

**VITAL**

CHURCHES CHANGING COMMUNITIES AND THE WORLD

Jorge Acevedo has been doing ministry this way for a long time. He is better than anyone I know of contextualizing the genius of Wesley's balance of head, heart and hands in personal and social holiness for our day. He is clear about the being intentional to lead people to Jesus AND meet their needs—and the result is a people who are in the process of becoming wholly holy. Persons are accepted exactly where they are in the midst of life's broken places, AND are given the places and spaces to be made whole as their lives are being transformed as they follow after Jesus.

Long before Jorge was preaching on Conference platforms, he was leading the people of his congregation to pray and ask God to send them people that nobody else wants or sees—and the result has been astonishing. Drawing people from Main Street and the margins, Grace Church has grown from one campus to four—and from 300 to nearly 3,000.

I have been Jorge's friend and colleague for thirty years—and this book captures the essence of why he is such an effective leader and his church is so VITAL.

–**Jeff Greenway**, Lead Pastor, Reynoldsburg UMC

If the Call to Action is an instrument of renewal for our church—and I believe it can be—it will happen one local church and one annual conference at a time. Jorge Acevedo's influence is grounded in a local church that makes disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world in profound and provocative ways. I am grateful for God for the witness in these pages and the lives that have been and will be changed by the power of the lived experience of Christianity in our Wesleyan tradition.

–**Ken Carter**, Resident Bishop, Florida Area, United Methodist Church

Nobody weds Wesley's doctrine of personal piety and social holiness together like Jorge does. In this book he describes in a straightforward way how he assembled a team that grew their church from 300 to close to 3000. By searching for the people nobody sees or wants they have created one of the only blue collar (or no collar!) mega churches in Methodism. Jorge is a light well worth following.

–**Phillip Connolly**, active UM layman,  
General Conference delegate, West Ohio Conference

If you are going to read one book this year on being a more effective leader or church, this is that book. Jorge Acevedo is an outstanding leader. *Vital* offers the keys to effective leadership and developing highly vital congregations. Resurrection's leadership team will be studying *Vital* together this year.

–**Adam Hamilton**, Senior Pastor,  
The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection

Jorge Acevedo is a leader who understands that the vitality of any congregation is based on the health of its pastors, staff, members, and the systems that lead to dynamic ministry. He has spent years pursuing that health in his own life and the churches he serves. By combining objective research on thousands of churches with his personal experience, he shares crucial behaviors for leaders and congregations that lead to fruitful ministry. A book that makes me take a fresh look at my ministry and leadership.

–**Tom Berlin**, Sr. Pastor, Floris UMC,  
co-author of *Bearing Fruit: Ministry with Real Results*

Jorge Acevedo is no ordinary pastor. He faced challenges common to thousands of struggling churches and found ways to overcome them to change lives and communities. His words offer hope and direction. He shows what can be done through hard work, prayer, perseverance, and a vision open to continuous learning.

–**Lovett H. Weems, Jr.**, Distinguished Professor of Church Leadership  
and Director, Lewis Center for Church Leadership, Washington, DC

Jorge and I have shared life together for over 20 years in a small covenant group of pastors. He is the "real deal." Jorge is able to write about vital churches because he enjoys an authentically vital life in Christ. Jorge clearly communicates how to experience life and vitality in your local church. This book will challenge, encourage and equip you to take your ministry to the next level of effectiveness. Jorge's book offers both a gentle hand of guidance and a swift kick in the rear to all of us in ministry! If you apply the principles in this book, you and your church will never be the same again.

–**Matthew Hartsfield**  
Senior Pastor, Van Dyke Church, Tampa, FL

Jorge tells the story of a church that found its vitality in reaching the needs of people in their communities. This is the story of a traditional United Methodist Church that has exploded in its outreach by falling in love with neighbors whom Jesus loves.

The United Methodist Church in the U.S. needs this story of hope and the lessons of faithful leadership. Jorge Acevedo tells the story of the miracle God. His story illustrates beautifully the research of what makes for a vital local church.

There are many critics of accountability for measuring vitality. We need more illustrations of how a real pastor encounters a church in real trouble and finds the real power of the Holy Spirit. Thank you, Jorge Acevedo, for being an accountable leader who also mentors lay and clergy leaders.

–**Deborah A. McLeod**, Sr. Pastor,  
Mandarin United Methodist Church, Jacksonville, FL



**Churches  
Changing  
Communities  
and the World**

Jorge Acevedo

foreword by John Schol

Abingdon Press

Nashville

**VITAL:  
CHURCHES CHANGING COMMUNITIES AND THE WORLD**

*Copyright © 2012 by Abingdon Press*

All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission can be addressed to Permissions, The United Methodist Publishing House, P.O. Box 801, 201 Eighth Avenue South, Nashville, TN 37202-0801, or e-mailed to [permissions@umpublishing.org](mailto:permissions@umpublishing.org).

*This book is printed on acid-free paper.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-1-4267-6755-5

Scripture quotations unless noted otherwise are from the Common English Bible. Copyright © 2011 by the Common English Bible. All rights reserved. Used by permission. [www.CommonEnglishBible.com](http://www.CommonEnglishBible.com).

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (CEV) are from the Contemporary English Version Copyright © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, Used by Permission.

Scripture quotations from THE MESSAGE. Copyright © by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Quotation from *Should We Change Our Game Plan?* by George Hunter (Abingdon Press, pre-publication) is used by permission of the author.

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*We were glad to share not only God's good news with you  
but also our very lives because we cared for you so much.*

1 Thessalonians 2:8

To three remarkable pastoral mentors who each shared themselves  
and invested uniquely in my life and awakened in me the joyful  
and demanding call to be a spiritual leader.

J. Howard Olds

Barbara Williams Riddle

Dick Wills



# Contents

Foreword by John Schol .....	11
Introduction.....	15
1. Spiritual Pastoral Leadership .....	23
<i>Pastors of highly vital congregations live, lead, coach, and set vision in accountable community.</i>	
2. Unleashing the Body of Christ .....	45
<i>Highly vital congregations equip and release laity for Kingdom ministry.</i>	
3. A People Made for Worship .....	65
<i>Highly vital congregations have worship that is transcendent, relevant, contextual, and excellent.</i>	
4. The Power of Small Groups .....	85
<i>Highly vital congregations have small groups that build Christian community.</i>	
5. Reaching Across the Street and Around the World.....	105
<i>Highly vital congregations strategically implement outreach and mission that is local and global.</i>	

*Contents*

Conclusion .....127

Appendix: Overview of Towers Watson Research Learnings .....133

Notes .....139

# Foreword

## John Schol

Life and vitality in the church are elusive and hard to get our hands around. Is it activity? Is it measures of fruitfulness? Or is it life-full stories emerging from the church? The answer is, YES! Like our lives, our vitality is a combination of a series of measures, our level of activity, and stories of life-full living.

I will never forget the puzzled look on the doctor's face when my wife, Beverly, gave birth to our second child, Kristin. After delivering and holding Kristin in his hands, the doctor looked at Kristin and looked at Beverly and looked at Kristin again and looked back at Beverly and said, "This baby is too small, there must be another one. You're having twins!"

At that moment, everything in the birthing room changed. There were three nurses present. To the first nurse the doctor said, "Run and get a pediatrician"; to the second he said, "Run and get an incubator"; and to the third nurse while pointing to the monitors he said, "Watch the vital signs, watch the vital signs." I did not need a medical degree to understand his concern. We were all relieved when nine and a half minutes later Rebecca was born, healthy and full of vitality. But I will never forget those words, "Watch the vital signs."

Jorge Acevedo shares a compelling story of how the church can become more vital. He is not describing institutional survival but what Jesus described to his followers, Kingdom life.

Today we want more highly vital congregations because they change lives and demonstrate Kingdom life. Vital congregations make and mature disciples, grow over time, and engage disciples in community and world ministry that is transforming lives and addressing social issues. Vital congregations are practicing the Wesleyan means of grace and are becoming the grace of Jesus Christ in the world.

Jorge Acevedo writes about what he knows and what he has led—congregations that are vital and engaged. Congregations that have vital signs engage daily with:

Life-full stories that are being told about and through the congregation. Stories about how people's lives are transformed and stories of transforming ministries done by the congregation.

Measures of fruitfulness evident by new disciples being made, number of disciples in small groups for learning and faith formation, number of disciples engaged in worship and mission, and generous giving by disciples to mission.

The ministry activities for building up the community of faith and to transform lives and social conditions in the community and the world.

A congregation may demonstrate health with any one or two of the vital signs, but it is the combination of all three that are evidences of high vitality and Kingdom life.

Effective leaders in these congregations watch the vital signs and build on the vitality of the congregation; they encourage people to claim their story and tell the story of God's activity in and through the congregation; and these leaders know their measures of vitality and lead toward greater fruitfulness. Vital leaders lead the congregation to organize ministry to grow disciples, serve the community, and grow the congregation.

**Vital Congregations focus ministry in five strategic ministry areas of vitality:**

**Pastoral Leadership**—Pastors use their influence to help congregations set and achieve significant goals, inspire the congregation through preaching, serve in an appointment effectively and for a longer period of time, and coach and mentor laity to lead effectively.

**Lay Leadership**—Laity demonstrate a vital and active personal faith, develop and grow in their leadership effectiveness, and rotate new people into leadership positions so that more people have the opportunity to serve.

**Worship**—Vital churches offer a mix of worship services appropriate to their context, and tend to use topical sermon series; for mid- to large-size congregations, they use contemporary music in contemporary worship and use multimedia in contemporary worship.

**Ministry**—Vital congregations offer effective and abundant opportunities for children and youth ministry and small groups.

**Mission**—Churches striving for vitality strategically put in place outreach programs making an impact both locally and globally.

Jorge Acevedo thoughtfully and inspirationally tells how congregations can grow their vitality based on his experience of leading vital congregations so that congregations become God's grace in the community and the world. Watch the vital signs!



# Introduction

*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me  
and I in you, then you will produce much fruit.*

*Without me, you can't do anything.*

John 15:5

I want to begin with a confession. I love the church! This may not sound profound upon an initial hearing, but let me give you some of my history because for me to say “I love the church” is quite radical if you know my story.

I had what you might call a nominal religious upbringing. Church was a very small part of my childhood, but I quit going to church when I was thirteen. The pastor yelled at me and my friend Alex for fooling around in the back of church during a service. I was so embarrassed that I left church that night and never returned to any church for five years. During those five years, my life spiraled into a world of drugs and alcohol. By the grace of God, a Campus Crusade for Christ area director led me to Christ shortly before I graduated from high school.

After attending a Campus Crusade for Christ summer conference in Colorado, I learned that Christ-followers were supposed to belong to local churches where they could worship, serve, give, and grow as a disciple. So in the summer of 1978, I began attending a local United Methodist church that was in the

midst of tremendous growth. This was at the height of the charismatic renewal movement.

In that church, I began to grow as a Christian. In that church, I began to sense the stirrings of the Spirit calling me into pastoral ministry. In that church, my calling was affirmed and confirmed, and from that church I was sent to Asbury College and Asbury Seminary to prepare myself for a lifetime of local church ministry as a United Methodist pastor.

Upon graduation and ordination, I began ministry in the local church. And little did I know it but an underlying bias was soon to confront me. Now please hear me, this is the truth. My bias was that I despised the church. In spite of a life-saving conversion, in spite of a wonderful local church where I was disciplined and called to ministry, in spite of a wonderful theological and practical education where I was prepared for parish ministry, I hated the local church. The church was at best a necessary evil for me to endure while I went about saving souls for Jesus.

Some of the more cynical might say that my disdain for the church was legitimate. And to some degree the cynics are right. There are so few examples of vital biblical churches in America. I had little to no exposure to a church that functioned with Kingdom purposes and values. Most of my experiences were in churches that often majored in minors and wallowed in minutia.

Some of my more sociologically minded friends might say that my local church dis-ease was a function of my age and demographic crowd. Baby boomers have been called an anti-institution age group, and I am one. My generation is hardwired to be distrustful and skeptical of government, industry, schools, and religious organizations.

## **A Second Conversion**

But something like a second conversion happened for me. Three encounters led me to question my bias. The first encounter happened in 1992 when I was appointed to Christ Church United Methodist, Fort Lauderdale, to serve with Dick Wills. Christ Church was in the embryonic days of her turnaround. God was up to something new in that place, and every once in a while I began to catch a glimpse of a high functioning, biblical church. I could feel a new move of the Spirit that began to confront my deeply ingrained bias against the local church.

Second, I began to hear the stories of congregations that were doing church in a fresh and new way. I first heard of places within my denomination like Christ Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and Frazer in Montgomery, Alabama.

Then my horizons were lifted to places like Willow Creek in Chicago and Saddleback in southern California. Each encounter challenged and confronted my anti-local church bias.

Finally, I began to read the Bible differently. It was as if the Spirit gave me a new set of lenses with which to read. I began to see that I had been guilty of theological shortsightedness. The Bible painted a picture of the local church that is the hope of the world. The biblical picture of the church was of a pure Bride adorned for her Bridegroom, of the Body of Christ functioning symbiotically and effectively for Kingdom ends, of a like-minded people linked together by a common allegiance to Jesus and his Kingdom who worked together for the loving takeover of planet Earth.

God used the church I was serving and other Kingdom-minded local churches and his Word to slowly, yet efficiently, transform my bias. In my heart and mind, the church was no longer a thing of disdain or hate, but rather an instrument of delight and honor. My first conversion was to Jesus, and my second one was to his Bride, the church.

Friends, I really love the church! She is no longer a necessary evil for me. Instead, I now am devoted to helping her come alive in all her beauty. I have committed the rest of my life to building a highly vital biblical church that honors God and helps people. If you asked me to name the number one thing I preach and teach on, it's the church. I stay awake at night dreaming of ways to grow a highly vital biblical local church. It's my one driving passion!

And, yet, I am a realist. I understand that leading a church, whether you are clergy or laity, is hard. Some call leadership in a local church difficult and even dangerous work!

## **Grace at Grace Church**

At this writing I am beginning my seventeenth year at Grace Church, a multisite United Methodist church in Southwest Florida. We have four campuses, three worshiping campuses, and a community center. One of the church campuses worships more than 2000, one campus worships 350 and one worships 225. Two of the campuses are "adoption" sites. They were United Methodist churches that, after years of decline, self-determined to become a campus of Grace Church.

The most recent "adoption" campus was the Central United Methodist Church in downtown Fort Myers in a transitioned neighborhood. At the time of adoption, it was an 88-year-old congregation that had had 42 pastors in her history. A group of courageous leaders with a part-time pastor from our staff

and a coach from a Christian ministry spent nearly a year building community, discerning their internal and external context, and prayerfully considering their future.

After nine months of regular meetings, this brave group of Central United Methodist Church Christ-followers made a motion at a duly called church conference for the charter of the church to be closed and for them to reopen as a campus of Grace Church. This was a bold move. The day of the vote 40 members showed up at the fellowship hall. The district superintendent handed out the ballots and told them, “There are only two options we can vote on tonight. Either vote to close Central United Methodist Church or vote to be adopted by Grace Church.”

I was sitting in the back thinking to myself, “This is a slam dunk! This will be the first unanimous vote in the history of this congregation—40-0! That’s what it will be!” The vote was taken, the ballots were collected, and when the district superintendent read them, I was floored. The vote was 23 in favor of the adoption and 17 in favor of closing. I was flabbergasted. I tried to fake a celebrative tone, and then after some pleasantries, I made my way to my car. I sat in the darkness of my Honda, leaned my head on the steering wheel, and wept. I prayed, “God, how do 17 faithful United Methodists vote to close rather than choose a bold, new future?” Although the “adoption plan” had been approved, my heart was broken.

Two years later, I have a better perspective. First, the adoption of Central United Methodist Church, now Grace Church, Fort Myers Central campus, is a miracle to behold. We sent 40 brave missionaries from Grace Church to partner with the two dozen remaining members for a community-focused restart. With our “Grace Church Playbook”<sup>1</sup> in hand, Pastor Arlene Jackson went to be the campus pastor. She is an alcoholic in recovery turned United Methodist Local Pastor and is a courageous firebrand who, along with her amazing team, has been used of God to transform that congregation. From 30 aging white people, in just two years the congregation has become a mixture of more than 200 black, brown, and white people; some are poor and some are rich. In just two years!

Second, time and experience has helped me get my head and heart around the culture of a declining congregation. All three of the church campuses of Grace Church have been turnaround congregations. The Cape Coral campus was in a five-year decline from 575 to 400. The Fort Myers Shores campus had shrunk from 350 to 70 over 15 years, and the Fort Myers Central campus was in a 25-year decline from 350 to 35. Declining congregations have a culture.

Slowly good people just lose their way in a stagnant mixture of typically inward-focused activity until there is little hope of reversal. Over time, all hope is lost, and it just seems better to close than to try again. Now I get it.

## Call to Action

In 2010, I was asked to serve on the Call to Action Steering Team. This gathering of United Methodist leaders included bishops, general secretaries, seminary administrators, pastors, and lay leaders who love our church. Our assignment was to do the most thorough analysis that has ever been done of a denomination. We would research and study not only the general church, but also more importantly over 32,000 United Methodist congregations in America. We needed professional, objective research experts who could give The United Methodist Church reliable information about what behaviors, or “drivers” as they are called in the research, are present in highly vital United Methodist congregations.

In the Towers Watson research, approximately 15% of the 32,228 churches (4,961 churches) scored high in vitality based on the vitality index. This means that 15% of our churches have figured out some way to remain highly vital in spite of the fact that 85% have not. It means that we cannot lay all the blame for our congregational demise at the feet of the institution of the church.

At Grace Church, I am privileged to work with a lot of addicts who are in different places in their recovery. One of the most frequent addict tricks I see in pre-recovery is “blame transference.” I’m talking with Jim, and he’s a full-blown alcoholic. He wants to blame his mother, father, siblings, wife, kids, boss, God, and yes, even the pastor for his drinking. It’s very sad.

It seems to me that many United Methodist leaders, both clergy and laity, are suffering from “blame transference.” They want to blame the bishop, district superintendent, pastor, lay leadership (or lack thereof), and yes, even God for their lack of faithfulness and fruitfulness in ministry. “If the bishop would just send me to a good appointment. . . .” “If the district hadn’t planted a church in our city. . . .”

The good news is that at least 4,961 congregations have figured out ways to prevail in spite of our denominational challenges. These congregations are in all settings, (urban, suburban, and rural). They are of all sizes (mega-churches, large, medium, small, and even very small). And they are in every

***In the Towers Watson research, approximately 15% of the 32,228 churches (4,961 churches) scored high in vitality based on the vitality index.<sup>2</sup>***

part of our American United Methodist connection from Maine to Hawaii and from Florida to Alaska. To me this is hopeful and promising!

## **Behaviors of Highly Vital Churches**

Five behaviors of highly vital congregations will be examined in this book. We will first look at **pastoral leadership** that is growing spiritually and is deeply connected in accountable, Christian community. Second, we will learn about **lay leaders** who are nurtured in their faith, equipped, and released into transformative ministry. Third, we will consider the importance of **worship** that is transcendent, relevant, contextual, and excellent. Fourth, we will look at the importance of building community through **small groups**. Finally, we will consider the essential practice of congregations engaging in local and global **missions and outreach**. The first four behaviors are directly related to findings of the Towers Watson research. The fifth, mission and outreach, was not included in the research as a separate category, because reliable data was not available. That data is currently being gathered by the General Council on Finance and Administration, and there are already some preliminary results.

I have grounded each congregational behavior in sacred Scripture. Then I root each behavior in the early Methodist movement, a section I call “Turbo-Charging Our Wesleyan Tradition.” Finally, in “On the Road to Vitality,” I describe what I believe are transferable principles and behaviors that we are constantly working to live out at Grace Church and that I have seen being lived out in other highly vital United Methodist congregations bearing fruit today. Each chapter also includes a story that illustrates an example of a key principle or behavior from another United Methodist church in a different context. And while we all know, and I say throughout the book, that becoming an increasingly vital church takes time, I also know that sometimes it is important to do something immediately. You need to demonstrate (to church members but also to yourself) that something new is happening and you are committed to positive change. So there are suggestions with each chapter for “Quick Victories.”

At the end of each chapter, you will find a summary of key learnings from the Towers Watson research. Of course we have more to discover, but it is essential that we take advantage of what we already know can strengthen congregations so that they will become more and more vital.

Craig Robertson, Executive Director of Spiritual Leadership, has been our coach at Grace for the last five years. He has taught us the importance of clarity around principles. When church leaders read a book or attend a conference, they usually learn about the results that a vital congregation is getting. It is nat-

ural to think, *Maybe I can get these results if I mimic this church.* Mimicking another church ministry seldom works.

Supporting those results are processes that these vital congregations execute to get their results. Again, it is easy to think that *if I can just replicate the processes in my church, we will get the same result.* Seldom does this happen. But beneath the processes are the principles and behaviors that drive the congregation. For vital United Methodist congregations, these principles are grounded in Scripture, rooted in the early Methodist movement, and then translated into each congregation's unique context with its own challenges and opportunities.

### **Continuous Improvement**

There is one other thing I see vital congregations doing. They slowly get better at what they do. Businessman W. Edwards Deming first introduced "continuous improvement," a business model that transformed Japan's economy and then became a business model around the world. A lifestyle application of this principle is that crash diets don't typically work while slow intentional lifestyle changes do. Cooperating with God's design for proper eating and constant exercise, health can be attained.

The same thing is true in our walk with Jesus. You don't just step over the line of faith, say "yes" to Jesus, and, bang, everything is fixed. The Christian life is a pilgrimage. It's a journey. And that is also true of vital congregations. They welcome feedback. They mine for problems and tirelessly fix them, getting better at the art of ministry, day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. After every major initiative at Grace, we gather the team leaders and reflect on how the event went, then we make adjustments that can help us do it better, and finally we list precisely what we are going to do better next time. It's continuous improvement.

Friend, I love the church, and I want to invite you to love the church with me. My prayer is that as you read the pages that follow, you will find your love for the Bride of Christ bringing you to tears and moving you to join Jesus in releasing the Body of Christ into this world of his that so desperately waits to see her beauty!