

## Bottom\_Up and Top\_Down at Church

One of my early lessons when I began my first pastorate is that there are a lot of people who would love to set the church's agenda. No, not church members. I suppose there are some of those, too, who would like to run things, but that's not what overwhelmed me. It was the denominational programs, parachurch organizations, missionary agencies, and church publishing and supply houses. They all knew exactly what we should be doing.

They still do. Every day at church the mail brings more exciting opportunities for our church to be in ministry . . . well, usually by sending money to someone. But even beyond money, we have chances to be a part of this mission trip, to use that new youth curriculum, send leaders to that other church growth conference. And they're all the best new thing ever, with testimonials to prove it. ("The most exciting leadership conference in the universe!" – Rick Warren. "When we adopted the Build-a-Church Growth Plan, we added 500 new members in the first 8 minutes!" – Joel Osteen).

So most of that stuff goes straight in the trash, unopened. It's not that they're necessarily bad; it's just that I've learned that the plans of the church are best when they arise either: (1) from the church members themselves, the people who will have to do the work, or (2) in response to a need that appears in the immediate community. Those are the ministries that last, the ones that attract broad support, the ones that define a church. Think Personal Needs Closet, Memory Café, and even welcoming the New Life UMC to our building.

So I believe in ministry that works from the bottom up. But there's one problem with that. Almost by definition "bottom-up" ministries are local and hands-on. That's all right: Jesus in the Gospels was pretty local and hands-on, too. But at the end of his ministry, Jesus shifted his focus and told his followers to go make disciples "even to the uttermost parts of the earth." If all we do is local and community ministry, then we never make any difference to the people in the rest of the world. For that, we need to join hands with other churches with which we share a common vision and purpose. And, face it, that won't happen unless someone at the top gets it started.

Here's an example of a top-down ministry that I believe we can get behind. The worldwide United Methodist Church has set certain ministry priorities for the world. One of those is to eradicate malaria, this preventable, treatable disease that kills millions every year. Our own Wisconsin Conference has chosen this priority to throw its heart into and has challenged the churches of Wisconsin to work together to raise a million dollars for this goal. (To see how this money will be spent, check out [imaginenomalaria.org](http://imaginenomalaria.org).)

So, we are beginning to collect money for the Imagine No Malaria project. Yes, we should put our first emphasis on ministry right here in our own community, working with dreams that begin right here in our own congregation. Those are the dreams and ministries that have real faces and that go to bed at night a little happier because we were here. But every now and then it's good to look over the horizon, too. Now is one of those times.