



WHAT IS FRESH EXPRESSIONS?

In last month's clergy email, our District Superintendent Rev. Doug Forrester shared some information about **Rural Church Rising**, a conference we attended in October. Rural Church Rising is a subset of the Fresh Expressions movement within the United Methodist Church. Learn more about Rural Church Rising by **reading Rev. Forrester's article** at the link [here](#).

In the article below, I will share some things about Fresh Expressions. Why tell you about this now? **In February 2024, the Fresh Expressions UM is holding its first national conference online and in Charlotte, North Carolina.** Fresh Expressions is more than a conference and theory. Officially, Fresh Expressions UM is... *“a distinctly Wesleyan Spirit-led movement of new Christian communities that serve the present age. Fresh Expressions has a singular focus: to cultivate communities of love and grace for people neglected by the church. It seeks to be the church with new people, in new places, and in new ways.”*

Fresh Expressions is based on six simple stages for cultivating communities of love and grace for those outside the church (freshexpressions.com). Whether your church is developing a “fresh expression” or not, these stages are helpful in effective disciple making. **Here are the first three stages.** In a future article, we'll discuss stages four through six:

STAGE ONE: LISTEN: “Faith communities that connect with neighbors begin with listening. When we reach out with open ears and open minds, we can create a community that will meet people where they are and walk alongside them to Jesus. It's important not to start the

process with preconceived ideas or preplanned programs. Be open to what your community is longing for. Take time to ask your neighbors what they are passionate about and what they would like to see in their community. Patience keeps us from rushing into a program or idea that our neighbors aren't asking for."

STAGE TWO: LOVING PEOPLE: "As we begin to listen to our neighbors, we form new friendships and invest more deeply in existing friendships. Love and friendship are the foundation on which we build a healthy fresh expression. Focusing on relationship-building keeps us from seeing our neighbors as targets to fill our programs. Forming relationships is one of the most impactful things we can do in our communities. The United States is facing something sociologists have termed "friendship decline." The Survey Center on American Life found that the number of close friendships Americans have has declined precipitously since 1990. Victor Lee Austin writes, "Friendship is why we exist in the first place. Friendship is also our final end in the kingdom of God. Out of friendship God has made us, for friendship he has died for us, to friendship he ever draws us." So go out there and invest in friendships!"

STAGE THREE: BUILDING COMMUNITY: "Faith communities that connect with their neighbors form a social community that can become a spiritual community. In this stage the leaders of the fresh expression begin to organize gatherings that build towards a cohesive community. Communities create a sense of belonging, form a shared identity, and add something of value to their members. The United States is facing an epidemic of loneliness, a perceived lack of meaningful social interactions. By focusing on social community, fresh expressions offer a compelling response to our cultural moment. What is something you can do with your neighbors to build a sense of belonging?" (© 2024 Fresh Expressions)

New forms of "church" are taking place across the Valley Ridge District based on these very principles. In the next article we will discuss stages 4-6, and in future articles we will share models of Fresh Expressions taking place across the district. And, as always, your district team is here to help you dream, implement, and thrive in growing new ministries!!

Blessings,
Dale White