

Mission Study: Your Voice, God's Plan

April 12, 2018

Introduction

Following the early-2017 departure of Rev. Nate Phillips to accept another call, the Session of Red Clay Creek Presbyterian Church began a pastoral search process by approving this motion on June 20, 2017:

“Red Clay Creek Presbyterian Church will develop a Mission Study describing Red Clay and our aspirations using the guidance of the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery. The study will engage the Congregation through focus groups and other opportunities to gain broad congregational input. The Mission Study will review the programs of Red Clay’s ministry and identify staffing priorities in light of our financial capacity. A Mission Study Design Team will target completion of the study by the end of 2017 with regular progress reviews with the Session. The resulting Mission Study will be used to support the process of identifying and calling future Pastoral Staff. Session calls and approves the following Congregation Members to form the Mission Study Design Team: Mike Eppehimer, Amy Cozine, Karen Tronto, Dave Aument, Fred Crowley, Mim Krout, and Mike Hawley.”

The Mission Study Design Team began meeting in July, 2017 and developed a plan to accomplish its task as described in the above motion, under the guidance of Rev. Jenny Warren – Presbytery Committee on Ministry liaison. The basis of the team’s charge fundamentally changed following the resignation of Rev. Patrick Vaughn in November, 2017. A mission study, instead of serving as the ground work for the search for an associate pastor in 2018, will be needed to serve as the foundation for a senior pastor search in 2019. Rev. Warren recommended that time be allowed for the Session to work with an Interim Pastor, when in place, to make further progress on pastoral transition. After an appropriate time, it is expected that the Session would charter another mission study that reflects where Red Clay Church is at that point. Therefore, the Mission Study Design Team presents this report to Session to document the team’s work.

Process Employed

The Mission Study Design Team followed New Castle Presbytery’s “Mission Study Design Guide – Data Gathering for Ministry,” updated August, 2017. The team reviewed previous mission study and visioning reports, and reviewed data regarding giving, participation and demographics at Red Clay. The team designed a process to engage as much of the congregation as possible to gain input. This was accomplished by leading focus groups and by use of a consultant’s on-line survey. The discussion questions used in the focus groups are shown below. Discussions were held with 32 groups and individuals.

1. How long have you been at RCCPC?
2. How would you describe your current involvement at RCCPC?
3. Describe a time when you thought RCCPC was thriving as a congregation – listening to God’s plan, connecting with one another and/or fulfilling your personal spiritual needs. What were some of the main attributes of the church during that time?
4. Describe a time when you through RCCPC was going through a period of challenge – unclear about God’s plan, not connected to one another and/or not fulfilling your personal spiritual needs. What were some of the main attributes of the church during that time?
5. What are some of the specific ministries or programs that you feel God is calling RCCPC to pursue as a congregation in the next five years?
6. What are some of the specific ministries or programs that you feel God is calling you personally to be involved in in the next five years?
7. As we anticipate a search for another pastor, what are the ideal qualities that this new pastor would bring to our congregation?
8. What other guidance or advice do you have as we complete this Mission Study?

The on-line survey - HolyCow! Consulting’s Congregational Assessment Tool (CAT) - consisted of 97 questions. 255 people participated in this assessment. “Vital Signs”, the main report from Holy Cow! dated 11/1/17, has been filed with the church office. The focus groups and the on-line assessment were completed

by the end of October, 2017. Findings were shared first with Rev. Vaughn and then with the Session in November, and with the congregation in two different feedback and discussion opportunities in January, 2018.

Findings

There is much to celebrate, and build upon, at Red Clay. There was wide participation in the focus groups and on-line assessment by members of different ages and tenures at Red Clay. The team heard consistent expressions of love for the church and for one another. Numerous examples were shared of how God has worked in the lives of the congregation. There is a strong sense of when Red Clay was at its best several years ago – and a desire to be at that best again.

The team heard serious concerns among many about the direction of the church. These include:

- Disappointment about the departure of the pastors. A sense of “choosing sides” between the co-pastors.
- The church let down its youth over the previous few years. Lack of consistency and follow-through.
- Lack of energy and direction for the church.
- Sense of community was replaced with cliques. Congregation is not as welcoming and inclusive as it thinks it is. Some members of the older generation have been forgotten or ignored.
- Concerns about church leadership. Session is not actively leading and has been controlled by the pastor(s). The membership has been overly dependent upon the pastor(s) over the last 4-6 years.
- Concerns about pastoral leadership, preaching and engagement.
- Concerns over inadequate support of volunteers (leading to burn-out), insufficient recruiting of new participants and lack of succession planning.

The negative messages from the discussions groups were strongly reinforced by the on-line assessment feedback:

- Overall feedback from the survey was very disturbing. Even though the Mission Study team knew there were issues, the results were worse than anticipated.
- There is a strong sense of dissatisfaction present across all demographics of the congregation.
- Many elements of our survey results were at the bottom percentile compared to all other surveyed churches. Only two churches in the previous few years have had six urgent drivers that needed immediate attention. Holy Cow! has been doing surveys for the past 25 years. They have over 1500 congregations in their benchmark data, with many of those churches in transition.

Going forward, there were consistent themes about where Red Clay should prioritize its focus:

1. Make necessary changes to attract families with children and youth to church.
2. Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and incorporate them into the life of the church.
3. Provide more opportunities for Christian education and spiritual formation at every age and stage of life.

Other key priorities included:

- Create more opportunities to form meaningful relationships
- Work to renew and revitalize the community around the church by building coalitions with partners that share this vision and commitment.
- Develop ministries that work towards healing those broken by life circumstances.

- Develop the spiritual generosity of the people to financially support the ministry of the church.
- Strengthen the process by which members are called and equipped for ministry and leadership.

Recommendations

1. As the church works to strengthen its ministry, it should consider ways to maintain what is special about Red Clay:
 - Challenging and relevant preaching
 - Quality music
 - Pastoral care, Deacon care, Stephen Ministry, Wellness
 - Missional emphasis
 - Relationships - small groups, intergenerational activities, serving together
 - Attractive and well-kept facilities
 - Hospitality and welcoming
 - Strong sense of engagement, taking part.
2. Improve leadership by the Session. Consider these steps as part of this change process:
 - Restructure the Session to be accountable for leading the church to achieve its vision and accomplish its mission.
 - Provide training for the Session to lead the church in its programs and ministries, actively engaging and supporting congregation members as much as possible by identifying and equipping member's unique gifts in response to God's call.
 - Adopt a process, led by the Session, of periodically re-assessing the membership's experience of the effectiveness of the church's ministries and programs.
3. Make necessary changes to attract families with children and youth to the church. Consider these steps as part of this improvement process:
 - Provide preaching and worship experiences that are relevant and attractive to young families – parents as well as children and youth.
 - Provide programs, music and activities especially geared toward young families, such as spiritual, social, educational, and missional.
 - Develop a recruiting strategy and talent pipeline of seminary interns to consistently engage, relate to and inspire youth.
 - Implement (and support with appropriate staff) a consistent method of communication with families and youth in the church and surrounding community that best leverages technologies and the way youth and young families communicate.
4. Provide more opportunities for Christian education and spiritual formation at every age and stage of life. Consider these steps as part of this improvement process:
 - Provide professional leadership of children and youth programs, focused on recruiting, training and nurturing lay leadership teams to develop and implement sustainable Christian Education programs.
 - Utilize low-risk approaches such as (Christian) Movie Night.
 - Engage older members in mentoring and nurturing younger members (adults, youth and children).
 - Build on the experience of Nurture Groups – resume or redirect this small group ministry.
5. Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and incorporate them into the life of the church. Consider these steps as part of this improvement process:
 - Increase members' skill, courage and expectation to welcome visitors and to invite people to come to church services or activities.

- Develop closer ties with community organizations, especially those that use our facilities (e.g. Scouts, Day Care, AA). Identify ways Red Clay can serve the needs of their members. Emphasize service, de-emphasize recruiting.
 - Increase Red Clay's visibility to the community, through events such as the 5K, signs outside the church, community breakfasts, hosting events, etc.
6. Provide staffing to adequately support our congregational needs and ministries. Consider these steps as part of this improvement process:
- Leverage available staffing budget through more extensive engagement of lay volunteers. Support volunteers with staff through training, planning, communication tools, documentation of programs and processes, recruiting and succession.
 - In addition to the senior pastor position, provide professional staff in Christian education and pastoral care, managing budgetary constraints by use of part-time positions.
 - Improve the effectiveness of staff evaluations.

Closing

The team heard great appreciation from the congregation for the amount and openness of communication that the team exhibited. The team thanks the congregation for the high level of engagement and caring that they demonstrated. The team thanks Rev. Warren for her purposeful and caring guidance. In the carrying out of this study, several painful issues were brought to light that had been present at Red Clay, some for a number of years. Facing these issues and the resignation of Rev. Vaughn was very difficult for the congregation, and especially hard on the Mission Study Design Team. Although the team grieves the pain that was experienced, it praises God for the presence of his spirit felt throughout the process.