people who walk in our doors, or worship with us from a distance. In this section of our report we begin by identifying the scope of our community. Next we propose embarking on a journey building our spiritual discipline through worship and prayer, Bible study, and prayerful service. The direction for this journey is to listen for God's call in our community, resulting in some programmatic activity in the Fall.

Identifying the size of a church can be a moving target and difficult to get a handle on (see sidebar). Roughly we estimate that about 400-500 different people are involved in the church with about 70 persons in leadership roles. As we try to communicate our faith enthusiasm, this community is both our target audience and the voices witnessing to God's transforming power.

In addition to the membership of our community, West Chester United Methodist Church ministers to a much larger community in the name of Jesus Christ. For example, many families receive care through our affiliated childcare program; we broadcast the early service to a radio audience; we minister to homeless women in our community; we offer worship services in assisted living facilities; we regularly host adults with special needs at our WEB dance; we share our facility with a Spanish-speaking congregation; and so on. Although these ministries are not the target audience for our Health Team initiatives, we believe that the larger community will be beneficiaries through a ripple effect that only God can create. We believe that we need to bear witness to one another about our spiritual enthusiasm, because it opens the door for God to transform the world in a much larger way than our feeble hands or mouths can do by themselves.

As we write this report, the Health Team has already put into motion a program introducing the congregation to spiritual disciplines. The term *spiritual discipline* refers to a God-focused practice or habit that "helps us to train our minds and hearts to see what God is already doing in our lives and join in" (Jennifer Youngman). There are dozens of spiritual disciplines and different traditions for teaching them. Many of us who were raised in the church do some without recognizing them as spiritual disciplines, or perhaps we engage them in a less disciplined way than we could.

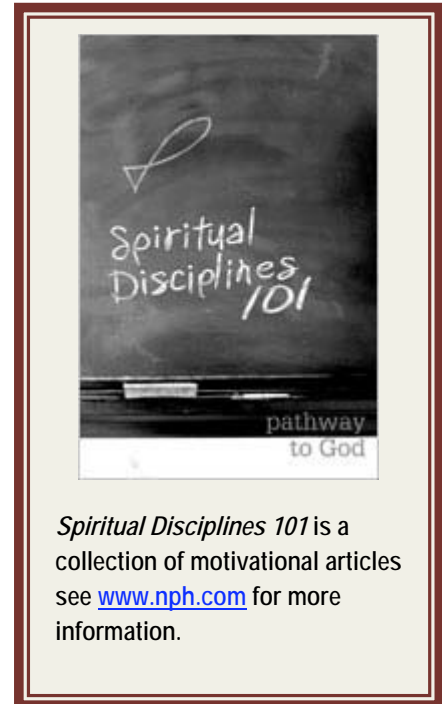
The small group interviews as well as the worship surveys suggested that as a community we find it difficult to be more passionate about our faith for a variety of reasons. Foremost in the list was the limitation of time and our busy schedules that make it difficult to place a priority on our faith. As one person put it, “Everyone is so busy with their own lives and sometimes our attention is diverted away from God.”

A second reason emerged as people recognized they felt uncomfortable about an enthusiastic faith. This unease came from different places: Some were afraid to step on others’ beliefs, some did not want to be associated with televised examples of religious fervor, some simply didn’t know how to talk about their faith energy. For example, one said, “I’m uncomfortable with sharing testimony at the lectern – what would I say for a testimony? Nothing exciting.” While another said, “We don’t want to be *pushy* about our faith.” Others said they felt their faith experience was very personal and private.

During January and February, the church staff will be introducing a variety of spiritual disciplines into worship. This intentional emphasis on God-focused habits will be followed up with an all-church book study and sermon series in Lent. The Small Groups Team has selected the book *Spiritual Disciplines 101: Pathway to God* published by Beacon Hill Press and will coordinate the study.

The leadership of our church, particularly the Health Team and Small Groups Team, have made a commitment to use the 40 days of Lent to be more intentional about spiritual discipline. Some are already reading the entire Bible in a year using either Joan Charles’ list or the youth blog ([www.Bibleshift.blogspot.com](http://www.Bibleshift.blogspot.com)). We further challenge the congregation to commit to one spiritual discipline during this period. It might be a new experience, or an opportunity to enrich a discipline you already practice. We will try and connect church members with others practicing the same discipline for support and growth, as well as share our experiences with members practicing different disciplines.

We believe that God will use these communication opportunities to enrich our enthusiasm for faith and lead us in some new directions. Over the summer, additional opportunities for God-focused discipline will be offered that lend themselves to the summer/vacation context. As we witness to one another about our faith journey we will be listening for God’s guidance to our community, with an eye to a programmatic response in September. The Church Health Team will be waiting to hear how you have heard God’s voice in the coming months. Our goal is to create opportunities in worship and prayer, Bible study, and prayerful service that allow us to listen and speak about our faith enthusiasm.



*Spiritual Disciplines 101* is a collection of motivational articles see [www.nph.com](http://www.nph.com) for more information.

---

### **Why Should You Participate?**

*These are troubled times, and it can get me down. But when I talk with my Savior and listen for His voice I forget about the problems. It's a positive distraction.*

---

*All you have to do is ask. You can be comforted in knowing that Jesus will resolve your worries and concerns in His own time. Just ask.*

---

*Even though I'm afraid about the future, I can recognize that so many gifts in my life are blessings from God. It more than offsets my fear.*

---

*When I thank God for all the good things in my life, it helps bring reconciliation when it's a struggle. It helps me understand that it is my faith that makes living worthwhile.*

---

*Giving is the greatest form of happiness in my life. I think making a difference for others should be everyone's goal. This church can give all of us the opportunity to live that dream.*

---

### **Part 3: Claiming Your Blessing**

The Church Health Team was commissioned to explore the idea of passionate spirituality at West Chester United Methodist Church and consider how we might increase our collective passion for God. Having done so, we now extend an invitation to you, the reader. Have you considered communicating about your spiritual enthusiasm with others in our church? Would you be interested in deepening that passion for Christ in the coming months?

We invite you to find regular habits and practices that focus your attention on God. Look beyond Sunday service or a weekly Bible study to **become mindful of what God is already doing in the rest of your life**. It does not need to be a burden or one more thing in your schedule. Allow God to transform your schedule to prioritize God's will for your life. We invite you join in the dance – communicate your enthusiasm together with us as we grow in our faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>



**West  
Chester  
United  
Methodist  
Church**

129 South High Street, West Chester, PA 19382  
60-692-5190 [www.westchesterumc.com](http://www.westchesterumc.com)

*We seek to become more like Christ by inviting and welcoming all, engaging everyone in ministry, and experiencing abundant life.*

---

<sup>3</sup> Report prepared by Lisa Millhous for the Church Health Team.