

# Marketing the UMC

*An Interview with UMCCom Head Larry Hollon*

By Shane Raynor



Photo courtesy of UMCCom

General Conference 2008 approved the launch of the UMC's newest ad campaign, Rethink Church. United Methodist Communications has led the way, reminding people inside and outside of faith communities that church is not just a place we go, but something we do. The campaign urges congregations to reach out in new ways, and the campaign's companion website, 10 Thousand Doors ([www.tenthousanddoors.org](http://www.tenthousanddoors.org)) invites seekers to find their path to spirituality and meaningful action through one of the many ministries of the UMC. UMCCom General Secretary Larry Hollon shares his vision for the campaign.



## Where did the idea for the Rethink Church campaign and the 10 Thousand Doors seeker website originate?

As we prepared to move into the third quadrennium of our advertising strategy, we realized we needed to take this campaign to the next level. As the world changes and the media environment changes, we know that we have to change too. We began to ask the question, "What comes next?" The past eight years have led us to a new place. And so the idea came about through an interactive conversation that was based upon research, based upon our previous experience with the campaign, and based on the realities that we are perceiving in the church and society that now call the church to look at itself differently and refocus on mission and ministry.

## In what ways is Rethink Church attempting to build a United Methodist brand?

The brand has already been created: it's the people of The United Methodist Church—and the brand promise is that you will be received with open hearts, open minds, and open doors if you engage with the people of The United Methodist Church. That brand is rooted in the Wesleyan tradition of serving people who are not a part of the established church, but who are seeking spiritual meaning. Rethink Church takes the promise as well as the invitation and makes it more active. It takes it to the level of

engagement and active expression. It presents options that make the invitation to discipleship concrete.

**United Methodist congregations are all over the map theologically. How can both theologically conservative and theologically liberal (for lack of better terms) congregations benefit from RethinkChurch.org? How can a large marketing initiative cast such a wide net without losing potency?**

The purpose statement on the site claims: "This is a relevant, open-minded place to explore your spirituality. Come as you are and discover ways to live with purpose and meaning."

RethinkChurch.org is targeted at persons who are looking for spiritual connections and are more open to finding that through involvement in mission activity. No one side of the theological

spectrum you describe is more or less attuned to that part of our faith than the other. Mission becomes the new point of entry, and eventually, as people on this journey look to be more fully a part of the faith community, they can decide whether the church's theology is a good fit with their own faith journey.

**Suppose someone who has never been to a church encounters the Rethink Church campaign. In their minds, how will the UMC be different from other denominations or non-denominational churches? According to RethinkChurch.org, what makes the UMC stand out?**

One of the challenges that denominations typically face is that people don't really know that much about them. Our research has given us a snapshot of how others see us, and the indication from the first eight years of the campaign is that it has helped reframe people's indistinct perceptions about the church into something more positive. The goals of Rethink Church are to change the current perception of The United Methodist Church into one of a relevant, active community of believers; to redefine the church experience beyond Sundays and a building; and to return to the first-century roots of the church as one of the original social networks.

**What exactly are we "selling" with RethinkChurch.org? An experience? An idea?**

RethinkChurch.org is not a sales tool but an invitational destination. We invite people to this destination with the hope they will find a way to engage with The United Methodist Church in a local congregation or through an activity, service project, mission opportunity, study group, or in some other way that interests them. "Get Involved" is the section of the site that features a highly interactive map highlighting churches and ministries. By linking this section of the site with the Find-A-Church database, seekers are able to locate churches in their geographical area with ministries that best meet their needs/interests. And so that we maintain that the site is a place for engagement, not just information, it allows them the ability to leave comments regarding their experiences.

**One criticism I've heard and made about RethinkChurch.org is that there isn't enough there about Jesus Christ. What is currently in RethinkChurch.org that makes it different from any secular organization involved in social concerns and projects?**

We know that we must speak in a way that is relevant to our audience's concerns. It's a matter of communicating in the language that people are familiar with in the media environment that they are comfortable in and reaching them with concerns that are directly related to their day-to-day experiences and concerns. RethinkChurch.org is an invitation to be missionally engaged disciples of Jesus Christ. It may invite you to become engaged by using some doorway that is nontraditional, but the mission of the church is to make disciples. Therefore, a life of disciplined study, prayer, and service following the teachings of Jesus is deeply embedded in the invitation.

Read the entire text of this interview at [WesleyReport.com](http://WesleyReport.com)!

The environment changes rapidly. However, we know from research that religious references frequently block communication. Therefore, we must get around the blockage to be heard and we must demonstrate an inviting, vibrant, authentic welcome. It's a delicate communications challenge that we must handle with care for the people we want to engage and our faithfulness as disciples of Jesus Christ.

**How does a church measure the success of a marketing effort? Increased membership? Name recognition? Positive feedback from surveys or focus groups?**

One of our hopes as we promote Rethink Church is that the church as a whole will look beyond what we have traditionally measured — membership, or worship attendance — and begin to explore ways we can measure how churches engage with their communities. How many lives are touched? How many children are cared for, how many people are fed, how many persons are connected to the places where they can find reasons to have hope?

In the last several months we have tied marketing efforts to community outreach activities and have seen wonderful responses from the communities and church members alike. At one such Rethink Church event on April 11th in Topeka, Kan., twenty-two churches partnered together to get out of their churches and into the area parks for a day of cleanup. Over 800 church members participated and they were joined by more than 200 volunteers from the community. One of the pastors interviewed that day has average worship attendance on Sunday mornings around 50 people, but his church had 66 people participate. With Rethink Church, we are really measuring engagement.

**What role does church "quality control" play in the success of a good campaign? How do we keep young people who visit local UMCs from being disappointed and possibly being inoculated against church in the process?**

If we do not deliver welcoming and hospitality to those folks who come to the church and take that step of being vulnerable by coming to the church, then we have failed in our faithfulness to be a welcoming community. Our welcoming training reminds churches that if visitors aren't made to feel welcome within the first thirty seconds or the first one hundred feet, they are not likely to want to return. One of the reasons for the RethinkChurch.org website is to provide a self-guided way for individuals who are interested in a new spiritual home to explore the people and work of United Methodist churches in their area. In every case, we hope that the experience of RethinkChurch.org leads a person toward finding an experience that is authentic, compelling, and the start of a fulfilling journey. □



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