

The following is a rough transcript of the presentation given by the Long Range Planning Task Force to the congregational meeting after worship on May 18, 2008. It is printed here so that those of you who care about the future of the church but were not able to attend the meeting might remain current with the work of the Planning team.

I urge you to read it and consider its conclusions carefully so that you can be fully invested in the next steps of the Planning team and may contribute as constructively as possible to the team's work.

Forrest

Introduction

This is the third congregation-wide meeting that has included significant discussion moving toward the future of the church. The first meeting was at this time last year, when the congregation voted to authorize the formation of a Long Range Planning Task Force and to elect the at-large members. The second occurred on December 2, 2007, giving the church the opportunity to respond to a presentation done two weeks earlier during church announcements. At this meeting today the Planning team hopes to communicate to you the progress we have recently made and the conclusions we have drawn from it, and to receive your responses to those conclusions.

The general outline of this presentation is as follows:

1. We'll identify as clearly as possible *what we're moving toward*;
2. We'll review *what we've done*;
3. We'll outline *what we have left to do*;
4. We'll mention *what we have learned*, both from you and from the wisdom of the materials that we've been reading;
5. We'll discuss *what those discoveries suggest we should do next*; and

6. We'll take time for a few words that ought to function as a bit of a pep talk.

What We're Moving Toward

The goal of the Planning team is this: we are seeking
*a clear sense of God's desire
for the future direction of the church,
to which we can direct
our time,
our money,
and our members' energies.*

What We've Done

To that end, we have taken the following steps:

1. We have obtained Session authorization for the establishment of the Task Force;
2. We have elected the Task Force. At-large members elected at the congregational meeting in May 2007 include Marge Briney, Don Greggain, Jeanie Kirkpatrick, Chris Moore, and Les Werner. Session representatives elected at the July 2007 Session meeting include Steve Clovis and Lois Devereaux. Forrest Claassen is serving the group as an ex officio member.
3. We have made a first attempt at *identifying the church's core values*. This has been done through the use of the United States Congregational Life Survey conducted during worship on February 10, 2008, and through the "Round Table" discussions of late winter. We'll talk more about these particular core values—both those that we support with strong action and those to which we aspire but do not execute as effectively—in the main section of this presentation.

What We Have Left to Do

Provided you respond favorably to the core values identified by the Planning team, we will then sit down to *prepare a set of guiding statements* for the church, including (1) a Core Values Statement (a “Credo”), (2) a Mission Statement (the document that tells who we are and what we’re here for), and (3) a Vision Statement (the document that reads like a description of the church twenty years from now: “The year is 2025. First Presbyterian Church of Clarkston is...”).

During this period of statement-writing, we’ll also *pursue further inquiry* to the extent that we discover we need it. Then, when our research is complete and the pieces are in place, we’ll *develop an action plan* with recommendations to Session and a full report to the congregation for your approval.

We do not yet know the time frame within which this will occur. Our original plans had suggested bringing action items to Session for discussion and refinement during the fall of 2008, and a final recommendation to the congregation at its January meeting in 2009. Some of us are hopeful that our work will be finished well before the new year—even, perhaps, to influence the program year that begins in September. But it would be premature to suggest a clear timeline to you at this point. At this point, we can only seek to reassure you that our actions and recommendations will not be hasty or rash, and at the same time we will not drag our feet in carrying out this important work.

What We’ve Learned—From You

From your input through the Congregational Life Survey and the round table discussions, we’ve identified five “Core Values” of the church—values that have received strong support throughout the history of the church both in what we say are priorities and

in where our time, energy, and passion are directed. Those five things are:

1. Relationships and fellowship with one another;
2. Service to the community around us;
3. Preaching and teaching and, more generally, study of the Scriptures;
4. Prayer; and
5. Ministry to children and youth.

I’d ask you to look carefully at this list of five values before we move on to the next slide. When this presentation is finished, we’re going to ask you whether it appears we are on the right track in identifying these values. Do they ring true with what you know of the church? When you think of the long story of this congregation and its purpose for being here, do these priorities match up with what you know of that story? What is missing? What deserves a second look?

In addition to those five core values, we’ve also identified three “Stated Values”—items that by your communication are important to who this church is, but which do not appear as strengths of the church. These, rather, are places where the church struggles, sometimes unsuccessfully, to put into action things that many of you hold dear. Those three stated values are:

1. Evangelism;
2. Worship and Sacraments; and
3. Service to the world beyond the valley

Once again, take a look at this list before we move on. Does this list also ring true to you?

What We’ve Learned—From Wise Teachers and Writers

It was not easy to arrive at these eight items. The material from the Congregational Life Survey and from your responses was initially overwhelming. We did

not know how—or even whether—we would be able to sort out the wide variety of concerns and comments and put it all together into a meaningful whole that would help guide the future of the church. But two pieces of advice from the Survey instructions gave us a way through.

First, we learned that a church flourishes best when it focuses on its unique combination of strengths: “Congregations make changes that transform their future by focusing on their strengths...” In fact, becoming too preoccupied with the congregation’s weaknesses and trying to fix them is strongly related to getting stuck: “Focusing on weaknesses goes hand in hand with resistance to change...”

When we heard this, suddenly large chunks of confusion fell away. We stopped worrying so much about trying to fix everything that wasn’t working with the church, and instead began to look at what was working well. And that provided a very hopeful perspective.

Second, opportunities for creative ministry planning lie at the point of intersection between multiple strengths: Focusing on strengths and building connections between your strengths affirm the unique set of opportunities available to each congregation...”

That insight provided an additional point of discovery, and it was an exciting one. What became clear was why some programs have found enormous and easy traction within this church. The programs that have succeeded have been regularly those that combine two or more of the congregation’s core values to create an original ministry. So:

(a) Community + Children = TLC

(b) Fellowship + Scripture Study = Home Bible Study Groups

(c) Community + Fellowship = small-group-based local service projects (such as those that created excitement during the “40 Days of Community”)¹

Identifying successful programs such as these, and understanding the values underneath that made them successful, confirmed for us that we were on the right track with identifying the unique priorities of this church—priorities that transcend any one era of program ministry.

What We Intend to Do Next

Focus on Strengths. Given these discoveries, the Planning team proposes to you that we should put the lion’s share of our energies toward pursuing those five Core Values that are matched in effective action, and to look for program opportunities that will operate at the intersection of two or more of those core values.

Trust God with the Weaknesses. That means that less of our energy, and certain less of our worry, will go toward fretting about and trying to fix those things that are weaknesses in the church. For instance, we won’t struggle to *make* worship more inspiring and joyful (two measures on which we received very low scores in the Congregational Life Survey). Instead, we will trust that inspiration and joy will come to worship as we focus on God’s call for us.

Similarly, we won’t beat ourselves up about being better evangelists. Instead, we will trust that our desire to bring people into the church, and ultimately into relationship with Christ, will rise without excitement about serving the community. We will trust also that they will be naturally drawn to the church

¹ This, in fact, lines up with what you said along the way in response to the “40 Days” effort. Many of you observed that it was the “community service” element of the campaign, such as building the Habitat for Humanity house, or bringing 1500 pounds of potatoes from central Washington for use at the local food banks, that saved the campaign. You really didn’t like the videos; you really didn’t like the book. But you loved the practical opportunity to get out and serve the community.

as they see good things happening through us and find themselves wanting to know more.

Finally, we won't struggle to make you passionate about world mission and other needs beyond the valley. Rather, we will trust that your passion for the needs of the world will come in God's time as a reward for your faithfulness to attending to the needs of the valley.

Trust God with the Future of the Church. We will also not worry excessively about our fears for this church and its future. As we work together faithfully, building on those priorities and strengths that God appears to have already given us, we will trust that things will "start looking up." Confidence about the future will come. Similarly, when we faithfully discern and follow God's call, we trust that people outside the church will start getting interested, and that growth will be a natural outcome of that fact. But we will not seek after growth for its own sake; we will let it be the natural result of our efforts to follow God faithfully.

A Few Final Thoughts

This church comes out of a period in which it took a serious hit, both in terms of active participants and in terms of confidence and energy. Any recovery from a hit like that will not be an easy one. It will take significant mutual effort and significant willingness to push beyond our comfort zones to follow God's will for our future. As one expert in church revitalization put it, the "two most destructive illusions" in a congregation are "the fantasy that growth can occur without change, and the fantasy that change can occur without [discomfort]" (Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live?* Alban Institute, 1999. Page 11).

And since it's not an easy task, my emotions have ridden the roller coaster from energetically hopeful to deeply discouraged, just as yours probably have. I find myself often thinking about a favorite poster, and about the people of the Exodus.

A Favorite Poster. The poster comes from a company called "Despair, Inc." That company has found a business niche in mocking the "motivational" posters of the 1980's and 1990's—you know, the ones that have a beautiful photograph above a central word like "Effort" and a motivating quote. The poster of which I'm thinking does not have an inspiring title like "Effort"; instead, its title is "Mistakes." It features a boat, looking a great deal like the *Titanic*, slipping woefully into the ocean, and the caption beneath reads, "It may be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others."

In those darkest moments, I have worried that God's purpose for this church is nothing more than "to serve as a warning to others." I have found myself praying that that would *not* be God's purpose for this church. And that's what got me thinking about the people of the Exodus.

The People of the Exodus. The Promised Land was only a few weeks' walk from Egypt. But when God told Moses to send twelve men to spy out the land, only two came back confident that God would give it to them. The rest believed that the effort would fail. And so the ten who didn't believe it could be done persuaded the people, and the people refused to go in. And the result was that the children of Israel did circles out in the desert for forty years until the last adult who didn't believe died. Only then did the new generation, and two very old, very believing spies, finally enter.

And as I have chewed on the story, I have wondered if God's purpose for this church is for us to wander around in the desert of our own making, until we have died off. And I have found myself praying that that would not be the case.

But the more I have thought about that poster, and those people, the more one extra fact has begun to dawn on me. And that one extra fact is this: In the story the difference between those who found their way into the Promised Land and those who didn't

was not the arbitrary result of God's decision. The difference between those who found their way into the Promised Land and those who didn't

was that the ones who got into the Promised Land believed that God would get them there, and the one's who didn't get in didn't believe.

strong, positive impact on our church's future?

I invite your replies.

Conclusion

So I am still praying for this church. But now I am praying that God would cause me to believe that he really does have a future for this church. And I am praying that you would believe in God's love for this church enough that God would see fit to bring us together into our Promised Land.

I'm not praying that you'll just blindly agree to the recommendations of the Task Force. We need your discernment and your help. We want creative, constructive comments this afternoon. Have we listened rightly and heard well so far? Does what you have heard ring true with what you already know about the church?

At best, your response would be "Well, duh! It took you six months to figure out *that*?", because that would should that we have discerned well. But still good would be your well-considered response to the committee and the congregation here today.

So:

- Are we on the right track?
- What raises your anxieties and hesitations?
- What questions do you need to have answered in order to tell us to proceed?
- What have we overlooked that you want us to see?
- And ultimately, are you ready for us to take the next step, knowing that each step we take gets us a little bit closer to some potentially significant changes that we hope will have a