

# Report of the of the Board of Elders On the Spring Congregational Discernment Meetings

June 22, 2014

From March 9 to April 4, 2014, Carla Bailey and members of the Boards of Elders hosted nine separate discernment meetings with members of the congregation. In total, seventy members, including members of the Board of Elders, attended these meetings. While the Financial Sustainability Working Team was established to develop recommendations concerning the church's financial health and sustainability, the intended focus of these discernment meetings was the other two strategic priorities identified by the Elders, namely "faith formation" and an "intentional justice ministry".

These two priorities were identified by the Elders through a process of holding up our different areas of ministry at CCDC against the standards suggested by the words of our covenant, and by reflecting upon themes arising from the Boards of Deacons, past discernment discussions, and informal conversations with church members. The goal for this spring's discernment discussions was to engage in a wider conversation with the full congregation (those willing and able to participate), testing these priorities against others potentially on the mind of the congregation and exploring together what they might mean and how they might be brought to life in the congregation.

Topic introductions and questions at these meetings were framed as follows:

## **Faith Formation**

*Nurturing members and prospective members at key points along their faith journey.*

The most rapidly growing denomination in the U.S. is "none", as faith institutions struggle to maintain relevance and meaning to current and potential members. We as a church community seek to support the faith formation of individuals wherever they are on their faith journey, e.g., youth pre- and post-confirmation, adult membership preparation, and engagement of "seekers" and the congregation as a whole. We seek to nurture faith formation and renewal in the context of our "progressive Christianity".

1. When you think of the influences that shaped your own faith formation, what were they and when were they most effective? And how do you think we're doing here at CCDC at influencing faith formation for our members at those similar times?
2. Recognizing that we will never (nor should we strive to) come to unanimity of faith expression, what would help our church members become more comfortable and skilled at "faith talk" – being able and comfortable articulating what they believe and how it applies to their lives?
3. Five years from now, what would we be doing that we are not doing now or want to do better?

## **Justice Advocacy**

*Issue education and individual initiative vs. more powerful collective impact in areas selected by the congregation.*

We as a church community seek to fully realize our Christian faith in collective action for justice, fulfilling our covenant (striving for justice and peace), and increasing our relevance on issues of importance in our wider communities. Ministries of mercy come more comfortably to the congregation and are the primary focus of the church's outreach efforts, while justice ministries (equally central to the Gospel and to our relevance outside our four walls) challenge the congregation's tolerance for discussion (including potential disagreement) and visible advocacy on more difficult, controversial and potentially divisive issues of the day.

1. When our covenant suggests we covenant together to strive for justice and peace, what does that mean to you and how do we measure our church against that covenantal promise?
2. We recognize that conversations about issues of justice are difficult – they challenge our abilities to disagree, challenge one another, and act courageously. How should we have those conversations in our church?
3. What kind of justice advocacy concerns touch your heart? What justice advocacy concerns may be viably addressed in our congregation, given who we are, where we are, and the age in which we live?

Members of the Board of Elders captured the answers to these questions and other points of discussion. The resulting meeting minutes for the nine meetings are available to the congregation; we do not attempt to capture the full breadth and substance of those discussions here. Instead, the Board of Elders met for a full morning on Saturday, May 31, 2014, to distill the comments captured during the discernment into a few high-level themes to report to the congregation, and to identify potential next steps for the consideration of the next Board of Elders. Those themes and potential next steps are summarized below:

***A yearning for increased connectedness (small group opportunities)***

Members ranging from young parents to newly arriving retirees expressed the desire for more small-group opportunities to connect with other members, strengthening our fellowship community. Small-group fellowship opportunities promote faith formation, first by presenting a more welcoming congregation and point of entry into the life of the church, and further by nurturing faith through sharing, serving, learning and praying together. They also ultimately support justice advocacy work by creating the trust foundation for members to take on more difficult conversations with other members that they have come to know, respect and care for. Current such opportunities include second-hour meetings, small study groups, choir, service projects, Christmas Market, and others. Possible increased small group opportunities might include bible study, book study, affinity/support groups (e.g. young parents, widows, etc.), and others.

Potential strengthening opportunities for Elders consideration include:

- Strengthen the Board of Deacons experience of community, shared learning and focused leadership/service (see Carla's planned pilot for the coming church year);
- Make available additional structured small group service projects;
- Form additional affinity/support groups for different groups of members;

- Execute Congregational Life plans to provide welcoming and informational materials to visitors, inviting membership;
- Provide “host members” to new church members, helping to make connections and friendships in the church;
- Evaluate the potential re-structuring of the Sunday morning schedule, better optimizing a morning at church, affording increased study and small-group meeting opportunities before or after the service, including adult Sunday school, and discussion groups;
- Develop additional youth programs.

### **Justice Advocacy – Individual vs. Whole Church Action**

While some members feel that the church already places too much emphasis on justice advocacy, there is a general interest and willingness to explore how the church might strengthen its justice ministry through increased member education on issues, exploration of what our faith says to us about these issues, and how to be an effective advocate on them. Many have joined and remained at CCDC because it is a “church that does things”, being vibrant and active. The greatest source of doubt concerning justice advocacy is on what individual members or our small church can do on seemingly large and overwhelming justice issues. The greatest source of discomfort is in the potential divisiveness of such issues in the congregation. Members value CCDC for its openness and inclusiveness to different views and beliefs.

In that context, there is generally a sense that positions on issues should be “explored but not dictated”, and that while it is fine and good in an open congregation to inspire individual members to action on individual conviction, there is general discomfort with the idea of the whole church taking a selected stand. In such cases, the process of generating alignment within the church body is critical. Past examples include the decision to become an open & affirming church (more effective) and to take a position on the Vietnam War (more destructive). Most importantly, how do we balance Christian courage and urgency in confronting critical issues with civility in the discourse?

Additionally, some in the congregation express concerns that increased attention to justice advocacy may come at the expense of individual faith ministries, service ministries and pastoral care. Clearly the goal of a strengthened justice ministry is to round out, complete, and mutually strengthen the church’s interwoven ministries rather than diminish any of them.

Potential strengthening opportunities for Elders consideration include:

- Continue and build on issue education efforts and individual/group advocacy opportunities (e.g. letter writing) through Outreach and Religious Education;
- Increase education and resource availability on how to do effective justice work, including the rich materials from the UCC Justice and Witness Ministries website;
- Provide increased scriptural exploration opportunities, based on sound scholarship, on what our faith says about contemporary issues of justice;
- Openly discuss and develop approaches to promote a civil discourse in the way we discuss these issues (discussion norms);

- Decide on 2015 church membership in the United Valley Interfaith Project (UVIP) as a potential means to leverage the combined impact of multiple faith communities to promote justice issues and to provide church members with organized and focused advocacy opportunities;
- Evaluate the formation of a Justice Ministry Board (separate from a service-focused Outreach Board) to provide focus to the congregation's justice issue identification, education, and advocacy opportunities.
- Develop a robust and transparent process for putting larger potential justice issues to the whole congregation for discernment when a whole church position is to be decided.

### **Importance of Religious Education through All Stages of Life in the Church**

Nearly all discernment discussions, whether focused on faith formation or justice advocacy, came back in some way to religious education as a foundation for faith, growth, fellowship, service and civil and scripturally-grounded discussions on difficult and controversial justice issues. This starts with building a foundational faith experience for our children, but continues throughout life. Many members do not enjoy the benefit of such a foundation from youth, come more recently to Bible study, or just continue to grow and explore in that scholarship in changing life contexts and questions. We already enjoy a strong religious education program at CCDC, including Sunday Schools, confirmation groups, study groups, open community forums, and more. Discernment discussions suggest exploring further ways to build on this foundation to strengthen all of our ministries and the vibrancy of our faith community.

Potential strengthening opportunities for Elders consideration include:

- Utilize Richard Crocker as a flexible resource (as he has offered) to enhance our educational offerings to members, including adult Bible study, exploration of the scriptural basis of looking at key justice issues, and others;
- As already suggested earlier in this report, evaluate the potential re-structuring of the Sunday morning schedule, better optimizing a "morning at church", affording increased study and small-group meeting opportunities before or after the service, including adult Sunday school, and discussion groups;
- Continue to evaluate and strengthen the scriptural foundation provided in youth Sunday schools and programs;
- Explore non-traditional educational venues/options, including on-line offerings.

As noted, this represents only our humble efforts to summarize the most prominent high-level themes emerging from our participation in these discussions and review of the meeting notes. We encourage you to share with us your own key take-aways from your participation or individual perspectives on these issues.

We thank all members who were able and willing to commit their time, perspectives and ideas to these valuable discernment discussions. We look forward to working with the whole congregation and with the next church year's newly elected leadership to further evaluate, refine, build on and advance the most promising of these opportunities to improve the life and ministry of our church.