

## **Connectional Ministries Role in Providing Training and Consulting to Local Churches with a Reduced Number of Districts**

***“Every church challenged and equipped to make disciples of Jesus Christ by taking risks and changing lives.” North Alabama Conference Vision Statement***

***The Current Model for Providing Resources to Local Churches Through Connectional Ministries:*** The way Connectional Ministries is currently working to resource local churches has been a good model, however, it has its limitations. When a local church contacts Connectional Ministries for training or consulting, one of the staff members works with the local church by setting up a meeting with the local church leadership and providing the appropriate training or consulting services. This involves help with visioning, ministry planning, missions planning, leadership training, age-level programming ideas, church growth consulting, facility development, and a variety of other services based on the needs of the local church. We have trained specialists to assist in all these areas. This model has worked well, however, we are finding it harder and harder to meet the number of requests we are receiving. We have recently started challenging churches that are seeking training from the Connectional Ministries staff to invite other churches in the area to join in the training event with them. This multiplies the benefits of the training by reaching more church members and it maximizes the limited resources of the Annual Conference.

Another model that we are using in training is what we call “train the trainers.” In this model, we identify people who can become trainers in each district and the Connectional Ministries staff provides training for them, thus enabling these newly trained trainers to work locally in their district in providing the training that local churches need. We saw the success of this model as we were developing the Safe Sanctuaries training. Again, utilizing this model demonstrated good stewardship as we made it possible for more people to be trained closer to home.

Finally, we are implementing Natural Church Development, a process of measuring a local church’s healthfulness in eight quality characteristics, and implementing a plan for improvement in the area that has the greatest potential for unlocking the natural growth of a church. We have trained over 60 coaches in this process who can work with local churches to become growing churches and we continue to offer training for more coaches to work with even more churches.

Building on the success of these models, we envision that the Connectional Ministries staff will be positioned to offer even better training and consulting services with the new district alignments being proposed.

***A Vision of Connectional Ministries with Eight Districts:*** With 8 districts we envision each district serving as a virtual training center. The district leadership structure would be organized around training, but instead of spending resources to develop training center facilities, we would utilize the facilities of existing churches or ministries within the bounds of the district to offer ongoing training for lay and clergy leadership. The United

Methodist Center in Birmingham could be a hub for the districts closest to Birmingham and an existing facility in either Decatur or Huntsville could also be a hub for the northern part of the conference. We would bring resource people in for training events at these sites. However, we would also access satellite links or closed circuit teleconferencing for all the districts so that people could participate on a more local level and then have interaction with other church leaders in the district around the training topic that is presented.

Even within districts, we would have the option of organizing “clusters of churches” around specific needs and providing more training to those needs. These clusters would be organic, in that your church would be in a cluster based on whatever need you were addressing. Once you addressed that particular need, you might want to join another cluster that is meeting to address another need in your congregation. Your church might actually be involved in two or more clusters at the same time based on the needs within your congregation.

Those churches that are participating in Natural Church Development who have the same Minimum Factor (the area where your church has the greatest potential for growth if you are able to improve that area) could be in a cluster that the Connectional Ministries staff meets with over time to provide training and resources to address that area.

For all churches, there would be various training tracks to address specific needs in local churches. These training tracks would be developed by the District Superintendent along with the District Leadership Teams in response to the needs within the district churches and they would be ongoing (i.e., mid-term or long-term to effect the greatest growth and change), intensive, and interactive in nature involving the leadership of several churches facing the same challenges. For instance, there could be one track for small membership churches trying to break the 50 or 100 barrier in worship, another track for medium membership churches trying to break the 200 or 300 barrier, and a third track for large membership churches trying to break the 500 or 1,000 barrier.

Additional training tracks may focus on any area identified as a need within the district such as developing worship leadership or music leadership, identifying people’s spiritual gifts and mobilizing people for ministry based on their gifts, local church financial management, undertaking a building program, growing a children’s or youth ministry, or creating a mission team for local, national, or international mission projects. The possibilities for training are endless as long as they equip local churches for the ministry of making disciples.

Another way we envision being better able to serve the local church is by supplementing the expertise of the Connectional Ministries staff with nationally-recognized resource people who are considered the tops in their field. By identifying churches with similar needs, we could bring in the highest caliber leadership to provide training for them at a minimal cost. Churches that couldn’t afford to pay for this caliber of leadership would find the costs well within their means if these costs were shared among many churches.

Connectional Ministries staff will still be available to do individual local church consultations where the church's District Superintendent feels like it is needed. We want the District Superintendents involved with us as we work with churches to be sure that we're all working toward the same purposes for a particular local church to assist them in becoming ore effective at making disciples for Jesus Christ.

How the Connectional Ministries staff will be deployed in the new district alignment will depend on how the district lines are drawn and how best we see these staff people being able to resource the local church. Although many of the staff have expertise in particular areas, all the staff are trained to competently deal with general consulting in a local church and assist them in visioning, mission development, and ministry implementation. All current staff members are trained as Natural Church Development coaches. This versatility will allow us the opportunity to consider several different options for how we deploy the Connectional Ministries staff in the new alignment. Some other conferences have staff permanently stationed throughout the conference to be more accessible to local churches. Other conferences utilize a rotation of staff that has individual staff members moving through various areas of the conference on a rotating basis to provide access to their expertise.

As we move into the implementation of any new district alignment, we are going to be listening to you to determine how best to make the Connectional Ministries staff available to you. We exist to serve the local church and we intend to continue to partner with local churches in helping them reach their communities with God's love and make disciples for Jesus Christ.