

Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors. The people of The United Methodist Church.

FLORIDA CONFERENCE IGNITING MINISTRY RESOURCE GUIDE



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Make Every Church In The Florida Conference A “Welcoming Congregation”



❑ What does it mean to be a “Welcoming Congregation”?

❑ How does a congregation become “Welcoming”?

Each September during the four-year Igniting Ministry evangelism and media campaign of the United Methodist Church is “Open House Month” at the more than 37,000 United Methodist churches across America.

It is also one of three times during the year that television commercials featuring the United Methodist Church air on major cable and broadcast channels nationwide.

The ads also run during the Advent and Lenten seasons and in virtually every form of media—on television, on radio, in the newspaper, on bus cards, on door hangers—reminding everyone that the United Methodist Church is a place of “Open Hearts, Open Minds and Open Doors.”

The ads make that promise; we United Methodists make that promise a reality for those who come to our churches.

As valuable as the advertising is in creating awareness, it is important that each congregation demonstrates Christian hospitality. The ads will stop in time, but Christian hospitality becomes the lifestyle of the church, and that has no end.

The Igniting Ministry campaign includes a checklist of welcoming and hospitality criteria congregations are encouraged to meet. Those that do are recognized as a “Welcoming Congregation.” **Our goal in the Florida Conference is to have every Florida United Methodist Church be a “Welcoming Congregation.”**

A list of the criteria is found in the Igniting Ministry Planning Kit, Appendix 6C1-2, produced by United Methodist Communications (UMCom) in Nashville.

Being a “welcoming congregation” is simple, but not necessarily easy. It requires ensuring that when any person visits your church, he or she finds a place that demonstrates Christian hospitality. This is more than just being friendly—it means making disciples for Jesus Christ.

Your church should have the materials you need to not only make your congregation welcoming, but also transform your church into a place where individuals can become disciples. It can also change your congregation’s understanding of what church is all about.

Here’s what you need to get started: **The Igniting Ministry Planning Kit.** If your church does not have this resource, it is available by contacting the national Igniting Ministry office at <http://www.ignitingministry.org> or 877-281-6535.

❑ What are the steps to becoming a “Welcoming Congregation”?

- Buy the Planning Kit.
- Form a group of individuals in your church who will work together to implement the training that every congregation needs to become more welcoming.

■ As a group, familiarize yourselves with the contents of the Planning Kit. Refer to the duties of this Welcoming Team in Appendix B-1 of the Planning Kit.

- Note especially the words in the Preface of the Planning Kit:

“Excellent welcoming and hospitality skills alone will not grow your church. Television or newspaper ads alone will not grow your church. In fact, growth is not the function of a local church. Instead, its function is to make disciples in Christ’s name, and when this function is carried out faithfully and creatively, growth often occurs. Welcoming and inviting skills, coupled with a system of congregational discipleship and backed up by a well-developed media campaign, will indeed grow a church.”

■ After you have familiarized yourselves with the Planning Kit, map out a schedule for introducing Igniting Ministry to your congregation. The Planning Kit has provided you with a format for training that can be followed directly, or the materials can be broken up into a series of shorter sessions. One congregation, for example, is using the training materials as part of its regular Wednesday night fellowship dinners, each week focusing on one of the training pieces and utilizing the training exercises and videos included in the kit.

❑ What resources are available to help my congregation?

All the resources needed to make your church a Welcoming Congregation are included in the Planning Kit.

Additionally, there is a wealth of resources available through the national Igniting Ministry Web site at <http://www.ignitingministry.org>. Included there is the Media Warehouse, offering more than 350 of the latest Igniting Ministry resources—everything from advertising for radio, TV and newspaper to graphics and worship resources—at no charge.

Another resource available on the national Igniting Ministry Web site is “Beyond 30 Seconds: Developing a Welcoming Congregation.” It’s a seven-session video curriculum for small or large groups that invites us to look beyond the television commercials to truly become people who understand what it means to welcome newcomers and guests.

❑ What resources are available here in Florida?

Many of the districts in the conference have an Igniting Ministry coordinator who is available to assist you and answer any questions. Your Conference Communications staff and Igniting Ministry Design Team are also here to help you. For district coordinators and design team contacts, as well as Florida Conference Igniting Ministry updates and resources, go to the Florida Conference Web site at <http://www.flumc2.org/page.asp?PKValue=214>.

Remember, Igniting Ministry is *more than advertising*. It is a way of making *each* congregation in the Florida Conference a “Welcoming Congregation”—a church that is making disciples for Jesus Christ.

❑ What else can my church do to participate in Igniting Ministry?

❑ *The Church's Physical Setting*

❑ *Signage*

TIPS AND IDEAS

By the Rev. Roger K. Swanson, former director of the Florida Conference's Operation Evangelization office and codeveloper of many of the national Igniting Ministry training materials.

In the 1950s, Marshall McLuhan coined a phrase that contains an extraordinary insight: The Medium IS the Message! That which brings the message to us has as much to do with whether and how we hear the message, as does the content of the message itself. A marvelously prepared sermon, delivered by an unkempt preacher with a nervous tick in an unattractive setting won't be nearly as absorbing, heard or acted upon as it would if the preacher of that same sermon was well-groomed, a good speaker and in an appealing setting.

Another way to say this is: Your Church Building is an Evangelist!

Pay attention to the property of your church and whether it attracts and supports the Gospel message or turns people off and perhaps away. Years ago when we traveled with our children, they could almost always guess the denomination of a church building before they saw the sign. Attractive, well-groomed, freshly painted properties tended to be Episcopalian or Presbyterian. Methodist churches were mostly rundown.

Do you have realtors in your congregation? Enlist their help. Brand-new members still have new eyes and can tell you a lot about first impressions, positive and negative.

This is perhaps the second statement your church makes to its community. Is your sign old and rusty? Are there weeds growing around it? Has the mower just ridden as close as possible, leaving a strip of tall grass around the base where the riding mower won't reach, or where no one has trimmed?

Front doors in homes make a statement of hospitality and welcome. So does a church sign.

Front signs should be simple and dignified with the church's name clear to anyone. The more uncluttered the better. Having the name of the pastor(s) and worship hours is not necessary. People seriously seeking a church will find out what they need to know by calling or stopping by the church office.

Should there be a message on the sign? Having replaceable letter message boards is a throwback to years past when the front sign was also an announcement board. These were also the days when most people walked past a sign with leisure to read it. It's dangerous to put messages on signs for people in cars driving past at 25 to 40 miles per hour.

Sermon titles probably don't draw anyone. How about the motto: Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors? How about preaching a series of sermons on the theme? "Open" is a great Biblical word. What does it mean to be open-minded? What are open hearts? And for "open" doors there is the word of our Lord, "Behold, I have set before you an Open door," from Rev. 3:8.

❑ Hospitality in Building Use

How a church's facilities are offered to and utilized by the community at large will describe whether or not hospitality extends beyond its own circle. The motto "Use it or Lose it" may apply. Too many buildings are under-utilized. At the same time there are worthy groups in every community needing space.

There are recovery groups helping people break the hold of alcohol and other drugs, Girl and Boy Scouts, committees to improve the community. Churches can serve the community by offering their facility for blood drives and voting. The point is, letting in outside groups meets a real need in your community; it also brings non-churched people to your church building

One idea that a growing number of churches are using is a Church Host group. These may be trustees or members of the evangelism or property committees. Each weekday evening a church host is on the property, greeting people and pointing out where groups are meeting. Such a person is clearly not present to supervise building use, but to greet and welcome and answer questions that non-churched people might have about the church.

❑ Use of the Parking Lot to Welcome

Churches are not only blessed with inside space, but many have substantial parking lots. You can put up basketball hoops, hopscotch diagrams. What about supervised skateboarding times during the week? Instead of signs reminding neighbors that this is private property, what about a sign welcoming children and youth and their parents to use the property?

❑ Kindness Evangelism

Kindness, according to St. Paul, is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal.5:22). Doing another person a kindness means doing something for them that they need doing and/or recognize as a kindness. A free car wash; the gutters of an elderly person cleaned out; a bottle of ice-cold water on a hot day of shopping; a no-strings-attached neighborhood cookout — there are so many ways congregations can be welcoming by simply being kind to their neighbors. Why not try it? For additional ideas go to <http://www.kindness.com>.

❑ Questions?

■ Visit UCom's Igniting Ministry Web site at <http://www.ignitingministry.org> or the Florida Conference Web site at <http://www.flumc2.org/page.asp?PKValue=214>.

■ Contact a member of Florida's Igniting Ministry Team:

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