



# How a Two-Hundred-Year-Old, Declining, County Seat Church Got Its Groove Back

By Martin Thielen

“This is a different church,” exclaimed Randy after the early worship service. “I barely recognize the place!” Randy, a former member of our congregation, left our church in 2001 for an out-of-state job. This was his first visit back in over three years. “I can’t believe the changes,” said Randy. “The congregation is so much larger, younger, and more alive than it was before. How did it happen?”

Like many mainline congregations, First United Methodist Church in Lebanon, Tenn., peaked in the mid 1960s. Then, over the next thirty-six years, the church slowly grew older, smaller, and more internally focused. The median age of the congregation increased, membership and worship attendance decreased, and the congregation’s primary focus shifted to its facilities.

In 2001 that trajectory changed. Over the past nine years our median age has decreased, membership has increased, worship attendance has doubled, and the congregation no longer focuses on our facilities but on our mission. So how did a two-hundred-year-old, declining, county seat, mainline church get its groove back? We got it back by boldly embracing our United Methodist identity while intentionally implementing the following seven strategies.

## 1. We Dreamed a New Dream

Years ago a Vietnam veteran told me, “When I first went to Vietnam, I had a clear sense of purpose—to save the world from communism. But as the weeks and months wore on and I saw the insanity of the war, I gained a new purpose—to survive another day.” Sadly, that’s the story of many churches. They start out with great vision and dreams. But as the years pass by, the dreams slip away. Before long, their only purpose is to survive another day or week or year. Eventually, that survival mentality leads to stagnation, decline, and even death.

When I first arrived at Lebanon First, the church was mostly

surviving another day. On my first Sunday I preached a sermon called “To Dream Again.” In that sermon I told the story about that Vietnam veteran and said, “I have not come to Lebanon First to survive another day. Rather, I’ve come to this place to dream new dreams with you about what God wants to do with us in this community.” In the months that followed, the church began dreaming a new dream—to become a vibrant, grace-filled, growing mainline church that practiced “Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors.”

## 2. We Determined Our Niche

No church can be all things to all people. Our worship and preaching style won’t attract every demographic in our community. Our programs will not meet the needs of all persons. Not everyone will embrace our theology. Therefore, every church must discover its own unique niche. At Lebanon First, our niche is providing a vibrant, centrist, mainline congregation to our “Bible-belt” community of mostly conservative churches. We offer:

- An atmosphere of grace rather than judgment
- Orthodox, historic Christian beliefs with an open-minded spirit
- A healthy balance between faith of the head and faith of the heart
- A rich diversity of theological, social, and political beliefs
- Concern for both evangelism and social justice
- Affirmation of gender equality at home, in church, and in society
- Acceptance of seekers and doubters and their questions
- A blend of ancient, traditional, and modern expressions of worship

We’ve discovered that large numbers of people in our community are hungry for a vibrant, open-minded, grace-filled UMC congregation. Offering that kind of church culture is our niche.

### 3. *We Renewed Our Worship*

In order to revitalize, Lebanon First needed to renew its tired worship services. We began by upgrading from a part-time choir director to a full-time Music Minister. We also made improvements to our lighting and sound system and installed a high quality projection system. Most important, we established a worship pattern and style that met the needs of the current congregation but also attracted new people. Our worship pattern offers the congregation a dependable, five-fold rhythm of worship—yet still allows for flexibility, creativity, and diversity.

Within the five-fold liturgical pattern of song, sermon, response, communion, and sending forth, we practice a blended worship style that we call “ancient-modern” worship, incorporating historic, traditional, and contemporary styles of praising our Creator. If you were to visit our church, you would see ancient practices of worship, including frequent celebration of Holy Communion, affirmation of the Apostles’ Creed, and anointing of oil for healing and wholeness. You would also see traditional elements of worship like clergy vestments, choral anthems, acolytes, and hymns. And you would see contemporary expressions of worship, including praise choruses, drums and guitars, and liberal use of projection screens. This blended worship style works well in our community, and our worship attendance has doubled from three hundred to over six hundred, a historic high. Visit [www.gettingreadyforsunday.com](http://www.gettingreadyforsunday.com) for access to some of the worship and preaching resources that we’ve used at Lebanon First.

### 4. *We Emphasized Evangelism*

Most United Methodists are terrified of the word “evangelism.” It conjures up images of high-pressure, obnoxious gospel salesmen. Trying to sell our congregation on “evangelism” would have been a losing battle. However, they loved the idea of becoming an “Inviting and Welcoming Congregation.” Inviting and welcoming people soon became a major emphasis for our church, part of our culture. Although we live in a fairly small town of 24,000 people, we have added at least one hundred new members per year for the past nine years. The vast majority of our growth can be attributed to our congregation inviting people to worship. But other factors also play a role, including a new website, direct mail to newcomers in our community, guest parking, a welcome center, trained greeters, and a thorough system of guest follow-up.

### 5. *We Connected People to Small Groups*

We believe the best way to experience Christian community is to participate in a small group. Our primary small group connection is our Sunday school program. However, as important as Sunday school is, we know it’s not enough. Although 55 percent of our worship attendees also attend Sunday school, 45 percent do not. So we offer many other options throughout the week, including music groups, Bible study groups, men’s groups, women’s groups, youth groups, senior adult groups, and short-term groups like marriage enrichment and financial planning classes. We even have a knitting group. Our goal is to connect every member and friend of the congregation to a small group.

### 6. *We Ministered to Our Community*

Several years ago we showed our congregation a tongue-in-cheek video called “The Me Church.” The short video features people making ridiculous demands of their church. One woman

wants her car buffed and waxed during worship. A young man wants tickets to the Super Bowl. A little girl wants a pony. In every case, the church meets their request. The video ends by saying, “The Me Church. Where’s it’s all about YOU.”

If churches are not careful, we can spend all our energy meeting the needs of our own members while neglecting our community. But, as Jesus inconveniently reminds us, church is not all about us but all about others. Although we still need to grow in this area, engaging in community ministry has been an important part of our revitalization. We established a counseling center and food pantry. We helped give birth to a homeless center for women and children and actively participate in maintaining that ministry. Every year we build a Habitat for Humanity house. We’re involved in a tutoring ministry in a nearby housing project. We’ve gotten involved in earth-care concerns. We still have a long way to go, but we’ve made significant progress in grappling with social justice issues and participating in community ministries.

### 7. *We Organized for Results*

Seven years ago our leaders wrote a document called “Foundations” that laid out our mission, tasks, and culture. (This document and other information can be found on our website, [www.lebanonfumc.org](http://www.lebanonfumc.org).) However, we later realized something was missing. We needed a *process* for actually reaching those lofty goals. So we added a simple yet comprehensive four-step process to help members grow as disciples:

- Worship God Weekly
- Connect to a Small Group
- Serve on a Ministry Team
- Invite and Welcome Others

We’ve certainly faced struggles along this path to revitalization. One staff member rejected our mainline identity and sought to lead the church in a fundamentalist direction, causing tremendous pain for me and the entire staff. When we tried to demolish a historic house on our campus and replace it with a new building, some of our best members threatened to “stand in front of the bulldozer.” We had some tensions when we added projection screens in the sanctuary, and because of our growth, we constantly struggle with space issues. In spite of these and other challenges, the past nine years have been overwhelmingly positive.

Although revitalization and growth is not the norm in our declining denomination, Lebanon First should not be an anomaly. United Methodist churches all across the country can experience similar vitality. We in the mainline tradition have a compelling faith story to tell! If United Methodist churches will unapologetically embrace their identity, and work hard and smart to provide a vibrant, grace-filled, open-minded mainline culture, people will enthusiastically respond. □



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