

First United Methodist Church of Valparaiso STRATEGIC STEERING TEAM RECOMMENDATIONS July 27, 2019

The following report reflects the major findings from the three Continue the Conversations meetings held in November 2018, January 2019 and March 2019. The gatherings were open to the entire church body. The objectives were to reignite the energy of our church and talk about our future. We wanted to assess our capacity for moving forward, growing and changing. This report and its recommendations are based on the input and ideas of the people in our church.

During the “Conversations”, it was almost universally acknowledged that if Valpo FUMC is to not only survive but thrive, we must evolve. But change is never easy and can prove fractious if the need is not understood, agreed upon, and carefully implemented. Therefore, the “why” of every action is very important to be communicated and understood.

These recommendations do not lay out all the details. It outlines intended progress and serves to guide the leaders of the congregation toward the formation of detailed plans of action and prioritizing next steps. It is offered to the church leadership and congregation as an aid to clarifying a vision, which will be nurtured and developed by the congregation and staff of the church.

Our church has a unique set of assets upon which we should build. We are a diverse church with passionate people who have varied directions and causes. There is a deep concern in our body for lost or hurt people, people who hate or are hurting others, and a concern for children.

Why do we do what we do (or need to do)?

We are called to grow spiritually and make disciples.

We want our church to thrive.

We must reflect our common core values: Worship – Grow – Serve – Invite

Following Jesus makes life better and because your life will be better, you’ll be better at life.

THREE AREAS OF MAJOR FOCUS

1. ENGAGE YOUTH, YOUNG ADULTS AND FAMILIES

A. Communicate differently and utilize multiple avenues.

Why? Our culture has shifted in many and diverse ways. Using communication methodologies from a generation ago means that we are failing to effectively communicate with a wide range of persons that simply connect differently. Using multiple channels and methods to communicate Valpo FUMC’s messages, events, and activities will enable us to engage ALL demographics. It is imperative that we utilize resources to effectively communicate using a wide variety of communication systems that now exist within our culture and particularly reach young adults and youth.

How?

- Conduct a communications analysis to determine if we are utilizing the best channels and leveraging them as much as possible. Important questions to ask: Do we update regularly? Are we sending/sharing in a timely manner? Are we leveraging our resources efficiently to reach our target audiences? How effective is our communications?
- Increase social media posts and communications. Limit the number of platforms used so we do it well.
- Review the website and its purpose. There are two audiences: newcomers/first time visitors and regular members/attendees. A website can be more than informational and easy to use.
- Maintain a centralized calendar of events and activities that is interactive.
- Reformat existing forms of communication where needed.

B. Offer more programs and events which meet the needs and wants of our younger core.

Why? “Growing Younger!” is a consistent refrain among our people. In order to carry the church forward, we must engage a younger population, inclusive of youth and families. A church that focuses its ministries on its current core constituency will be attractive to ONLY that constituency (the average age of our current congregation is over 60.)

How? Focus on “Small Groups” and “Service Opportunities”.

- Schedule activities that are responsive to the needs of this constituency.
- Offer studies and small groups off-site – not everything has to happen at the church.
- Saturday of Service was extremely popular – offer service opportunities such as this on a regular basis (perhaps quarterly, or every other month).
- Find ways to connect current youth programming to the adults in the congregation (is there a service opportunity available that these two groups could “partner” and work together?)
- Investigate best practices of churches that are attractive to youth and young adults
- Determine which practices might be most appropriate for a church in our situation, and then work to appropriately and expeditiously to implement.

2. CONNECT WITH THE COMMUNITY AROUND US

Remember, the people in our congregation define community and invest themselves in different ways: local, regional, national, international.

A. Develop strategic partnerships.

Why? Existing service projects and community relationships were repeatedly brought up as a way to connect with the community. People become acquainted and more comfortable with each other during service activities. Younger people particularly want to be engaged, and then they can see Christian faith in action.

How?

- Determine what our criteria is for partnerships. What areas of service are we passionate about and how can we be better partners to existing nonprofits/businesses that serve these areas (aside from money)?
- Engage with other church youth groups for a community-wide outreach.
- Publicly acknowledge our partnerships with existing programs, such as the Christian Food Pantry – we could be engaging more on their Facebook page as an example.

- Consider if there are businesses in town with whom we could partner. (Example: we partner with a local restaurant to help serve a meal at the men's shelter.)
- Determine if there are other nonprofit groups in our community with which we could build a strong relationship.

B. Involve ourselves in new initiatives.

Why? We should not assume that what we have been doing is what we ought to be doing. We need to open to God's callings and where we have the potential to change lives. We are still looking for an "epic win".

How?

- Determine metrics to ensure the work we are doing in our community is effective. These "measures" should be SMART (Specific Measurable Attainable Relevant and Timely) and public to the congregation, with regular updates on progress.
- Be constantly alert to the possibilities of service that would provide for meaningful missional engagement.
- Do not be afraid to fail. Some things may not work but might develop into truly significant ways in which we can provide Christian service.
- Create a "Pathway to Possibilities" that encourages people to both propose new initiatives AND gives license to implement such initiatives.
- Become more of a "resource and encouragement" organization, rather than a "gate-keeping" organization.

3. PROVIDE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH.

A. Offer more choices and specifically use short term activities, studies, and programs.

Why? Members at Town Hall meetings repeatedly asked for opportunities for spiritual growth – offering a variety (length, topic, groups, etc.) is a way to nurture and grow our flock. There was clearly a longing and desire for discipleship teaching and engagement that brings persons into a more intimate relationship with God, through Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Growth in Discipleship is not just a hope – it's an imperative for a church. There is no mistaking Jesus' intent when he tells the disciples to "Go into all the world, baptizing (welcoming into membership) them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 29:19-20.)

How?

- Offer short-term studies, such as 2-3 sessions or 6-8 weekly sessions.
- Keep some session offerings to 1 hour or less, when possible.
- Offer studies and small groups off-site – not everything has to happen at the church.
- Consider the possibilities of offering study sessions when childcare is already available (for example, a Sunday morning session).
- Our current structure, with many activities, programs and groups meeting mid-week, makes it difficult to provide for child-care. Consider scheduling these when child-care is already in place, it would facilitate the engagement of entire families – particularly young families.

B. Build and strengthen small groups in our church.

Why? Small groups are a way to build community and strong ties within the congregation. Small groups are essential to the sense of community that is of paramount importance in our disconnected world. While various forms of “digital connection” might seem to provide for a sense of community, they do not. If we are to reach youth and young adults, the need to provide REAL connections, relationships, and mentoring, is critical.

How?

- Identify the existing groups in the church now, whether Sunday School classes, Life-Groups, Resale Shop volunteers, regular meetings of existing groups such as United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, Choir, Youth, etc.
- Look for gaps or missing groups that might be developed.
- Identify “affinity” areas that are not simply age-based or family-based (e.g. “local service” and “arts” etc.)
- Identify key volunteers that are excited and passionate about these affinities to “lead” the group. Consider implementing a 1-3-year time limit with a succession plan for these small group leaders.
- Organize and create a sustainable small group culture model.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

In considering the range of issues referenced previously, the Strategic Planning Team concluded that there are two major first steps or actions that we can initiate to create the greatest impact. There are more suggestions and questions below. It is for the Church Council to determine how and when changes can be made.

RESTRUCTURE OUR LEADERSHIP

Why? An organization that thrives must build and nurture its leadership. Creation of new leaders and reconfiguration of structure allows opportunity for new ideas and approaches, assessment and reconsideration, evolution and growth. If the church wants to grow younger, the leadership, including staff, should reflect this. We should look how we want to be. At times our local church structure is overly burdensome and slow to react to needed change. We need a structure that meets the needs of our church.

How?

- Utilize our term limits guidelines for leadership positions and have a succession plan in place.
- Create opportunities for young or less experienced potential leaders to be mentored or learn their future role.
- Improve ways for members of the congregations to ask questions, be provided information on important organizational issues, and voice their concerns.
- Reconfigure the format of the Church Council meeting to incorporate some form of idea sharing/brainstorming and strategic decision making.
- Evaluate the effectiveness and explore options for our church leadership structure.

RESTRUCTURE SUNDAYS

Why? Sundays are the primary times that we can gather, worship, connect and communicate, we would adjust Sundays to focus on all three areas: growing younger, community connections, and spiritual growth. Families could worship together and whole family participation could be facilitated, since childcare is already in place on Sunday mornings. There could be less “disconnect” between folks in three different services with time between for coming together in the variety of ways indicated above.

How?

- Reduce the number of Sunday morning worship times from three to two. One could be early (beginning somewhere between 8:30 and 9:00) and the other “late” (beginning somewhere between 10:45 and 11:15). Format to be determined by the worship staff.
- Introduce a minimum one hour “study, connection, and fellowship” period between the two services. During this time, Sunday School classes, small groups, Bible Studies, special committees and/or task forces, service project reports/recruitment, and even “connectional” ministries could meet.
- A church wide breakfast/brunch could be provided during this period periodically.

FINAL THOUGHTS & NEXT STEPS

We cannot be all things to all people, so we need to define what we do well and do it with excellence. There needs to be an action plan in place that drives, steers, and shapes our direction. We need a “map” to get from where we are to where we need to be. Engaging people means successfully communicating the “why,” then move to “how” and “what”.

We suggest expanding the Strategic Planning Team, incorporating the current team and adding another half dozen people to develop further specific functions, monitor our processes, and evaluate our progress.

Strategic Steering Team: Bob Coolman, Matt Hoyert, Keith Kirkpatrick, Pastor Kevin, Elisha Porterfield & Leeann Wright.