



**Journey Toward
Vitality:
*Equipping
Missional
Congregations***

HCI Consult Report

Fairmont United Methodist Church

April 2, 2017

Healthy Church Initiative Report

Minnesota Conference of the United Methodist Church

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The Minnesota Conference HCI Team would like to thank Pastor Tony Fink and the leadership of Fairmont United Methodist Community for your hospitality this weekend and for the privilege of teaming with you. Our prayer is that God will use this process to focus and maximize the potential of your congregation for fruitfulness for Christ.

The Healthy Church Initiative has named five key factors to a congregation's effectiveness and vitality. The consultation team used these as a lens to assess what they heard, and to make their recommendations. These factors are:

- **Purpose:** a clear sense of why this church exists, what they want to accomplish, a genuine outward focus and grounded in a clear set of shared values.
- **Structure:** staff accountable and empowered to fulfill their responsibilities in the context of healthy relationships with lay leadership, a future oriented church board focused on the ends not the means of ministry.
- **Connectedness:** a high level of community in which people feel connected and newcomers can easily find their way in, excellent facilities that work well to facilitate ministry.
- **Current:** music that, regardless of style, is current in its execution, relevant biblical preaching, clear understanding of the community and its needs.
- **Passion:** a genuine excitement about the church and strong desire to invite others, sense of call to serve the community.

We reviewed the congregational self-study, the report of the mystery guest visitors, and the results of the Natural Church Development inventory. We conducted individual interviews with the pastor, paid staff and key leaders. We held two focus groups: one was a cross section of the congregation, and another was the church council members. We also received input during a congregational gathering in which about 40 people attended. We were present to observe Sunday morning worship and we engaged the leaders in a feedback session about our observations and recommendations before finalizing them in this report.



GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Fairmont United Methodist Church is in its 150th year. It is located in the heart of the downtown community. Its members come from not only Fairmont proper but also the surrounding smaller communities as the United Methodist Churches in those towns have closed making this a regional church. The membership is aging, with over 40% of the congregation being 65 and older, and its approach to ministry is traditional. They have a memory of being a much larger congregation in attendance, and their building is of the size that can accommodate the needs of a large, growing congregation. The other prevailing memory is of a previous congregational split when a pastor left the denomination with several members following him and ultimately this gave birth to the Evangelical Covenant Church. That led to a generation of folks who seem to be missing from this congregation, and even though it has been close to 40 years since those events, the imprint remains in the congregation making it risk averse regarding significant change efforts. At the same time, there are new people finding a place of welcome in this congregation and a desire on the part of many leaders to write a new chapter.

Fairmont United Methodist Community embodies numerous resources and strengths ideally suited for next-level transformational ministry, as well as some concerns that need to be addressed in order for the church to move forward.

STRENGTHS

1. WELCOME AND ACCEPTANCE

We heard from new people how welcomed they felt into the congregation. The Mystery Guests universally echoed that sentiment. As one said: *The atmosphere was happy. The hospitality of the people was great! The vibe of all the people were that they were overwhelmed with care and love. I hope all guests feel as comfortable as I did there.* The congregation is making intentional efforts to create hospitality and welcome for those who because of their special needs and circumstances have not always found acceptance in church.



2. HEART OF/FOR THE COMMUNITY

The congregation's location puts it right in the heart of a mission field to reach the least, the lost and left out. It has a great space in great shape for all kinds of ministries. Pastor Tony Fink's 10 year tenure and community engagement makes him an asset in being a church for the community and, of course, the carillon bells ring out this church's presence in the center of the city.

3. WEDNESDAY MINISTRIES

The congregation is rightly proud of the community outreach that happens through CLICK and the Wednesday evening dinner. Adding Mentors to Confirmation has seemed to strengthen that key spiritual formation of young people. Members and mystery guests alike praised the choirs that practice on Wednesdays and perform in Sunday worship.

4. INJECTION OF NEW ENERGY AND TALENT

The addition of Dale and Jenny to the staff, as well as some new leaders who have come from closed regional churches, are bringing some new energy, perspectives and gifts, which will be helpful as the congregation moves forward.

5. GIVING PEOPLE

We heard stories of how the congregation steps up when there is a tangible need or project. ASP mission trip, replacing the roof, and bringing food to a family in need were just some of the examples that were shared with us.



CONCERNS

1. ONE COHESIVE IDENTITY

When you view the church building from the outside, it looks like two very different buildings that are attached but not unified. In many ways, that is what the congregation feels like to us. We heard about two different congregations: the old guard who are resistant to change and the newer ones who were ready to do something different. We read the Mystery Guests overwhelming positive comments of their experience and yet the congregation scored themselves below average in the Natural Church Development survey. We applaud the past visioning and strategic planning the congregation has done, but we did not get a strong sense that the vision is what is leading the congregation forward. We heard more stories about the past than hearing about the positive momentum arising from how God is leading this church into the future.

2. TRENDS OF AGING AND DECLINE

The membership records state that is a congregation of over 600 members, but average worship attendance is less than 170 in a sanctuary that can seat 300. There are only 42 children 6th grade and under. There are more funerals than baptisms each year. While this congregation is still of substantial size, the age of the membership makes it challenging to reach younger generations. The slow decline is beginning to affect the congregation's capacity to sustain the financial commitments for their current staff, ministries and building. The ability to effect a turnaround is in question simply because of the energy and physical limitations of an older congregation.

3. UNDERCURRENT OF CONFLICT

Consistently we heard about a small pocket of people, who were unhappy with the current pastor. We did not hear from them directly, only that they existed, and it never became clear, what was at the heart of the issue. We also heard about behavior in the congregation where people did not treat each other well when people were trying new things or making the simplest of change. When asked how open do people perceive the congregation as a



whole is open to change, the scores were in the range of 3 to 5 with 1 being low and 10 high. There is quite a bit of power given to this story of unhappy people and resistant people to change. Members of the consultation team have heard similar stories from previous pastors about the challenges they experienced of critical and negative attitudes that affected their ministry. This leads us to believe there are some long-term patterns in this congregation that must be broken as this constant undercurrent eats away at the health and vitality of a congregation. We wonder if the leadership has the tools and courage they will need to empower the positive voices, hold people accountable to healthy communication practices, and to stay focused on mission above personal preference.

4. INSPIRING WORSHIP/PASSIONATE SPIRITUALITY

These were the minimum factors on the NCD score, and they were significantly below 35. The heartbeat of a congregation is worship. Our passionate spirituality is the spark that engages new people and motivates us to go and tell others about Jesus. The sense we received from people is that worship has become predictable and not as transformative as it could be. What we observed were some strong components of worship but the cohesive flow that creates a sense of excitement and movement and a strong experience of the Holy Spirit being present was lacking.

5. RIGHT-SIZED AND RIGHT-FOCUSED

The congregation is still functioning in structure and staffing as if it were a thousand member congregation. Some examples include:

- Given the limited number of children and youth, we do not perceive that two staff people focused on that area makes the most sense when there are other areas that could use attention;
- There is no longer critical mass for two strong worship services on Sunday morning; and
- The organizational structure is too complex and requires too many leaders and workers given the capacity of the congregation.



STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ADOPT AND LIVE INTO A DEEPER VISION OF “RESOUNDING GOD’S GRACE: WE WILL BE KNOWN AS A PEOPLE AND PLACE OF UNMISTAKABLE GRACE IN THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY.”

It is time to let the past be the past. This is a day of new beginnings. Decide who you want to be and be that! In order for this congregation to thrive, it is critical you have a strong sense of identity: who we will be and what we will do. And given the capacity of the congregation, simplifying and focusing your energy so you can do well what is most important will be essential for developing momentum. In order to grow, and reach new people, you will need a season of strengthening the heart of this congregation.

- Engage in a process of developing core values and a behavioral covenant of who we promise to be to one another that undergirds being a people and place of unmistakable grace. Teach the congregation these values and have a formal service of commitment to the behavioral covenant. Use the behavioral covenant at all gatherings as reaffirmation and reminder of your commitment to be a people of unmistakable grace. *Behavioral Covenants in the Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences* by Gil Rendle is a helpful resource. A great example of a covenant that includes values and membership expectations can be found on p.111 of *Flood Gates: Holy Momentum for a Fearless Church* by Sue Nilson Kibbey.
- Discover the biblical story that provides the theological context for your vision of “resounding God’s grace” and create a new story that you tell consistently and often about who we are and who we will be.
- Use the 150th anniversary as a launch pad into a new day! Be creative and have fun. Find some pieces of the history of this congregation that will help you connect who you have been to where God is leading into the future.
- As a symbol of this new day, re-paint and re-carpet the entire church so it is one color scheme throughout the building. Choose colors that communicate warmth, grace and welcome. Remove everything from the walls. Clear the clutter and the past. Create a fresh, clean slate. Thoughtfully and intentionally, once you have removed everything, have applied fresh paint and flooring, consider what you will add to the walls. Less is



more, and everything tells a story. Use the lens of how does this create a space of grace and is current and contemporary. Your stained glass windows in the sanctuary offer a great color palette to build from. Embrace Church on 57th Street in Sioux Falls or the St. Croix campus in Lakeland, MN are strong examples of traditional buildings that have a fresh, unified look.

2. CREATE RADICALLY WELCOMING SUNDAY MORNING EXPERIENCE

It is time for a total refresh of the Sunday morning experience in order to build the cohesiveness of the congregation as well as helping people experience fresh and new the amazing grace of God.

- Move to a new Sunday morning schedule of one worship service at 9am. Sunday school, small groups, community forums would start at 10:10 after people have a chance to greet one another and grab a cup of coffee. Coffee would be on all morning and move it all to one place, upstairs in the gathering space. You have such a large space, you need to intentionally create energy by keeping people together. Rename the narthex into something more contemporary like the Connection Café or Grace Grounds because new people have no idea what a narthex is! Also find a new name for children's ministry other than Sunday school. School is not usually an appealing idea for kids especially on a Sunday morning.
- With a coach, redesign the Sunday morning worship to be EPIC: Experiential, Participative, Image-Rich and Connective. As a starting place, attend the Breakthrough Worship Workshop with Dr. Marcia McFee on Saturday, October 7th at Hamline church. This workshop's focus is how traditional worship can become more alive through music, visuals, congregational engagement, flow and design to bring the ancient liturgy alive for today.
- Create flexibility in the sanctuary by removing the pews from the sanctuary and putting in pew chairs. This will create more space as the seating is currently very cramped and uncomfortable. Engage a designer to create a new plan for the chancel area. You have a large space with a choir loft that is used on a limited basis.



- Improve the signage for new people by having sandwich board signs at the parking lots and doors so new people know where to park and enter and how to get to the sanctuary. Order some large moveable canvas signs that can be located at the doors with your logo and directing people to key areas. Visit The Well in Rosemount/Apple Valley for great examples.

3. RELATING WITH LOVE AND GRACE THROUGH COMMUNITY (SMALL) GROUPS

The congregation needs to develop deeper relationships with one another as well as grow people spiritually. Small groups need to be seen not as a program but how we do life with one another. This was the genius of the Methodist movement and needs to be reclaimed for a new day.

- Use the concepts in Nelson Searcy's book *Activate!* to redesign your entire adult spiritual formation. Every group in the church needs to understand themselves as a small/community group, from the choir to the UMW and everything in between. Hilltop in Mankato is a great resource congregation on how to do this. In order to multiply energy, we encourage small groups to meet on either Sunday morning or Wednesday night if they meet in the church, or to meet in someone's home or in a public place if at other times. These groups would re-form every quarter so new people always have a chance to join in. Congregational care, spiritual formation, community building and leadership development need to be built into the design of these groups.
- Plan quarterly all church fun/fellowship events. This can be as simple as an after worship potluck or a summer party. Build in get to know you and community building activities where people can develop new relationships.
- At every team gathering, small group, service outing, ensure that there is an opportunity to connect with each other and connect to God. A simple way to do that is to give people a question to answer that allows them to tell a piece of their story such as *What has God been teaching you this week that has stretched or grown you spiritually?*
- Once during the year, do an all congregation spiritual focus where the Sunday worship and small/community groups are all focused on the same thing. John Ortberg's *If You Want to Walk On Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat* is an example.



4. REACH OUT TO THE COMMUNITY BY LEVERAGING WEDNESDAY NIGHT

CLICK and the Wednesday Evening Dinner are effective means of connecting to the community. We encourage you to keep doing this and build on them.

- Add classes/small groups following the Wednesday evening meal that particularly would be of interest to the community. Think about the needs of the parents of the kids who come to CLICK or the students who attend Presentation College down the street. It could be a Financial Peace University class, or a knitting class, or a parenting workshop. The ideas are many. Just make sure it is something that would be of interest to those outside/new to the church.
- Treat Wednesday night just like Sunday morning in terms of hospitality. Have greeters at the doors. Put on the coffee and fruit juice. Find a way to get guests names with some sort of connection card, send a follow up letter, and invite back. Build relationships by sitting at different tables each week. Have a staffed nursery.
- Focus your giving efforts. Many congregations are going to a “One Thing” approach. They have one mission project focus a month, and that is the congregation’s One Thing. So for example, if collecting school supplies for Operation Classroom is the One Thing, make that for the month of September, and do only that. Pack the bags of supplies and pray over them at the Wednesday Evening Dinner on the last Wednesday of the month so that new people see and participate in how this congregation is meeting the real needs of people.
- Get some t-shirts that say something like “the grace brigade” and wear them whenever you are doing service out in the community. The t-shirts help the community know who you are and they can be a conversation starter. Pick one day a year that you do something to blanket the community in grace whether it is One Day of Service, or One Day of Kindness.
- Continue to open your church building to the community. Make it a “grace space” for all sort of groups.



5. REALIGN AND REDIRECT RESOURCES

We are asking the church to be a simple church. The best energy and resources are directed towards the Sunday morning experience, the Wednesday evening community outreach, and engaging people into life-giving small/community groups. In order to do that, we believe the church needs to re-organize its committee and leadership structure around the three core processes of:

- Radically Welcoming to God and Guests: Sunday worship, hospitality, follow up
- Reaching Out to Community in Love: Wednesday evening dinner, servant evangelism, ministries of compassion and justice
- Relating with Love and Grace: small/community groups for discipleship of all ages and congregational care
- If it is a new day, and we are becoming a new church, then it is time to take a blank piece of paper and consider how we organize ourselves to most effectively be this new church. A first step would be for the church council/HCI team to read together *Just Say Yes! Unleashing People for Ministry and Effective Staffing for a Vital Congregation* to understand the culture shift from committees to ministry.
- Your coach will work with you to design a new organization structure. Our recommendation for this structure would include:
 - Transforming the Church Council into a Leadership Team. The leadership team would be made up 9 persons, 4 of whom are ministry/process team leaders (see next bullet) and 5 are chosen as strategic/spiritual leaders. The leadership team spends the majority of their time on the key tasks for listening for God's direction; evaluating the fruits of ministry; developing new leaders; and growing themselves as spiritual leaders. The leadership team would engage in an annual retreat for spiritual formation, leadership development particularly around leading change, setting SMART Goals and creating/renewing a leadership covenant.
 - Combine the SPRC, Trustees, and Finance Committee into one Resource Team. This team of nine persons would have the charge of ensuring that we are resourcing the work of the process teams. The Resource Team chair would be on the Leadership Team.
 - As much as possible, eliminate all other committees and create three new process teams that align towards your mission and focus of Radically



Welcoming, Relating with Love and Grace, and Reaching Out to Community.

The three chairs of these teams would also be on the Leadership Team.

- Short-term task groups and other teams can certainly be formed as needed. For example, there may be a worship design team, or the Wednesday Evening meal team. They have a specific focus to implement in a particular area. People join the team because the gifts and passions in that area and don't have to be formally elected by the church. Those teams come and go as long as there is a need and that ministry exists.
- Designate staff champions for each of the three process areas. Re-write staff job descriptions to focus on equipping and developing leaders and achieving clear outcomes rather than being responsible for the doing of ministry. Develop a staff covenant as a staff that is consistent with the congregational covenant. The lead pastor is supervisor of the staff with full authority to hold staff accountable to goals and the covenant.

CONCLUSION

The recommendations we are making are phase one of a longer process. Down the road, we believe the congregation will need to add another worship service and outreach to reach a younger generation/new constituency. By moving to one worship service, space is created for the birth of something completely new. However, that must wait for a season, as there is foundational work that must be done first. Therefore, for now, we are asking the congregation to step back, to focus more, so that in the future, they can expand again.

What struck us the most is how the members of this congregation said what they believe and want people to know about God is that God is loving, accepting, forgiving and welcoming, and that they seek to be a community that embodies that as they welcome new people. Yet, what we heard congregants also say is they do not always extend that grace to each other.

Therefore, there is work to do here if this church is going to be the kind of church that actually resounds God's grace. That is the work of phase one. As the members and participants strengthen the spiritual heart and unity of this congregation, and live more deeply into their calling to be a church in the heart of the community, we are confident that they will discover a renewed sense of how God is showing up in their lives, and using them to be agents of God's grace. Then this congregation will indeed be ready for phase two: stepping out in radically new ways to reach the next generation.



IMMEDIATE STEPS

1. TOWN HALL MEETINGS

The congregation will hold two town hall meetings on Sunday, April 9th at 9:15am and Wednesday, April 19th at 6pm.

2. CONGREGATIONAL VOTE

The congregation will vote on this report, to either accept or reject it, at an official church conference to be held on Sunday, May 7th at 9:15am and led by the District Superintendent. As per the Book of Discipline, all full members who are present may vote. Approval by 70% of those present and voting is required to move to the next step.

3. COACHING

Presuming a positive vote, our coach will lead an implementation session to formulate this report into a strategic plan for the next 12 months. A Covenanting and Re-Commissioning Sunday to launch our implementation will be Sunday, June 25, 2017.