

How to Become a 4x, Permission-Giving, Community-Focused Church

Part 1 of 3 (297 words)

Since 1899, the Gaylord United Church of Christ has had a history of connecting with community needs, sharing a strong music ministry, and providing leaders and volunteers to school and community activities. We were the first English-speaking church in Gaylord and we are now the only church with a choir that sings every Sunday. Our history included a successful 22+ year ministry of leadership from Rev. Don Britt. We wanted to continue this tradition after Rev. Britt left our church in 2002. Rev. John Guttermann mentored our congregation ten years ago during our interim period of transition after Rev. Britt's ministry.

Rev. Guttermann's interim ministry planted the seeds for tackling change and doing new things. His favorite phrase was: *"If you want to grow the church, you have to grow the ministry."* During many congregational brainstorming sessions, we sought to identify a ministry and mission that would resonate not only with our small congregation, but also with our rural community. We discussed many ideas, tried a few small experiments, agreed upon our core strengths and values, and wanted to do something.

However, after 7+ years of *"wandering in the wilderness"* our members increasingly felt as if all we did was talk and talk, but did not DO anything. And we were also afraid to experiment with bold new activities, because we were afraid that we could be exposed to criticism, failure, or a waste of resources – namely, time, money, and trust. Despite this fear, we continued to remember not only our past successes, but also Rev. Guttermann's advice to try new ideas and new ways of doing things, even though not all new ideas will be successful and not all new ideas can be undertaken at one time. In other words, do not be afraid to fail.

Part 2 of 3 (271 words)

During this same time, the Minnesota Conference was going through a strategic planning and visioning process. Our church benefited from having a representative on the Conference Board of Directors, so we also received ideas, resources, and encouragement from our wider connection within the United Church of Christ. In addition, our partnership with the New Ulm United Church of Christ and the sharing of pastoral leadership from Rev. Hank Campbell has also been helpful. Rev. Campbell has supported our desire to build community connections. He has also been willing to experiment with our worship services, introducing new music and hymnals, supporting guest concerts, programs, and special worship services, etc.

The table was set for July and October 2012, when church leaders and our current pastor, Rev. Campbell, attended two uplifting VRV workshops and June 2013 when we attended the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference UCC. These gatherings were not only inspirational, but they reinforced Rev. Guttermann's words of advice from a decade ago. And our former Associate Conference Minister, Rev. Elena Larssen, emphatically supported our efforts to move past our fears. The advice was consistent: *"Visioning and prayer should always be present."*

We were reminded that visioning and prayer should go on constantly. We remembered Rev. Guttermann's advice to "grow the ministry." We learned that vital congregations stop and say "YES, we'll try that!" VRV – What an exciting concept! VRV - Vitality*Renewal*Vision! Church leaders were re-energized! We saw and heard about ideas other congregations were successfully doing. We decided to try the VRV approach with our small (95 member) congregation and see what would happen. Guess what? The congregation is re-energized!

Part 3 of 3 (475 words)

Exciting things are happening at the Gaylord UCC. We have become a "**4-x, permission-giving, community-focused**" church. What does this mean? First, we are focused on connecting the resources of our church with the needs of our community. We have asked our members to trust in our leadership and to pray for guidance. We have hosted various church events to welcome and connect with the Hispanic community in Gaylord. Second, we have given everyone permission to experiment with new ministries, mission outreach programs, and community events...explicitly stating that we have permission to spend up to \$2,000 on a new idea, even if it is not successful. This means that we have the freedom to experiment. We have given members permission to fail, to fail frequently, to fail quickly...and to fail forward!

Third, we have encouraged everyone to identify new ministry opportunities. If at least 3 people want to lead the effort, we'll give it a try. Finally, we are centering on our core strengths, while recognizing we have limited resources. Hence, the "**4-x**" statement. Our goal is to become a great church each and every year by having at least: 4 great worship services, 4 great musical concerts or events, 4 great community programs, and 4 great mission outreach projects.

With our congregation's blessing and support, ideas are being tried, action steps are being taken and we are not afraid to try, try, try again. Our focus on building stronger community connections has resulted in many new initiatives. We have invited our community to join us at "Pepsi with the Pastor" in one of Gaylord's eateries. We moved our congregation's 2013 Wednesday night Lenten suppers and services out of the church building and into the local retirement and care center. (It was more work; but what a great feeling of joining in faith and fellowship with residents who have difficulty getting out to church!)

Boards and Committees have permission to carry out new ideas. 3-member teams are moving forward with plans to host special musical events, special worship services, and improve our social networking presence. We have also deferred other ideas until 2014 or later. ("*Not all ideas have to be undertaken at the same time*" J. Guttermann). We have discovered a wonderful mission/service project that is gathering excitement, involvement, and broad support, not only from within our congregation, but from other service organizations within the Gaylord community – the P.E.T (Personal Energy Transportation) project.

We have not yet increased the number of members in the Gaylord UCC congregation, but we are making a new name for ourselves in Gaylord, gaining visibility as a church that is connected with the community. Gaylord residents wonder how such a small church can do so much. The answer: we believe that we have a lot to give and we enjoy sharing our gifts with others.