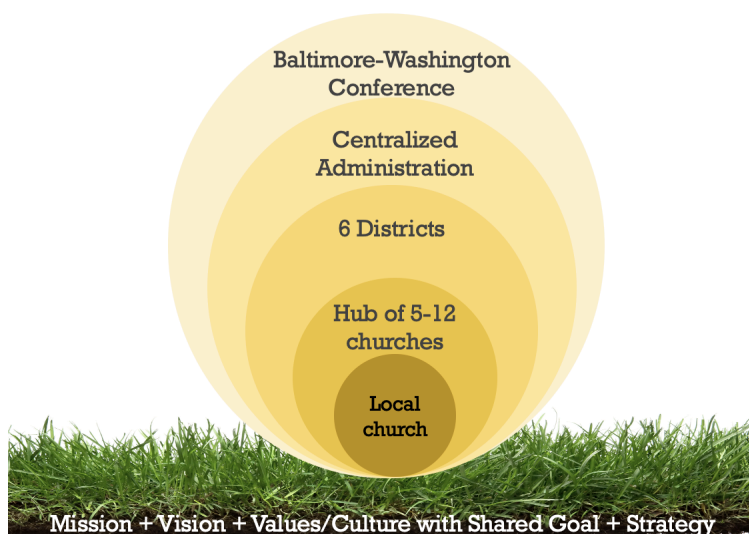


# Implementing Vital Change: Collaborative Hubs and Connecting Churches

In the face of declining church membership, declining attendance, and declining religious participation, the people in the Baltimore-Washington Conference decided to focus on moving closer to Christ, to focus on transformational, outward-facing, community-driven ministry, and to do so in a collaborative manner consistent with our shared values. Vital Change involves refocusing on being the hands and feet of Christ in the community, reconnecting to our values, and restructuring to support our goal of 100% of our churches being 100% vital.

In support of Vital Change, the following structural changes are being made:

1. all churches will be part of a collaborative hub,
2. all hubs will be part of geographic districts, and
3. non-mission-related, specialized administrative duties will be centralized to support churches, rather than requiring each district to provide these services.



Without embodying our values and staying mission-focused, we will not reach vitality regardless of the structure. Congregations are being asked to prepare for structural changes between now and the Annual Conference Session by engaging all people in reflection and action around our shared values using resources found at [bwcumc.org/vitalchangetools](http://bwcumc.org/vitalchangetools).

Primary relationship-building and disciple-making happens at the local church and hub level.

## The Role of Collaborative Hubs, Connecting Churches & Connecting Pastors

### Collaborative Hubs

According to survey feedback, almost twice as many people in the Conference believe that engaging with a cluster or hub of churches is the best way to create, improve, and grow transformational missions as opposed to focusing on individual churches. Additionally, collaborative hubs support our

values of *Strength Through Connection* and *Partnering with Purpose*. A collaborative hub creates a community with shared values and diverse resources, experiences, and expertise. This combination of shared values and diverse perspectives provides fertile ground for growth, learning, experimentation, and successful innovation. The strength and effectiveness of each hub will depend on God's grace and the efforts of the people in the hub to become the hands and feet of Christ, serving those in need.

A group of collaborative hubs forms a district. In the image to the right, both districts (rectangle) and hubs (circles) are geographically based. The letters on the circles represent congregations. The letter "C" represents the Connecting Church, Districts are composed of 11-12 Collaborative Hubs. Each hub includes 5-12 churches.

The primary purpose of a collaborative hub is to support the creation, improvement, and growth of transformational, disciple-making, outward-facing, community-driven mission. Each collaborative hub will use missional action planning, or MAP, a process of discovery, ideation, experimentation, and evolution to create and implement a missional action plan for the hub. Collaborative hub plans should help identify centers of expertise and reflect shared priorities and how people will support each other.

If a church does not have a missional action plan, the church has two options: 1) just proceed to work with the Hub (without a plan), or 2) create a plan while working with the Hub. If a church does have a missional action plan, the church should share the plan with Hub members and all in the Hub should work to ensure all church and hub plans are complementary.

Collaborative hub church leaders (clergy and lay) will meet regularly to:

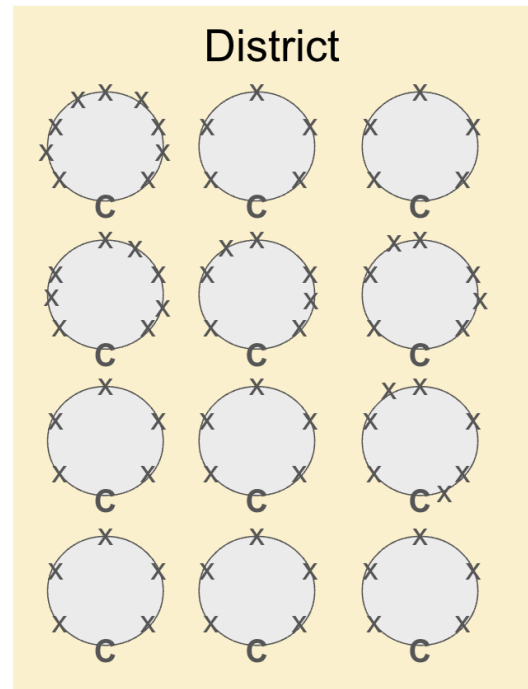
1. Build relationships within the hub and
2. Develop and implement a missional action plan that
  - Meets a tangible need in the community,
  - Includes deep listening and partnering with people and entities in the community, and
  - Multiplies impact through partnering with purpose in ways that are transformational.

Even as churches are connected in hubs, each church maintains its administrative structure (e.g., unified board, board of trustees, finance, SPRC, etc.) that makes decisions and provides leadership to each church.

Each collaborative hub determines the details of how they connect and what their collaborative ministry looks like.

Building relationships and lines of communication is a starting point for collaborative hubs to:

- Meet regularly,
- Get to know one another, individually and as congregations,



- Learn about each other, individually and as congregations, and
- Consider how best to share information, ideas, and resources.

Once relationships and lines of effective communication have been built:

- Start the discovery and assessment process
  - Who are we?
  - With neighbors and partners continue discovering
    - Who are our neighbors?
    - What are the biggest or most important needs in our community?
    - What are the assets?

Once we understand who we are and our field of ministry:

- Then start the ideation process with neighbors and partners
  - How might we be the hands and feet of God in the community?
  - Include neighbors and partners in ideation and selection processes
  - Identify alternate paths to living God's plan in your community
    - Together, what can we do that is transformational?
    - Together, what can we do that will increase discipleship?
    - Together, what can we do that is outward-facing and community-driven?
  - Prayerfully and collaboratively assess the alternatives and define a path forward
- Now create and implement an action plan
  - What do we need to do to make this happen?
  - How will we know if it is working?
  - How will we know when to tweak or pivot?
- Evolve based on experience and feedback

## Connecting Church

A Connecting Church refers to a congregation that has agreed to facilitate and lead the collaborative work of the churches in a hub. The primary role of the Connecting Church (lay and clergy) is to facilitate relationship building and lead collaboration on the creation, improvement, and growth of transformational, disciple-making, outward-facing, community-driven ministries.

The Connecting Church will facilitate and lead the collaborative development of a missional action plan for the hub. An effective Connecting Church will facilitate collaborative work, discipleship, and vitality within a collaborative hub made up of 5-12 churches within geographic proximity (generally located in similar mission zones). This model relies on the passion, gifts, and graces of the pastor, lay leadership, and congregation.

## Connecting Pastor

The lead pastor of the Connecting Church serves as the Connecting Pastor and assists the Connecting Church in carrying out its responsibilities. Additionally, the Connecting Pastor:

- ***Embodies Our Shared Values and Effectively Facilitates Missional Action Planning*** in the mission zone where the church buildings in the hub reside. It is their responsibility to be

prepared to fully participate in a process that results in missional action planning and implementation.

- **Participates in Connecting Pastor Learning Forum:** Meet monthly with Bishop Easterling for prayer, resourcing, mutual encouragement, and support.
  - Content will be developed for clergy covenant groups out of these gatherings so that there is congruence and consistency across all groups.
  - Meets on the last Tuesday of the month
- **Participates in Mission Strategy Meetings:** As a group, Connecting Pastors meet four to six times a year with their designated conference superintendent (formerly known as District Superintendent) and designated Vitality Strategist to check-in on hub progress and mission strategy. These meetings will be scheduled every other month until hubs find their rhythm and clarify their collective vision and missional, strategic objectives.

Connecting Pastors are NOT:

- Supervisors. This is not another layer of authority nor level of supervision.
- Responsible for getting all churches to participate. Check-in with DS includes participation reports of hub churches.

## Timeline

### January 2025:

- All leaders share the bishop's video with their followers, stakeholders, and peers; commit to personal and community revitalization; and invite everyone to respond to the calls to action
- All leaders share wave 1 materials and resources and invite everyone to respond to the calls to action

### February 2025:

- February 11: Town Hall on Restructuring and Revitalization
- Streamline processes and centralized admin pool created
- Post new full-time positions, including three [Vitality Strategists](#) (formerly known as Resource Coordinators)
- Invitations go out to Connecting Church SPRC's and Pastors without information about which churches will be in their hub

### March 2025:

- March 6: Special e-connection featuring the second wave of resources for local churches
- All leaders share wave 2 materials and resources and invite everyone to respond to the calls to action
- 40-Day Season of Prayer for Vital Change
- Discipleship Council completes pilot for an annual evaluation tool for ministry leaders that measures a congregation's missional impact and leads toward increased church vitality.

- As available, provide a draft of district and region information to the Rules Committee, Discipleship Council and Nominations Committee so that the leadership report, policies, and procedures can be updated

#### April 2025:

- All leaders share wave 3 materials and resources and invite everyone to respond to the calls to action
- After Easter: Collaborative Hubs, Districts, and Regions are published
- Discipleship Council shares the annual congregational evaluation tool

#### May 2025:

- May 3: Pre-Con
- May 13-15 Annual Conference: Collaborative Hub and District Kick-Off

#### June 2025:

- June 7: New Appointment Workshops

#### July 1, 2025:

- New collaborative hubs, districts, centralized admin regions, clergy groups, and accountability systems are in place with resource pools.

#### 2026-27 Ministry Year:

A vitality management system for holistic accountability is developed after receiving feedback on the first year of hubs and other aspects designed to support the vitality of local churches.

# Appendix A: Collaborative Hub Questionnaire Report

January 2025

## Executive Summary

We celebrate the level of participation and appreciate those 414 churches (out of 570 churches or 73%) who clearly took this assignment seriously by involving many laity in the process. Answers provided will support hub formation and the selection of Connecting Churches. Churches that did not complete the survey are disqualified from consideration as Connecting Churches as one of the criteria is connectionalism and engagement.

**More Churches Expressed Hopes Than Concerns.** The overarching theme is a collective aspiration for collaboration that enhances the vitality of each church while addressing community needs more effectively. By sharing resources, engaging in joint outreach, and fostering relationships, churches hope to create a more significant impact in their communities and strengthen their ministries.

**Shared Concerns Will Inform Design and Implementation.** There are two key concerns that churches have regarding their participation in collaborative hubs: 1) impact on workload/resources and 2) how it will work. Addressing these issues through clear communication, equitable resource sharing, and respect for each church's unique identity while sharing common values will be crucial for fostering successful collaboration.

While many of the hopes expressed in the questionnaire are aligned with our shared values, the lack of clarity about the why, what, and how of restructuring was clear, as evidenced by the survey and conversations with leaders of the Baltimore-Washington Conference's (BWC's) Connectional Table. This is why the announcement of collaborative hubs is being delayed until after Easter.

Resources are being provided to church leaders so that as many church members as possible may understand the reason for the change—to help us focus on transformational, disciple-making, outward-facing, community-driven ministry, the foundational element of vital change. Collaboration, living our shared values together, and missional action planning will be essential to the success of hubs.

Hub Questionnaire Launched in June	2
73% of BWC churches completed the survey.	2
65% of BWC churches named with whom they'd like to be in a hub.	2
86% of participating congregations shared hopes for becoming a part of a collaborative hub.	3
74% of participating congregations expressed concerns about becoming a part of a collaborative hub.	4
27% of participating congregations indicated their interest in serving as a Connecting Church.	6

## Hub Questionnaire Launched in June

BWC members first learned of a collaborative hub questionnaire during the March 19, 2024 Restructuring Townhall and again prior to the vote on the number of districts at Annual Conference

2024. From June 22 to September 15, 2024 congregations were invited to gather leaders together to discuss Collaborative Hubs and discern their interest in being a Connecting Church ([see agenda and questions](#)).

The objectives of the questionnaire were to:

1. Ensure that all congregations were aware of the fact that they would be a part of a Collaborative Hub with a total of 5-12 congregations and had input into the shaping of them.
2. Provide an opportunity for churches to indicate an interest in serving as a connecting church.

## 73% of BWC churches completed the survey.

We celebrate the level of participation and appreciate the 416 churches that completed the survey. 376 churches clearly took this assignment seriously by involving many laity in the process. Only 40 surveys were completed by a single person.

The survey included information that supported hub formation and the selection of Connecting Churches. The 154 churches that did not complete the survey were disqualified from consideration as Connecting Churches as one of the criteria is connectionalism and engagement.

## 65% of BWC churches named with whom they'd like to be in a hub.

This information was used to form hubs. Hub formation included the following priorities:

1. Create the least disruption by maintaining vital collaborative hubs, clusters, and multi-point charges.
2. Ensure geographic proximity to facilitate ease of meeting and focus on a shared mission field.
3. Honor expressed church preferences so that each church in a hub will be in relationship with at least one church that they named. If a church named churches that weren't in geographic proximity and/or churches that were in a cooperative parish, requests were unable to be honored.
4. Ensure there were no fewer than 5 churches and no more than 12 churches in a single hub. Each congregation has been placed in a hub regardless of those who may be currently unable to participate for a variety of reasons (including lawsuits or another type of conflict). We are making a place for all because we are one.

## 86% of participating congregations shared hopes for becoming a part of a collaborative hub.

The overarching theme is a collective aspiration for collaboration that enhances the vitality of each church while addressing community needs more effectively. By sharing resources, engaging in joint outreach, and fostering relationships, churches hope to create a more significant impact in their communities and strengthen their ministries.

Key themes included:

### **1. Building Relationships.**

There is a strong emphasis on building relationships, both within the church community and with the broader community. Churches hope that collaboration will foster deeper connections and a greater sense of belonging among congregants. *(related to **Love in Action** and **Strength through Connection** value)*

### **2. Community Engagement and Outreach.**

A significant hope is to increase community engagement through collaborative efforts. Churches aim to work together on outreach programs that address local needs, such as food insecurity, youth activities, and social justice initiatives. *(related to **Partnering with Purpose** value)*

### **3. Strengthening Ministries.**

Churches hope that collaboration will lead to the revitalization and strengthening of their ministries, (e.g., youth and children's programs (20% said this)). There is a shared interest in developing new ministries that may not be feasible for individual congregations alone. *(related to **Partnering with Purpose**, **Strength through Connection** and **Love in Action** values)*

### **4. Innovative Worship and Fellowship Opportunities.**

Many responses indicate a desire for innovative worship experiences and fellowship opportunities that can arise from collaboration. This includes joint worship services, shared music ministries, and community events that foster a sense of unity. *(related to **Freedom to Try** value)*

### **5. Learning and Growth.**

Churches express a hope to learn from one another, sharing best practices and successful strategies in ministry. This mutual learning is seen as a way to enhance their effectiveness and adapt to changing community needs. *(related to **Strength through Connection** and **Freedom to Try** values)*

### **6. Resource Sharing.**

Many churches express a desire to share resources, including facilities, staff, expertise and materials, to enhance their collective outreach and ministry efforts. For some—not all— this included pooling financial resources. *(related to **Strength through Connection** and **Love in Action** values)*

### **7. Addressing Challenges Together.**

Many churches acknowledge the challenges they face, such as declining membership and financial constraints. They hope that by collaborating, they can address these challenges more effectively and ensure ministry into the future. *(related to **Strength through Connection** value)*



## 74% of participating congregations expressed concerns about becoming a part of a collaborative hub.

The common themes highlight two key concerns that churches have regarding their participation in collaborative hubs: 1) impact on workload/resources and 2) how it will work. Addressing these issues through clear communication, equitable resource sharing, and respect for each church's unique identity while sharing common values will be crucial for fostering successful collaboration. These themes will be used to shape our thinking about hub expectations.

### Impact on Workload/Resources

#### **1. Stretched Too Thin**

Many congregations report that their members are nearing burnout due to the demands of existing ministries and the potential for additional responsibilities associated with collaborative hubs. This concern is particularly acute among smaller congregations with limited volunteer bases. Churches express worries about their limited resources, including personnel, time, and finances. Many congregations are already stretched thin and fear that additional commitments to a hub could further strain their capabilities.

#### **2. Increased Workload and Bureaucracy**

There is apprehension regarding the potential increase in administrative burdens and the number of meetings required for hub participation. Many church leaders are already managing significant workloads and are concerned that additional meetings and reporting requirements could detract from their primary mission. Some fear unproductive meetings and bureaucratic processes.

### How Will It Work?

#### **3. Uncertainty and Lack of Clarity**

Many congregations express uncertainty about what participation in a collaborative hub will entail. They seek clearer guidelines on how the hub will function, the expectations for participation, and how decisions will be made. This lack of clarity contributes to anxiety about the potential impacts on their existing ministries and relationships. Concerns about the unclear expectations and responsibilities of being a connecting church also contribute to this anxiety.

#### **4. Preservation of Identity and Autonomy**

Many churches are concerned about losing their unique identity and mission when joining a collaborative hub. They emphasize the importance of maintaining their distinct presence and voice; smaller congregations fear being overshadowed by larger ones. There is a strong desire for collaboration that enhances their efforts without compromising their values or autonomy.

#### **5. Diversity and Equal Voice**

Churches emphasize the need for diversity within the hub and the importance of ensuring that no single church dominates decision-making processes. They want to uphold impartiality and ensure that all churches, regardless of size, have an equal voice. This concern is particularly relevant for congregations that value inclusivity and wish to collaborate with like-minded churches.

## 6. Concerns About Leadership Dynamics

There are concerns about how leadership roles will be structured within the hub, particularly regarding the distribution of power and authority among participating churches. Some congregations worry about being paired with churches that do not share their vision or values, which could lead to conflicts.

The lack of clarity about the why, what, and how of restructuring as evidenced by the survey and conversation with leaders of BWC's Connectional Table is why the announcement of hubs is being delayed and why resources are being provided to church leaders to help everyone understand the foundational element that undergirds the changes—a focus on transformational, outward-facing, community-driven missions aligned with our shared values.

**29% out of participating churches provided reasons why they should NOT be in a collaborative hub**

121 churches believe their circumstances – an aging congregation, extremely limited resources (financial and human), diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds within their congregation, an exceptionally strong mission program – should disqualify them from participating in a hub.

As hubs are created, an overarching theme is that there is room for all. Our bold, brave focus on reigniting the “movement not reinforcing the monument”...focusing on transformational, out-ward facing, community-driven missions consistent with our shared values, creates space for all to work together and flourish doing God's work. Through hubs we may discover others have similar circumstances, we may also discover new ideas and new ways of working independently and together to address our circumstances.

In the formation of hubs all congregations will be placed in one so that everyone knows there is a place for them at the table even as some may need to go through a process before they are ready to participate in a healthy manner.

**27% of participating congregations indicated their interest in serving as a Connecting Church.**

110 churches indicated that they would serve in this role if needed. There was no correlation between church size and interest in serving as a connecting church.

These are examples of the types of responses we received:

*“We have an affinity with other rural churches in the southern part of our County and have common ministry concerns. Our leaders are willing to help share information and to help coordinate ministry activities designed to benefit the local community. .... We believe the United Methodist witness in our County can be strengthened when we work together. We are going through the Readiness Initiative this year. As we learn more about our strengths and the challenges we face, church leaders already see that we need to find ways to connect and collaborate with others in ministry. All that we do needs to be a team effort, not a solo*

*performance. We desire to share what we are learning and share the gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone we can reach.”*

*“At a time when our church struggled because of a dwindling congregation, a larger, more vibrant church “adopted” us, stood by us, partnered and collaborated with us to the point where we could stand on our own and flourish. We would like to pay this forward and share this blessing with others. Our hope is that we bring vitality and energy to smaller churches, as well as outreach beyond our town.”*

*“If we are called to do this, we see great potential for collaborative partnership. With the recent joining of young families, we feel we have the vitality to sustain leadership. We are a reconciling community and have served as a lighthouse church in the conference. But we have concerns about being the connecting church because we do not have a big staff. Ideally, we would pool some assets of the Hub members to hire a person to coordinate resources for the Hub. We have reservations about the resources needed, but otherwise, we have the energy and perspective to lead and to be a prayerful and patient community that trusts that God is doing something exciting in this space.”*

*“We would be interested in exploring the possibility of creating missional strategies for this area and resourcing other churches and leaders. There is a huge amount of untapped potential in this community that we are excited to explore and we feel we are positioned to do so after a lot of work to create a more welcoming and diverse community at our church.”*

As the Cabinet considered possible connecting churches, they reviewed hub questionnaire answers, vitality, and risk factors including:

- Known vitality level through participating in assessments and processes offered through the BWC, other partners, or experts.
- 2023 Discipleship Ministries Report answers:
  - Status of their discipleship pathway from the (teaching or implementing) (question 2),
  - Whether they have had a Profession of Faith within the past three years (question 3a)
  - Status of their racial justice work (4a)
  - Community partners (7)
- Statistical Report data to assess the vulnerability of the ministry’s resiliency including financial considerations, declining worship attendance, etc.

Some geographic areas have more churches that expressed an interest in becoming connecting churches than others so additional invitations will be made using the same criteria.

Those congregations who are selected to serve as Connecting Churches will be notified prior to hubs being announced (after Easter) so that they are equipped to lead well prior to hubs going into effect on July 1, 2025.

# Appendix B: Connecting Church Process

## Selecting

- Criteria for identifying Connecting Churches include:
  - a. Completion of hub survey
  - b. Embodiment of vitality (including evidence of deepening discipleship, seeing all the people, living and loving like Jesus and multiplying impact for the good of the community) and MAP (strategic transformational, outward-facing, community-driven ministry in collaboration with the community).
  - c. Evidence of connectionalism
  - d. Engaged laity
- Evaluate those who indicated interest in becoming a Connecting Church in the Collaborative Hub Questionnaire.
  - a. Additionally considered available data including: Readiness 360, discipleship pathway status (could be teaching church or is in the process of implementing), professions of faith within the past 3 years, on a path to racial justice, evidence of community engagement, and risk factors.
  - b. District Superintendent input on vitality.
  - c. Their hopes, concerns and other information from the hub questionnaire.
  - d. Additional information added by reviewers.
- For hubs with no churches who indicated an interest in serving as Connecting Churches, assess whether or not they have been in leadership positions before and if they are respected by their peers. Leaders need to show evidence of:
  - a. Strong connectionalism
  - b. Deep discipleship and MAP heartset and mindset
  - c. Highly self-differentiated and high EQ
  - d. Not in it for themselves
  - e. Fruitfulness in ministry: growing vitality in leaders and congregations

## Inviting After the Townhall (February 11)

- Notify churches (pastor + 9) who have indicated an interest and describe the process. Three different outcomes:
  - a. Congratulations letter with dates for training and link to set up a call with leaders to answer questions and gain input.
  - b. Potential connecting churches that we are uncertain about their vitality, are asked to take the R360 with a link to the form that enables us to set up R360s for them and schedule a vitality conversation.
  - c. Others are thanked for their interest and an affirmation of their gifts and hopes and who to contact should they have questions.
- Asked to hold this in confidence until an announcement has been made after Easter.
- Equipping begins in March.