

CATALYST FOR CONVERSATION

Bethel United Church of Christ, May 2018

REPORT ON PHASE ONE: STABILIZING AND ASSESSING THE “STATE OF THE CHURCH”

Following the renovation, 6 months, plus or minus into the interim period, we gathered with 65 people in various groups including the council and board chairs, the past presidents, wise women, ironmen, youth, and two gatherings open to the congregation at-large. We also received personal or written feedback from 17 individuals having asked for responses to ten questions about the congregation.

There were lots of positive responses including how much members and friends of Bethel care for one another and for the health of the congregation. The rich history of the church was celebrated and the many changes of the past decade were acknowledged. Both hope and concern for the congregation’s future were expressed. The conversations always included discussion of the church’s vision statement.

Our vision is to be **united** in seeking God’s will and serving all people. We focused on various portions of those phrases.

Seeking: Bethel is a church that has believed in education and in moving forward. Its theological bent has been process oriented. Both buildings have been set on the growing edge of town. Early concerns were to assimilate into the culture; to be on the forefront of women’s involvement; to be leaders in Christian education (weekday education; seminary support; preschool; Bless the Week). Some of its strongest times were when members of the church engaged in Bible study and spiritual renewal (Bethel Series, Strategic Spiritual Journey (triplets)).

Serving: Bethel is immensely proud of its history and involvement in mission to the world and the community. Whether looking for positives or talking about “the sizzle,” mission and outreach came up most often. For the first 50 years, plus or minus, the church supported international missionaries. The need for decent housing for people around the world was also an impetus to Bethel’s early involvement with Habitat for Humanity. With a pastor and lay person on the founding board, this is an involvement that has continued. We are especially proud of the Habitat builds and blitzes in Evansville.

Closer to home, Bethel has cared for the most vulnerable including the sick, via Deaconess Hospital; the elderly via the Protestant Home and Good Samaritan Home; the homeless, being the catalyst for United Caring Services; and most recently homeless veterans, supporting the Gresham House. Bethel has also been “hands on” with a variety of outreach ministries to the neighborhood when the church was on South Garvin and now with Stockwell School; those in impoverished areas via the Appalachian Service Project; gathering items for Albion Bacon Fellows, Ronald McDonald House, Riley’s’ Children’ Hospital; and serving others whether it be Saturday breakfasts or at United Caring Services. Several people mentioned that we reach out to the underserved.

Vitality of the congregation: The church has worked together to produce major events, for instance “the Last Supper” and the Summer Social. At the same time, a number of people reflected on difficulties among members and between members and staff. Among some, there is the feeling that decisions are made by a small group and that there are cliques that are hard to break into. Transition is a word that came up in almost every discussion, often, many times.

When asked about what draws people to Bethel, fit and friendliness, welcome and warmth came up most often. Bethel is open, yet traditional. We are a church for thinking people who don’t back off from tough issues. We pull together when we have a project. Both the confirmation program and the adult Sunday school classes were mentioned as draws. At the death of a loved one, the congregation is a source of faith and comfort. A couple of people said that as they aged, they have “mellowed out,” finding the support of the congregation greater than the occasional hassles.

When asked about the decline some said that, among other factors, it is cultural. All churches are declining. Some said it had to do with the pastor, though few pointed to specifics. Very few said it had to do with the congregation but then went on to talk about people with hurt feelings, turmoil, lack of staff unity, lack of communication, and lack of strong pastoral and administrative leadership. The same leaders have to do everything, leading to burnout. People take things as personal affronts.

We’re not for everyone and everyone who leaves isn’t mad.

Hope for the congregation: Without exception, people want Bethel to survive and to grow, especially to grow our ministry with children, youth, young adults, and families. We hope for more opportunities to gather with other faiths and those of other ethnic backgrounds. We hope to make a difference in our community and in the world.

Specific ideas for the future: use of our outdoors; a commercial for Bethel; another service during the week with good marketing; movie night; trivial pursuit; more pickle ball;; open gym;; recognizing that everything we do changes us; pursuing open and affirming; having someone conduct the congregation during worship; organ could be softer; exploring what the UCC’s values are and what it means to be a part of the UCC.

MEMBERS AND MONEY

Membership: We are in the midst of an exhaustive and exhausting search for our active members. We are trying to provide those going forward with an accurate picture of our people resources rather than trying to “clear the roles.’ We have made every attempt to be in touch with those who have not been active in recent years. We are keeping many on an inactive list. It is important to keep our constituency list as large as possible. Further, we are very grateful to have an increasing list of friends of the congregation.

We have 284 active adult members. By active we mean people who have attended, supported, made contact, or are part of a well-connected family that still needs to be followed up. That is, the 284 continues to include some that aren't so active. This includes 33 homebound. There are an additional 46 people we need to contact.

Of the 284 people, we lack birthdates for 18, leaving 266 for the following figures

- 80 are over 75
- 45 are between 65 and 74
- 61 are between 55 and 64

This means 70% of our membership is over 55. At least 12% of our total membership is homebound. We have a dozen active families with children and youth – plus friends on occasion.

Finances and assets: We have an amazing facility that has been recently updated and is completely paid for. We are located on the busiest street in town. We have a history of superb lay leadership.

We have 89 supporting (pledge) families.

- 82 of these are over 55 years of age that is 92% of pledge units
- They provide 96% of the dollars pledged.
- Those over 80 provide 42% of the pledge income.
- When the 70-79 set is included that becomes 73% of the pledged income.

It is important to remember that approximate 30% of the 2018 budget comes from a percentage of the rolling value of the endowment. That is, we are using the endowment but not invading the principle. We also have income from trust funds that averages \$8,000 a year. There are two one-time gifts for this year.

AMONG THE CONCERNS SHARED

We don't have a critical mass in several age groups.

Officers and leaders often speak about how hard it is to get others to help and that "they'll never do that again." The President (and Vice-president) have to do the heavy-lifting, especially during pastoral vacancies.

There have been rifts between members and between members and pastors.

It has been said we don't know ourselves. Some are strongly aligned with UCC values; others are actively opposed. Do we know what those values are?

How does Bethel treat clergy? Sometimes not so well.

When asked what Evansville would miss if Bethel were to close, among the responses were: There would be a tattered hole in the fabric that is Evansville; our legacy will live on in Good Samaritan and the United Caring Services; Stockwell would be sad; there would be a gap in the program we serve; someone would get a good piece of property; would the community notice at all?

Midway through the process, this question was replaced with a much better question, If Bethel didn't exist, why would God invent it? That may be the question of the next part of the search process.

Areas of our ministry that need to be attended to:

1. Engaging Young Adults (matching grant)
2. Resources from Center for Congregation (a possibility, matching grant)
3. Loss of MCYYA, media person and nursery care
4. Possible change with preschool
5. Cost of search
6. Other

QUESTIONS THE CONGREGATION NEEDS TO DECIDE PRIOR TO PROFILE

1. What is the church's parish, i.e. target area?
 - a. Geographic
 - b. Theological
 - c. Socio-economic
 - d.???
2. What is the congregation's general approach to faith?
 - a. Progressive Christianity takes the Bible seriously but not literally; believes in tradition while applying it to the current context; lives with the questions and is wary of certainty;
 - b. Orthodox Christianity reads the text more closely; is more tradition bound; believes the answers have been found.
3. Expectations
 - a. What does the congregation expect of the next pastor?
 - b. What can the next pastor expect of the congregation?
4. Is there a planning process going on or planned? For mission? For property?
5. Is Bethel Open and Affirming? (relates to sexual orientation and gender identity)

6. What is the relationship of the minister and the lay leadership of the church?
7. How solvent is the church going forward? How dependent on the endowment? Is the church willing to use some of the principle?
8. More...

WHAT/WHO ARE WE LOOKING FOR? AMONG THE OPTIONS:

1. Call one all-purpose pastor.
2. Call a lead pastor with specific programming help: children and/or youth and/or elders and/or?
3. Call co-pastors and let them work it out.
4. Call a lead pastor that has a family/youth emphasis and a part-time pastor for the elders.
5. Call two pastors. One to lead the church as it is. One to start a new church within the current building.
6. Additional ideas

2019 IKC Clergy Guidelines for a pastor with 10 years of experience, leading a congregation of 150 to 300 people, having a family, runs approximately \$104,000. There are churches in Evansville paying that. This does not include professional expenses, continuing education, mileage, or escrow for sabbatical.

It is important to pay part-time employees a commensurate pay, including an amount of benefits that they need to provide for themselves.

A staff configuration that is greater than one full-time pastor and one half-time program person (or equivalent) will call for use of the principle of the endowment.

ADVICE TO THE SEARCH COMMITTEE FROM THE CONVERSATIONS:

Be brutally honest in the profile; paint an accurate picture. We need to be very open to the pool of candidates and not to prejudge them. We should consider all candidates, including but not limited to those with little or no parish experience (may come from other areas), younger candidates, women, people of color; people of differing sexual orientations. (This needs to be checked out with the congregation because if we say it we need to really mean it.) Determine

if the person in the interview is the same person – in person. We need someone with entrepreneurial skills.

We need newer people on the search committee – people without baggage about the church. We need people with a fresh perspective. We need to prep the congregation for the need to keep the work of the search committee confidential. AT the same time, we need to keep the congregation informed through the Record, the website and addresses to the congregation.

We need to recognize that we have few young people and it can be hard to get old people to accept change. There is a core of people that the pastor can rely on. The pastor needs to have strong self-confidence. Leadership of the church needs to realize that changes are afoot. We need to be open to the leading of the Spirit.

Please note: Many of the comments are generalized; the number of times the words mission and transition were used are beyond counting. Most of the phrases in the report of the meetings and the concerns were taken verbatim.

Every listing ends with the category of other or additional ideas or more. This is a work in progress.

Bethel is on the cusp of a new phase of its ministry, we are in this together and grateful for God's spirit that has led us in the past and we trust will lead us into the future.