

DTP Discovering the Possibilities Report for Mt. Gilead Trinity UMC

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Assessment of Ministry Areas

Worship

The standard measure of the effectiveness of worship is the Average Worship Attendance Missional Vital Sign. A review of this data for the past 10 years shows a steady decline resulting in the loss of half of the worship participants since 2004. (see attached graph for worship attendance). In 2014, the average worship attendance was reported as 214 and at the end of 2015 the average worship attendance was reported as 107.

In response to the Congregational Interviews question “Describe a worship experience that had an impact on your life and where you knew you were in the presence of God.” the workshop participants identified a variety of worship elements including:

- Communion, hymns and choir songs, music
- Christmas Eve services, luminaries
- Children’s musicals, programs
- Laying on of hands/prayer
- Baptisms
- Reaching out in worship to reclusive person and seeing the transformation
- Senior Pastor’s story and how they were called to Mt. Gilead church

The common theme in the responses seems to be that this congregation finds elements of worship that are engaging and interactive to be of greatest impact. It would serve this congregation well to be intentional in the design of worship to keep this as a primary consideration. I use the acronym GPS (God-centered, Participatory, and Sensory) in considering worship design. Leonard Sweet uses EPIC (Experiential, Participatory, Interactive, Communal – see the book “Soul Tsunami”).

The 8:30am worship service is an intimate setting with a variety of music. The 10:30am service is a traditional service in a traditional sanctuary setting. The traditional model seems to fit well with a section of the people described in the demographic information from the study areas. The general inclination is toward the ‘church they grew up with’. It may be valuable to focus on a more traditional approach done with excellence. This does not eliminate the interactive emphasis discussed previously. It just gets built into a more traditional format.

A different model of worship needs to be explored for a significant part of the study area. Below is the description of worship for this second group. This comes from the Missioninsite website as written by Tom Bandy.

“Worship is relatively informal and very upbeat. Even with a concurrent nursery and preschool program, infants and children may still be in worship. Be prepared for participants coming and going during the service. Praise music with a strong rhythm begins worship, and music tends to set the mood, frame the message, and connect everything together. The music director or band leader is more important than the average organist or choir director might be in a traditional church. Christian music may have a distinctly country or rock sound, and is usually led by electronic keyboard or band. There is often soft music in the background of prayers, communion, or baptism. Lyrics are uncomplicated and clear, and the words to and prayers, music, and the points of the sermon are visually displayed (projected or computer generated.) The content of worship may be coaching or transformational. Worship often follows a practical theme for the day (or a theme extending several weeks) on a practical subject of Christian living. The pastor often speaks for

30 minutes or so, without a written text, and with frequent references to scripture. The message may be supplemented by video clips or drama. Alternatively, worship may focus on changing lives (conversion, spiritual blessings, addiction intervention, etc.) The message is more motivational, and often includes a witness from the band or congregation, healing prayer or altar call.”

My recommendation is to commit to the current worship styles and do them with excellence. After significant relationships have been built within the community, then I would recommend to vision and begin a new worship service as described above. This should happen within the next 24-30 months.

Hospitality

The primary statistical indicator of the level of hospitality is the Professions of Faith. Hospitality in its ideal outcome is an expression of welcome, acceptance, and relational engagement that results in people being drawn to the love of God and accepting a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Since 2005, 67 persons have made a profession of faith through this congregation. This is a strong number of Professions of Faith and should be celebrated. It is important to note that in recent years the number of Professions of Faith has declined dramatically. It is also unclear if these numbers include Professions of Faith by youth coming through a Confirmation class. (see attached chart for Professions of Faith)

In response to the Congregational Interviews question “What attracted you to this community of faith?” there were several key trends:

- Methodist connection
- Family connections
- Size of the church

In the follow up question “How were you made to feel welcome and invited to connect?” the responses focused on:

- Relationships developed through ministries such as choir
- Invitations to join a group such as Sunday School
- Welcomed by the pastor or greeters

The general consensus of workshop participants is that the congregation is not effective when it comes to inviting others into a relationship with Jesus nor is it effective in even inviting others to come to worship. This is of course a major issue if this congregation is to turn around the decline in worship participation. Current research indicates that between 60-80% of those who come to worship for the first time in a congregation come because of the invitation of a friend. There are some ways that the church can make it easier for members to invite friends (e.g. FRAN Events, Season marketing, sermon series marketing). It is also important to provide training for the leadership/congregation in Relational Evangelism and being a Welcoming Congregation (reThink Church, UMCOM).

Going hand-in-hand with the focus on developing a stronger culture of hospitality is the excellence with which worship is conducted. As Dan Glover and Claudia Lavy put it (Deepening Your Effectiveness) “the acid test...is whether or not your average attendee will stake his or her personal reputation among unchurched friends on the quality of your worship experience and actually invite them.”

Studies indicate that a majority of participants seek to relate to people in ways that reflect the hospitality they have received from God. I call this the ‘niceness’ level of hospitality. While over half of the study participants said they were nice, only 1% indicated that they were intentionally building relationships with people outside the church in order to be Christ in their lives and invite people to discover God’s love for them. There could be a variety of factors at play here:

- People don't know how to build these kinds of relationships
- The church has not made people aware of the opportunities afforded by needs-oriented evangelism
- People are kept so busy with church activities that they don't have time to build these kinds of relationships
- The church has not built a culture of incarnational hospitality

Whatever the reason, it is apparent that this congregation needs to do a better job of building relationships beyond the church. If this does not change, the church simply cannot grow and people will simply not come to know Jesus through the witness of this congregation and the community will not be transformed by the ministry of this church.

The general approach of this congregation for inviting others to discover God's love is through the offering of "attractational" events (e.g. VBS, community dinner, food pantry, mom's connection, exercise class, family fall event etc.). While there is nothing wrong with these types of activities, they do not in general result in relationships through which people discover the love of God. The same is true for traditional marketing tools (e.g. newspaper advertisements, flyers distributed to neighborhoods).

The practices of this congregation for intentional hospitality (how guests are welcomed when they show up in church) needs to be stronger and should include:

- Welcome packets distributed by greeters
- Welcome letter from the pastor
- "Porch" visit by church members within 36 hours with gift
- Greeters at the doors

The 'traditional' greeting time during worship can be an awkward time by guests. A more positive way to welcome guests is an invitation to gather at a Hospitality Center for refreshments and building relationships. This would be a major step forward in expressing hospitality. Hospitality includes the care and concern expressed for members as well as welcoming guests. This congregation needs an active follow up plan in place for connecting with regular worshipers that have been absent for more than 3 weeks. Worship attendance is needs to be tracked weekly. Contact needs to be made with people that have missed 3 consecutive weeks and sometimes a visit made by the pastor. Long-term absences are followed up by a contact from congregational care team. It is important to note that hospitality and service often go 'hand-in-glove'. If we do service well, we build relationships that express the love of Jesus. If we do hospitality well, we often find ourselves making a difference in people's lives by meeting needs that would only become known through a relationship. This will be explored further in the Service section of this report.

Discipleship

The primary statistical indicator of the effectiveness of the discipleship ministries in the local church is the level of Participation in Discipleship Groups. While this is certainly not the only indicator of growing mature disciples, it is a commonly available statistic and provides a lens into this dimension of congregational life.

For this congregation, we have data for Sunday School attendance. In 2015, it was reported that there are 6 Sunday School classes, 6 other small groups and 3 short-term classes or groups. (See attached graph for Sunday School attendance)

It would be helpful for this congregation to have a clear description of what constitutes a discipleship group and an accurate tracking system for participation.

It would also be a step forward for there to be a clear expectation regarding participation in a discipleship group by worship participants. In general, there is a direct correlation between the focus on small groups and worship participation. Small groups are the place where relationships are formed

and strengthened; where people experience the pastoral care of being prayed for and cared about; where they are challenged to grow toward maturity in their faith; and where they get excited about making a difference in their world.

In response to the Congregational Interviews question “How has this congregation helped you grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ? What activities have been most helpful for you?” a couple of themes emerged:

- Sunday School classes
- Bible Study groups
- Serving in the community and on committees

It is clear that this congregation, in the arena of discipleship, has focused on the Christian support rather than life transformation. This is not unusual. Congregations traditionally substitute Christian Education for Christian Formation. They are very different things.

This was also the consensus of workshop participants as they responded to the statement: “Describe the process (not just activities or programs) for intentionally discipling persons in this congregation and leading them toward a more Christ-centered lifestyle.” Most table groups indicated there is not a clearly defined process for discipleship growth. There may be components of such a process but a clearly defined process does not exist.

A process for discipleship should help people grow toward maturity in the following areas.

- A Life of Worship refers to the participation in corporate worship, the development of personal worship practices, and development of a lifestyle of worship. This is an area of strength for this congregation.
- A Life of Hospitality refers to the level of acceptance and welcome extended to people by the congregation and the degree of intentionality with which the congregation engages people beyond the walls of the church. As noted previously, the congregation is strong in acceptance of others but there is a great need to develop stronger personal relationships outside the church.
- A Life Open to Jesus refers to the practice of spiritual disciplines and taking responsibility for one’s own spiritual growth. These scores are fairly well distributed.
- A Life Obeying Jesus refers to our commitment to Christ and the growing application of scripture to our lives. The end goal in this area of discipleship is that mature disciples help make other disciples. There is a very strong emphasis on “accepting a life with Jesus” – professing faith in Jesus or claiming Jesus as Savior. There is much less commitment when it comes to letting Jesus be Lord – be in charge of our lives. It is obvious that the idea of disciples having responsibility for making disciples is a foreign concept yet a great opportunity for growth.
- A Life of Service refers to people being engaged in making a difference in the community/world using their God-given gifts and graces. These scores are fairly well distributed.
- A Life of Generosity refers to the spiritual practices of faithful stewardship with what God has provided financially.

Service

A variety of outreach ministries were identified by workshop participants, including:

- Exercise class
- Mom’s Connection
- Food Pantry and End of the Month Meal
- “Heroes Unmasked” family fall event
- Offered the Catholic Church to worship in our building after theirs burned down.
- Habitat for Humanity
- Vacation Bible School

- Allowing outside groups to use building (Scouts, AA, TOPS and Step Aerobics)
- “The Awakening Morrow County” event at fairgrounds this past summer
- Monthly Community Dinner
- Interchurch Council activities
- Helping, along with other area churches, with needs in the community for food, gas, help with utility bills, ect.

This seems like a lot of projects for a congregation this size to try to support, especially since a couple of them appear to be longer term projects. In addition, many of the projects listed seem to fall into the category of what I call “missional gestures”. This is where we give support for something or someone to help those in need. A distinguishing factor for missional gestures is that they do not have people engaged in hands-on ministry and the related development of relationships with those being served.

I encourage all congregations to move beyond missional gestures (which do good and make us feel good) to finding at least one “ministry of engagement”. In a ministry of engagement, the congregation not only provides resources for those with specific needs but also has direct contact with those being served. This approach fosters the building of relationships with people so that they may come to know the love of Christ; engages our hands and feet rather than just our pocketbooks; and helps us grow in our understanding of the needs of those in our community so that we might address both mercy and justice issues.

Of the listing above, the greatest opportunities for developing a strong focus on ministries of engagement seem to be the community meals and food pantry. While there are other projects that could become ministries of engagement with some intentionality, I would caution that it might be unwise to stretch the limited people resources of this congregation too thin. It is better to become known for doing one ministry really well and making a significant impact on the community.

Generosity

The metric used as an indicator of generosity is the total giving of the congregation. According to the graph provided the giving and amount paid has been erratic over the last 7 years.(see attached grand Total Paid graph). In 2015, the church received \$215,364 for the annual budget. According to the attached chart this amount did not meet the needs of the expense budget.

In response to the Congregational Interviews questions about stewardship the following points were noted:

- Some stewardship emphasis is done through witnesses and messages
- Fund-raising is done by a variety of groups within the church
- Some groups provide their own financial support
- Occasional letters are sent to the congregation asking for additional financial support

There does not seem to be an annual stewardship emphasis. It might be worth considering some of the excellent resources available to support this type of annual emphasis.

Leadership Development and Selection

The selection of leaders, according to workshop participants, seems primarily focused on ‘getting volunteers’. Elected leaders are nominated through the traditional Lay Leadership Committee. It is suggested that some thought be given to strengthening this process. For example:

- Identifying standards/expectations for those serving in leadership (e.g. regular worship participation, small group participation, giving proportionately and moving toward a tithe, serving in ministry beyond the local church)
- Establishing a leadership covenant (e.g. behavioral covenant)

- An application process for consideration as a leader which is reviewed/used by the Lay Leadership Committee.
- Identification of elected leaders through their demonstrated leadership in other capacities
- A general leadership training process for all leaders
- Mentoring by existing leaders for those identified with high potential for leadership

Starting Point Recommendations

1. Reclaim the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ by focusing all of your ministry around discipleship. This includes aligning all ministry around discipleship. You can do this by using the “So that?” question to evaluate if ministries are discipleship focused. If ministries are not discipleship focused they should be reimagined and discontinued.
2. Through the development of a Creative Worship Team, seek to strengthen the excellence with which traditional worship is conducted. As well as look toward the future to establish a new worship service within the next 24-30 months. The new worship service should be designed to reach new people in the community and not split the current congregation. Decisions about the time and style of the new service should be made after a thorough study of the ministry area.
3. Create a Hospitality plan to welcome and follow-up with guests and long-time attenders. This should include a hospitality center where people can gather for refreshments, conversation, and relationship building. Offer this service before and after the worship experience and use it intentionally. This plan should also include a description of how Mt. Gilead UMC will offer hospitality to all people who use the church facility. -Book resource, “Clip-In” by Jim Ozier
4. Train, equip, support, and model (especially the leadership team) the practices of relational evangelism. Set an expectation that each member of congregational leadership will bring a guest to worship each month. A great technique for this is the FRAN plan (friends, relatives, associates and neighbors). This plan should also include studies and discussions about how current members can share their faith with neighbors. -Book Resource, “Get Their Name” By Doug Anderson and Bob Farr
5. Begin the development of an intentional process for discipleship with the creation of a strong focus on small groups. A helpful resource for this work is the real discipleship survey which can be accessed through the congregational vitality website. -Book Resource, “Membership to Discipleship” and “Shift” by Phil Maynard
6. Establish a strong stewardship emphasis in the congregation. The intent of this recommendation is to help people focus on stewardship throughout the year and to cultivate a consistent stream of giving for the life and work of the congregation.
7. Grow your community meal ministry by intentionally focusing on relationships and not just providing a meal. Make plans to establish or reimagine current ministries to focus on relational mission in the community within the next 24 months.
8. Develop a system of leadership development, training, and deployment based upon discipleship journey, gifts, and calling. This includes helping people understand their current leadership position as well as growing new leaders for the ministry of the congregation.