

Hope from a Hurricane
by Jack Bender

A recent future search conference had its beginning in the aftermath of Katrina. Such a powerful natural disaster demands a response and below is a brief report of the conference, from the wreckage of Katrina to its earliest outcomes.

In New Orleans Reverend Dr. Aidsand Wright-Riggins, Executive Director of American Baptist National Ministries, saw first hand the destruction of property and lives wrought by one of history's most powerful hurricanes. With fewer resources to defend themselves against the effects of Katrina, those in poverty suffered the most—and the most vulnerable of the poor are children. Rev. Wright-Riggins knew that a broad response, not only to Katrina but to poverty as well, was necessary.

Running parallel at this time was Future Search Network's ongoing development of the Prosperous Communities Prosperous Nation (PCPN) initiative, fueled by the energy of the Network's Nancy Polend.

Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, Co-Directors of Future Search Network, Nancy Polend and American Baptist Churches National Ministries Staff developed an initiative to address children in poverty using the future search conference model. Nine teams (from Rhode Island to Alaska) of Baptist clergy and lay people met at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania to experience a future search conference and consider its appropriateness for meeting the needs of children in poverty. Also at the conference were nine network facilitators who joined and supported the teams. The network facilitator that partnered with the Michigan team was Jack Bender.

At Valley Forge, the five-member team from Michigan experienced the power of the model and, at meetings back home, pursued sponsoring a future search conference focusing on poor children in the Detroit area. One of its members, Ron Cary, a staff consultant with American Baptist Churches of Michigan, saw another application of the model. He was convinced that a conference on "Growing Healthy Churches" would renew the energy for and clarify the direction of the region's healthy churches program. Ron presented the idea to the ABC-MI executive board and the board responded by allocating funding for the future search.

Ron Cary assembled a conference planning group that represented a diverse group of stakeholders from across the state. Bender and Cary were confirmed as co-facilitators. The theme—Nurturing Healthy Churches that Impact Our World. At the end of the first all-day planning meeting members battled the worst snowstorm of the season in order to return home.

After creating eight stakeholder groups and determining the essential participant list, it became clear to committee members that the conference model was helping the region (state) convene a meeting of the most diverse group of members ever assembled. The planning group worked very hard to secure 64 confirmed participants. "We had 64 confirmed participants for one day," chuckles Ron Cary. "Clergy are always tuned in to the needs of congregational members. We knew a hospitalization or death could quickly influence the attendance of one or more participants."

The conference would be an adventure of sorts. “We’re assembling a group of highly verbal people with diverse, strongly held beliefs,” indicated Cary. “I’m more than a little interested to see what will happen at the future search conference.” Also anticipated was some mistrust and disconnection, common to most organizations, caused by distance and structure.

As the conference progressed, Bender developed a deep respect for the group. “I was really impressed with the sincerity, dedication and work ethic of this group. It was gratifying to see people so highly engaged.”

Bender points to one critical moment during the conference that reinforces the value of embracing diverse opinions. “The first person to comment on the common ground areas developed said that they ‘did nothing’ for him. We were reflecting on two days of hard work and the comment seemed to negate all of that work. The statement created a lot of anxiety in the room. Was this conference for naught? We stayed with the participant until we understood and addressed his concern. In the end, the common ground areas were significantly strengthened by honoring his comment.”

Their action plans notwithstanding, participants left the conference with enabling impressions and tools: 1) they were pleased that they had worked together so well, 2) the conference underscored how much the group really had in common, 3) relationships were strengthened, especially those between individual churches and the region office. Participants came to realize that the region office and executive board had taken a risk in supporting the conference. Action plans could redefine the jobs of state-level personnel, 4) the conference gave participants a methodology for managing their opposing views (listen, respect what’s said, look for common ground, act on agreements), and 5) the level of optimism for the future rose significantly.

A great deal of social capital developed over the three days. Ron Cary says of the conference, “The event surpassed my expectations. I’ve been to a number of meetings since the conference and optimism, trust and stronger relationships are evident. This product may be as important or even more important than any common ground outcome.”

And the children in poverty issue? The Michigan team has identified an area of Detroit that members have committed to support. They, along with community members, will host a future search conference in November.

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