

SUMMARY REPORT

Moving Toward a Flourishing Future: A Congregational Engagement Process

The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (LMPC) was invited to propose a congregational engagement process to heal past hurts, address current differences, and develop a shared vision to facilitate a flourishing future with the First Presbyterian Church of Allentown (FPCA). LMPC proposed a seven-phase process to reach a mutual understanding of FPCA's mission moving forward through a participatory process, achieving the following outcomes:

1. Discern the exact nature of the congregation's health and functioning and how its members perceive and experience their participation in the church community at FPCA together.
2. Provide opportunity for congregants to voice their perspective on the current situation at FPCA.
3. Document the areas of congregational life that members hold in common and celebrate.
4. Provide opportunity for individuals to better understand the views and perspectives of other individuals and groups within the church.
5. Address past misunderstandings and griefs in a manner that works toward healing and reconciliation.
6. Teach conflict transformation skills and strategies to manage differences in the congregation.
7. Educate the congregation in healthy congregational functioning from an emotional process perspective.
8. Identify core values and key interests and work systematically to find win/win solutions for the congregation to move forward together.
9. Document the process through accurate reporting.
10. Do all of this in a way that glorifies God and strengthens the church.

Contracting Phase

On January 22, 2022, LMPC presented an engagement process on Zoom at FPCA's Annual Session Retreat. LMPC developed and submitted a first draft proposal, which was considered by Session on January 26, 2022. LMPC revised the proposal, which was approved on February 23, 2022.

On Sunday, February 27, 2022, a team from the Session presented the proposal to the congregation in a hybrid event. Positive support for the process was expressed by members and LMPC was invited to meet with the congregation on Sunday March 13, 2022, to present the process, answer questions, and conduct a survey to gauge the congregation's commitment to support the process moving forward.

Information-Gathering Phase

A questionnaire was distributed, both electronically and by mail, to as many members as could be contacted. Two hundred and twenty-one people responded to the questionnaire, highlighting the

strengths of the congregation and some key areas of tension. LMPC also conducted 15 phone interviews with members to understand the wide range of perspectives from within the congregation. The information gathered from these conversations, together with that gathered from the questionnaire, was used by LMPC to shape the upcoming small group dialogues.

Education Phase

LMPC conducted two workshops that were essential for the engagement process, giving church members a time to be reflective, learn new concepts, and apply these learnings to their context for a renewed understanding of God's will for the church. Jay Wittmeyer traveled to Allentown to lead a *Healthy Congregations* workshop on Friday night and all-day Saturday. The workshop focused on the family emotional process in the congregation and the impact of anxiety on the church. Nearly one hundred members participated in the workshop.

On May 5-6, 2022, Devon Miller led *Conflict Transformation Skills for Congregations* workshop. Again, the workshop was well attended with approximately one hundred participants. Members celebrated being in the fellowship hall again, which had been unused for some time. The event was hosted by the Middle Eastern Community.

Small-Group Phase

In late May, LMPC conducted ten ninety-minute small group sessions, consisting of 12 persons per group, though some of the groups were not full. Two additional sessions were held on Zoom. 109 individuals participated in the sessions. Inspired by Phil. 2:4, which states "Look to the interests of others," members were given opportunity to highlight the things they celebrate about FPCA and voice their interests on how the church might even flourish more going forward. The interests were written as *needs statements*, which provided the groundwork for the problem-solving sessions held in September.

Restoration Phase

On Saturday, June 25, 2022, LMPC conducted a five-hour healing session in the sanctuary. Beginning with the most distant hurts, people were asked to come to the center and speak directly to another member who did some active listening. The pattern of addressing hurts followed a timeline up through the most recent issues as understood by the facilitator. The healing session concluded with a circle of affirmation and appreciation. Leadership and clergy of FPCA actively participated.

Strategic-Planning Phase

On both September 10 and 17, members of First Presbyterian Church of Allentown gathered in the Fellowship Hall to collaboratively address the interests of the congregation. Each session ran from 8:30 AM to 1:30 PM. The process began by distributing a list of interest statements that had been categorized into ten areas. Members began the process by writing down their ideas in each category. Next members were placed in one of the ten groups to work through the brainstorming and begin to develop a proposal to address the ideas. In the second session, these ideas were further honed until a proposal was developed.

Everyone then gathered in the sanctuary and each of the ten groups presented their proposals and tested for agreement, which members did by raising colored cards. While some proposals did require a

few small adjustments in language, overwhelmingly, there was strong support for all of the proposals. Because of the complexity of each issue and the size of the congregation, it was understood that each proposal would not immediately address various issues, but point towards a process to address the issues.

The final list of proposals is summarized here. It will be important for Session, and any committee assigned to address the proposals, to look at the comprehensive language around each proposal, which is in the appendix of the full report.

1. Mission/Identity/Theology

- a. We propose that the Session develop a plan to communicate and implement a Mission Study to educate the congregation about PCUSA theology, PCUSA standards for communications and civil discourse. The study will need regular opportunities for town hall gatherings and listening sessions.
- b. We propose that Session address the need for an up-to-date mission or identity statement. A statement which defines: Who we are; what we are called to do; what we do; why we are doing it; and what makes us different from other churches. The mission statement should be based on the Bible, clear, concise, candid, and honest. It needs to have congregational alignment and needs to value the diversity within the congregation.

2. Membership/Belonging/Community

- a. *Statement: Everyone who enters our church should feel valued, welcome, and safe. Our community should indicate a clear and noticeable communication of belonging and a common belief in Jesus Christ.*
- b. We propose that Session organize a temporary membership study team to execute a census of members and attendees to determine: Membership status and number of members; how each member is engaged; and the interests of members for future engagement.
- c. We propose Session create a permanent team to assist in forming and supporting an active and vibrant small group ministry. The team will be tasked to: Inventory and reinvigorate current small groups; start new small groups based on identified interests; and encourage members, particularly new members, to get involved in a small group that interests them.
- d. This will enable us to worship as one united, diverse church family.
- e. In order to worship as one united, diverse church family, we propose that there be a regular singular worship service with an all-church fellowship time following this service. This could be monthly after Communion Sundays.

3. Worship/Education/Spiritual Formation

- a. In order for the congregation to make an informed choice regarding the future use of the sanctuary as a worship space that is able to accommodate diverse forms of worship, we propose that the Session have the sanctuary assessed and evaluated by a professional firm. The assessment should include seating options, sound and electronics, and the suitability of the space for multiple purposes like funerals, weddings, and community concerts.
- b. We propose that FPCA offer two distinct worship services with two distinct styles on Sunday morning, with a time of spiritual formation for all ages to occur in between. We propose that these services be combined monthly in a mixture of worship styles.

- c. We recognize the desire of the congregation to have sermons be anchored in scripture and then connected to our daily lives and broader social issues. We encourage the use of the lectionary as a starting point.

4. Children/Youth/Families

- a. We propose FPCA provide nursery care on Sunday mornings and designate an 8:45 service as a “family friendly” service with an emphasis on activities for children, casual in nature.
- b. We propose an intergenerational learning hour (9:50-10:50) that is meaningful.
- c. We propose extending childcare for weekday FPCA preschool children during the weekday for a continued church presence.

5. Transition/Leadership/Communication

- a. We propose that FPCA improve its communications by developing and implementing a communication plan that includes one person in charge with designated responsibility.
- b. We propose that the PNC streamline the PNC process to improve its effectiveness and that PNC work to increase the congregations’ understanding of the process.
- c. We propose that sermons be Biblically based, and that sermons which address political issues do so in a positive way, using inclusive language to challenge the congregation to go into the world ready to “love one another.”
- d. We propose that leadership ensure a good and respectful utilization of resources, including the efforts of volunteers
- e. We propose that Session adopt a process to constructively address disagreements.

6. Finances/Stewardship/Campus/Physical Plant

- a. We propose that Session ask staff to develop a stewardship education program to educate the congregation on the spiritual discipline and fiscal responsibility of stewardship.
- b. We propose Session develop a long-term plan by January 2023 and embark on a capital campaign/special project campaign to address improvements, major repairs, and mission projects.
- c. We propose that FPCA “Repurpose the Church” in order to generate additional income, facilitate the church’s mission, and ensure the viability for future generations.

7. History/Reputation

- a. We propose that FPCA create a committee to compose a living history of the congregation.
- b. We propose that FPCA work to document and benchmark key successes of the past to determine what is relevant in our community today. We propose John Dubbs lead the effort.

8. Conflict/Change/Disruption/Discomfort/COVID

- a. We propose that a Session member host a monthly listening session, either before or after worship, and that the input and questions of congregants get documented and processed appropriately. This is to include online participants.
- b. We propose revisiting Conflict Management training in six months by engaging the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center to ensure we approach conflict in a healthy manner.
- c. We propose an open seating option in the pews or balcony as a way to prepare for an increase in COVID positivity rates.

9. Diversity/Friendliness/Welcoming

- a. We propose FPCA have regular greeters and ushers.
- b. We propose FPCA re-establish methods of communication for volunteer opportunities. We propose that job descriptions for volunteers be developed.
- c. We propose that members be encouraged to participate in fellowship opportunities.

10. Staffing/Volunteers

- a. We propose FPCA support efforts to hire new staff.

Determining the priority of these proposals will be up to Session. However, LMPC would highlight several key areas or proposals that might deserve immediate attention and be worked on concurrently. They include addressing the worship proposal, the identity and mission proposal, and the search process for a new installed lead pastor. These will begin to bring stability after a period of uncertainty that in many ways was spawned by the upheaval caused by the pandemic.

Other proposals such as the capital campaign which will involve more thought and energy may be able to wait until the areas above have attained greater stability.

Still other smaller proposals such as the oral history, which is an excellent idea for a congregation such as FPCA, and the implementation of a greeter/ usher system would require little effort from Session but might reap significant rewards. If the people who worked in these areas feel like they were heard and their ideas are acted upon, they will likely feel their work was worthwhile and not for naught.

Finally, it may be helpful for Session to address each of the proposals, even if it is only to say that Session has read them and will come back to them later after they have adequately addressed the most pressing needs. Devising and communicating an overall plan to address the proposal will be crucial in keeping people involved and informed as Session carries out these proposals as they see fit. Even if Session decides that a particular proposal is not fitting, communicating that and the reasons why is better than simply tabling it without an explanation. Members put in tremendous energy in this work and deserve to stay informed.

To conclude the Strategic-Planning Phase, Rev. Dr. Devon Miller preached on Sunday, September 18, 2022. LMPC then met with Session on October 26, 2022, to go over the outcome of the problem-solving session and highlight areas that Session might consider prioritizing as outlined above.

Concluding Comments

Many members of the congregation attended nearly every aspect of the consultation process, which required nearly 40 hours in total—an amazing commitment. Other members had other obligations and could not attend every session but made every effort to participate when it was possible. The success of any such engagement process is determined by a congregation's commitment to participate. There was great energy and great commitment in all of the sessions. We trust that such energy will go into the next phase of the work, as well.

As LMPC engaged in this process, it became clear that the challenges FPCA was and is facing are not unique to their situation. Many of the issues such as an aging congregation or the lack of youth is part of a larger socio-cultural shift sweeping Western Christianity. Churches finding themselves in such circumstances often resort to searching for more appealing services to attract a younger generation rather than being content with who they are. This can lead to its own set of complications and misunderstandings

In addition, the pandemic played a tremendous role in many, if not all, churches in one way or another. It was and is a time of uncertainty that churches all over were ill-prepared to deal with. FPCA should be commended that it sought help much earlier than many churches to navigate the uncertain waters they were facing. LMPC's experience over the past year has been that the challenges FPCA is facing are widespread. In some ways, that can be a comfort; it can also be a call to rally together to work through these challenges in creative and adaptive ways.

As FPCA begins to find their way forward, LMPC would remind FPCA to remember who you are: the First Presbyterian Church of Allentown. You are a particular kind of church in a particular place. FPCA does have a starting point in helping shape who you are and where you are going in the future. How has the landscape changed through the years? What will distinguish you from other churches in your region, other churches in your Presbytery, and other churches in your denomination?

Finally, LMPC is grateful for the work of the Rev. Dr. Jan Nolting Carter throughout this process. The Rev. Dr. Nolting Carter was instrumental in initiating the process LMPC designed to engage with FPCA, saw to it that an effective logistics team was in place to carry out the details, and remained engaged in the process through the information gathering and healing phases. In the end, Rev. Dr. Nolting Carter determined that FPCA may not be a good fit moving forward based on comments, at times hurtful, that were received. Although Rev. Dr. Nolting Carter chose to resign at the end of August and before the problem-solving session, FPCA should be grateful for the inexhaustible energy she put into this process in helping FPCA move forward as a more flourishing community of faith in the midst of uncertain times.