

**Report to the Congregation of
Monson Community United Methodist Church**

By

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Introduction:

My name is Sharlene Kobb (Shar) and I am a Master of Divinity student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. This semester I took the class “Understanding the Church’s Context” and Monson Community Church was kind enough to assist me in my final project. This report is the written results of that project. The data that I gathered came from many sources: the four class textbooks, demographic information from the online census site, South Bend Area Connect web site, the Monson Community Church website, the United Methodist general website, and interviewing a variety of people from all walks of life who attend Monson Community Church. Thank you all for your time, openness, and hospitality. My hope and prayer is that this report will be a starting point or an encouragement to continue discussions concerning Monson Community Church’s place in our community and world as they continue to love people into the Kingdom of God.

The Immediate Context:

Monson Community United Methodist Church recently changed its name from Monson Chapel United Methodist Church. For the younger people in the congregation changing the name was not an issue as they see being a community church more in line with Monson’s mission and vision. The older members were not as encouraging. Monson is in a unique location—it is rural and inner city, located on South Bend’s Southwest side, it is near rural (to the west of the church) and considered a country church by some people, but also near an area that is economically challenged with apartment projects and gangs running the street. The people in the immediate neighborhood next to the church are middle class or lower class people economically. The neighborhood “down the street” is economically challenged with many living in poverty in government supported housing and on government assistance. There are many households in this neighborhood that are listed as “food insecure”. This means that there is not an

adequate amount of food available to the family. The population for the zip code in which Monson is located is 20,687 with 19,735 being urban and 952 being rural.¹ South Bend is predominately white with large black and Hispanic communities. The median age for the household is 33.9 years old.² South Bend's total population in 2006 was 98,516, an 8.6% decrease since 2000.³

The History of the Congregation:

Monson Community Church began as a Sunday School with a worship service in 1880 and had its own building by 1884. The Studebaker brothers donated the materials for the original building. They felt that the Westside of South Bend needed a church so that it was not so far to travel to attend church. The church was named after the circuit rider, Pastor Monson.

Recent history is that before Pastor Tim came to Monson, Monson went through several pastors. One of the pastors left the ministry after his tenure at Monson Chapel, possibly "burned out" according to members. The year immediately before Pastor Tim's appointment one of the long-term members who is a lay speaker was the pulpit supply pastor. Monson has gone through many changes in the last seven years, since Pastor Tim's appointment. Pastor Tim was appointed to Monson to close the church, but instead as he has worked with the congregation, they have gone from 75 members in 2002 (the year before Pastor Time was appointed) to 102 members in 2009 (the last time that complete data is available). Today they average about 87 people on Sunday mornings. Monson is a church that has families who have been attending members for generations, currently three and four generations attend together and are active. Monson in the last few years has made leadership changes that now follow the United Methodist Book of Discipline. This has been a challenge as those who do not want the

¹ www.aresllc.com (retrieved on June 16, 2010).

² www.aresllc.com (retrieved on June 16, 2010).

³ www.southbendareconnect.com (retrieved on June 8, 2010).

changes and do not understand that the Book of Discipline outlines the requirements for the structure in the United Methodist Church, it is not just because the pastor says so. In the last one to two years the leadership of Monson with the guidance of Pastor Tim have been encouraging new and younger people to be in church leadership. One of the reoccurring themes in the interview process is that this leadership change needs to continue so that the younger or newer Christians are mentored by the mature leaders to help them learn what it takes for the leadership position and responsibilities of the position. Change has been difficult and very hard on the older members; most of the younger and newer members have embraced the changes.

Identity of the Congregation:

The members of Monson Community Church see themselves as people who are very giving and loving. If someone has a need they all come together to meet that need; sometimes never even knowing who they are helping. They have many Spirit filled people in the congregation. Monson is a multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-generational congregation—this has happened in the last five years with many mixed families.

They list on their website and in a membership pamphlet that you can expect these things at Monson:

- Honest people who struggle with the real world, and might even be a little grumpy
- Us to make mistakes--we are all human
- Our focus to be on Jesus, not on the building, the windows, etc.
- God to talk directly to you
- Answers to prayer, even if it's not the answer that you want
- The Holy Spirit to show up
- To learn a new song, re-learn a scripture passage, make a new friend.

Monson is truly a congregation of multiple generations, multi-racial/ethnic and mixed ethnic heritage, various economic situations, many layers of educational levels, and people who are brand new to the church as well as those who have grown up there—were baptized there, met their spouse there, and were married there. One of the most amazing things is in this small church people come from two counties and about seven different cities to be a participant at Monson Community Church. One relationship story that a newer member shared with me is that three years ago when her family was looking for a new church, her ex-husband invited her and her family to Monson. They have been there ever since and when you attend events with them, there is no discomfort. They have a wonderful relationship between their families and are a witness of lives transformed by God's love through a congregation that accepts all people as persons of sacred worth.

The congregation at Monson has many traditions, but the glue is the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. The United Methodist Church has an open communion. If a person has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and is living for Jesus, they are welcome to participate, so everyone is welcome regardless of denominational affiliation. The sacrament of baptism is one of the things that people when interviewed consistently said was one of those things that encouraged them and made them feel alive. It excites them to see especially an adult give their life to Christ and watch the transformation that happens when someone becomes a Christ-follower.

Monson Community Church has a global ministry called "Cross in My Pocket". This ministry has been in action for many years and the crosses have gone into war zones, the slums of many third world countries and the local neighborhoods. During the Memorial Day Parade on the Westside of South Bend, members walk in the parade and hand out crosses with their flyers inviting everyone to Monson activities, including Sunday services. The flyers are in both English and Spanish. The "Cross in My Pocket" ministry was inspired by the poem by Vera Mae Thomas, "The Cross in My

Pocket.” The church has a punch and die, and they make them and package them. I personally have given them to people in the LaSalle Park neighborhood and the Muessel neighborhood in South Bend through a street ministry in which I participated, people were touched to receive such a gift of love.

This congregation has become a very open congregation that welcomes everyone regardless! This is something that they have nurtured in the last five years or so. During the interview process this was brought to the table by many of the interviewees and the fact that for a small church the average age is in the thirties not the eighties. There are a growing number of young people and young families in attendance.

The Theology and Practices of the Congregation:

At Monson Church, their membership flyer says that they believe:

- God is bigger and better and closer than we can imagine.
- The Bible is God’s perfect guidebook for living.
- Jesus is God showing himself to us
- Through his Holy Spirit, God lives in and through us now
- Nothing in creation “just happened.” God made it all.
- Grace is the ONLY way to have a relationship with God.
- Faith is the only way to grow in our relationship with God.
- God has allowed evil to provide us with a choice, God can bring good even out of evil event and God promises victory over evil to those who choose him.
- Heaven and Hell are real places. Death is a beginning, not the end.
- The church is to serve people like Jesus served people.
- Jesus is coming again.

During the interview process, the members spoke with great passion about the outreach

ministries in which Monson is involved. The interviewees also spoke about their Emmaus Walk and how it was a tool that God used to transform their life.⁴ For such a small congregation Monson has a very high percentage of Certified Lay Speakers. They also have a children's ministry and a youth ministry. During the summer Vacation Bible School has 45-50 children in attendance and in one way or another, the whole church is involved. The whole church is also involved in the annual Turkey Dinner where over 800 people are served. On Thanksgiving Day they also have a community Thanksgiving Dinner that is served to anyone who stops in and some meals are even delivered to those that they know need it and cannot come to the church. The congregation loves their Community Care Center, they provide a free lunch and activities once a month for the immediate neighborhood. Many in the congregation come to serve and just fellowship together as well so that this is a more than just an outreach opportunity, but also a time of fellowship for them. Before school begins in the Fall they will have free school physicals, eye exams, and haircuts for those who come. This is an awesome ministry for the people who live in that area, as many of them have no other way to make these things happen for their children! A monthly after worship fellowship meal is open to the community even if they do not attend service. Often there are one or two people from the community and most of the congregation attends this meal, it is a celebration of the family of God. One member said, "It is ALL worth it if we are able to impact just one person for Christ."

On Sunday morning between services there is Sunday School for children, youth and adults. During the week a men's accountability group and a women's accountability group is offered as well as a Disciple Bible Study group. The youth group meets on Sunday evening. Monson has opportunities for discipleship, but could use a more intentional plan of forming, guiding, and nurturing disciples and new people to the congregation.

⁴ See www.upperroom.org/emmaus/whatis for more information.

From my observations and interviews, I believe that Monson Community Church lives its beliefs, but could benefit from a more intentional, intensive plan of discipleship.

Missional Vocation:

The congregation understands its God-given calling to be serving the community. One interviewee said, “We are a missionary congregation spreading the Word of God, and caring for those less fortunate today.”

Monson’s Mission Statement: “Offering the Word of God, and the Love of Christ, in the community and the world around us.”

The congregation at Monson is energized and feels alive when they are able to positively influence their community for Christ. Through the Interview process it was very apparent that the congregation was passionate about living out this mission statement. For instance, walking in the Memorial Day Parade was a huge risk for some in the congregation because of their life before Christ. Those members were making a very public statement in their community about Christ’s transformation of their life.

Monson is a missional church. They pray, learn, fellowship together as well as serve their community by being the hands and feet of Christ.

The Congregation’s Engagement with Its Contexts:

Today the Monson Community United Methodist Church congregation looks more in line with the demographics of the area than it ever has. The area is multi-racial, multi-generational, of mixed ethnic heritage, with blended families—Monson resembles this. The congregation is really striving to reach a biblical worldview, but as with most of us today this is a struggle. The community surrounding Monson has a very secular, aggressive worldview. Monson Community UMC is very much engaged with its community and the world. In this congregation there are people whose lives have been dramatically transformed by the love of Jesus Christ through fellow members of the

Body of Christ at Monson Church.

The congregation lives its faith in many ways in the community through their community outreach. Do they fail sometimes? Can they do more? Do they need to be more intentional? YES to all of the above questions. When the lights are turned off and the doors locked after an event or Sunday Services, have they touch someone or encouraged someone in the name of Jesus? YES! They have, and the community where they are located benefits from the love that they receive from the congregation at Monson Church.

Monson has several challenges:

1. They have many people who are young in the LORD and need to be mentored and taught. This is a challenge because Pastor Tim is a part-time local pastor according to the conference. He puts in many more hours than should be expected and is very committed to Monson. He is a bi-vocational pastor. There still are some congregation members who fight the changes that need to be made for Monson to continue to move forward. The pastor should not have to engage this by himself. The congregation needs to have reasonable, realistic expectations of part-time local pastor, or they need to step out in faith and risk getting a full-time pastor.
2. The physical building is a huge challenge as they are land locked and using the building almost to its full capacity. The septic system is about at its limits; they used to pump it only one time per year now it is pumped several times per year. The congregation is going to have to become very creative as well as begin to dream big, scary big, God-sized big as they begin to think about a different building. Several people during the interview process could see themselves in a new building (the empty K-mart building) and using the "Chapel" for weddings and other special events. The biggest concern was the financial piece.

3. The Pastor and leadership team need to consider a more intentional discipleship path for the congregation at Monson, from the littlest child to the patriarch of the congregation. With opportunities that are lead by people of different generations.
4. The congregation needs to review Biblical Conflict Resolution as found in Matthew 18:15. A former Lay Leader of the church has used the process, but I think that formalizing the process and teaching people to use would be helpful.

Conclusions:

Many congregations could learn from Monson Community United Methodist Church and the way that they are loving people into the Kingdom of God. They are truly a missional congregation. They are pushing out the walls of their church as they reach their community for Jesus!