



NEW BEGINNINGS - COUNCIL / CONGREGATION REPORT

“New Beginnings” is a process which requires a representative number of the congregation to meet in small groups to review and discuss the congregation’s strengths and weaknesses, the “Passion” for its work, what it is “Best At”, and the “Resources” available to support its “Mission”. Information was provided listing the various uses of facilities, demographic data of the “community” surrounding the church campus, and the activities in which our church is presently involved. The most revealing data was the presentation of numbers from our church records covering a 10 year history. Total membership and average worship attendance and “giving” in support of the church budget have remained basically unchanged over this period. Worse, our donations for outreach, both local and world communities, suggested at 10% by the UCC, is less than 3%. Using the data provided, the purpose of these first discussion sessions was not the development of ideas or solutions to issues, rather, discerning where we are as a church community leading to a recommendation of the best possible direction the church should follow. Once established, our leadership and members may jointly enter into the further study and definition of actions that will yield wise and realistic decisions about the future.

Nine small groups met for around two hours once a week for six weeks. Seventy eight of our congregation, both members and friends, joined in the discussions totaling approximately 936 possible hours with an attendance of 77%, quite good based on summer time schedules and a holiday. The report from each of our Facilitators indicates most of those choosing to attend the small group meetings were pleased the church is going through this process, that their voices are being heard, and were optimistic and excited about the potential for our future. Participants also enjoyed the chance to become better acquainted with people they did not know well or at all before. Several individuals commented that this has been their best small group church experience.

The Assessment Report pointed out the disturbing facts that our church and others, service clubs and non-profit organizations are functioning within a quickly changing world with an absence of or slow response to that change. Operating the same way today that was memorable for many of us during the 50’s and 60’s is not sustainable today. This is proven as we see membership, attendance and giving, relatively unchanged over the past ten years – no growth. We are a mostly white congregation in an area that is much more diverse in ethnicity. We have little in common with those who live near the Big Red Church. We do not know them or their needs and they do not know us and what we may have to offer them.

With this snapshot of our present situation, our groups began to more closely analyze why First Congregational Church of Fresno is here and how we function as a church. The initial step was to list the activities we perform well and our passion in what we do.

Strengths

- All believe that Music is a strong mission of our church. Through the attraction of the great organ and acoustically live sanctuary, we are able to reach out to the wider community.
- Worship is a spiritual experience, intellectual in content, and our congregation welcoming and caring for those who visit.



NEW BEGINNINGS - COUNCIL / CONGREGATION REPORT

- We are a church believing in social justice and an openness to the thoughts and opinions of others. Ours was one of the first congregations to commit to and accept the movement to be an Open & Affirming Church.
- As “God is Still Speaking” His Word provides the opportunity in worship and educational study groups for an open forum without compulsion, through self-taught, individual interpretation, emphasized by our ministerial staff and the blended congregation.
- Our facilities, while needing a face lift and the upgrade of lighting and basic operational equipment, provide a safe meeting place for a variety of groups and still has the capacity to accommodate more, if managed properly.
- A few of our members have initiated various youth related programs such as Kid-munity, winter and summer programs for autistic youth, and special events such as last year’s Halloween night party with over 200 youth and parents in attendance, many from our neighborhood, not the church. Our congregation has been supportive in these events.
- We have a wealth of Resources within our congregation, individuals with the ability to initiate, plan and conduct successful events like Broadway on Van Ness and Gospel on Van Ness, likely with many on the periphery who have special talents that could be shared.
- Several of our members actively support specific organizations serving the homeless and the hungry.

Weaknesses

- The most disturbing issue reported by our groups was the absence of young couples and youth. Without younger members to replace the aging congregation, our future will follow a predictable path.
- Many of the activities of our church are focused more on the membership with little attention given to those who surround our church. Isn’t this our true mission, to spread the “Good News”?
- We do not communicate well within our membership nor the community as a whole. Our use and understanding of the effectiveness of social media is well behind that of other groups.
- We do not adequately tell our story in promoting “who” we are as Congregationalists, “why” we are here, “what” we believe and “how” we can serve the needs of those searching for “something” to fill the void in their lives.
- Each of the groups touched on the lack of training, both for our lay leadership and the congregation in how to extend a warm welcome to visitors and in relating and speaking with strangers. We must learn how to connect with our local neighborhood, to speak and listen, in order to discover the needs and provide assistance.
- A frequent topic in the presentation of New Beginnings, “mission” and “evangelism”, created uneasy feelings in the small group discussions, almost to the point of the avoidance of their use.



NEW BEGINNINGS - COUNCIL / CONGREGATION REPORT

The Road Ahead

Congregations have four basic choices for the future:

1. Do Nothing: This option would send an important message to the congregation and to potential ministerial candidates as to the openness to change by the congregation.
2. Mission Redefinition: This option requires significant energy, ingenuity, creativity and spirituality to envision and act upon future mission opportunities.
3. Redevelopment: This would involve a hybrid that might include relocation, parallel start with a new demographic profile, a restart or adoption.
4. Close: Churches who choose this option realize they don't have the energy or resources to keep going and choose to conserve rather than continue to spend down the available assets that could be better utilized by others.

The New Beginning Decision: *MISSION REDEFINITION*****

Reasons for the decision:

People in our church have a great deal of passion for what we do as we provide opportunities for non-traditional Christian activities that are uniquely well-suited to the needs of our community. We have amazing facilities that could be better managed and promoted to reach their full potential. Many people on the periphery have unique talents, perspectives, and enthusiasm, if we just resolve to integrate them into a shared service to the community. It is from this younger group that we expect a rise in the passion and energy to drive our New Beginnings opportunities. History has shown that our congregation can unite to perform demanding undertakings, so, it is time to take that leap of faith toward the path of discernment of the new Mission that God would have us follow. It is important for the search committees, both interim minister and our future pastor, to be able to define our congregation and the direction we are heading to ensure these individuals have the training, the aptitude and the desire to support future change within our congregation.

The Recommendation to the Congregation:

Since New Beginnings is a multi-year process, it is recommended that a collective conversation about "why" we are a church continue in the small group setting. The meeting agenda should follow the same pattern as our first six group meetings with identical topics of discussion for each group. We need to address our church mission statement, not for reasons of making changes in the statement, but to place into action what we have already stated. We at First Congregational Church of Fresno are uniquely well-positioned to help each other, our community, and the wider world, confront those important issues in a satisfying and meaningful way.

The recommendation further suggests the formation of a committee to be reportable to or assigned as a responsibility of Stewardship and Sustainable Growth. The purpose of this
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NEW BEGINNINGS - COUNCIL / CONGREGATION REPORT

committee will be to better define the elements of a decision to become a “missional church” and to begin, with an emphasis on congregational input, the dreaming of projects and strategies which will enhance the attainment of this goal.

The final recommendation is the declaration of the formal entry of First Congregational Church of Fresno into conversation with our Northern California Nevada Conference United Church of Christ and Hope Partnership for Missional Transformation about the next steps for us to achieve this new vision.