

First Congregational Church of Evanston

Transition Team Report

Team Members:

Hal Sprague, Chair
Jean Cleland
Alex Doty
Barb Fonda
Kristin Julcher
Kathy Koestring
Lacey Ogbolumani
Joe Page
Rev. Jim Roghair
Kwesi Steele

March 13, 2007

Table of Contents

	Page
I. Executive Summary and Goals	3
II. Overview of the Transition Team Process	5
III. Theory of Congregational Size – FCCE Size Dynamics	6
IV. Assessment of Findings from Small Gatherings with Congregants	8
• Strengths and Values	
• Weaknesses and Challenges	
• Mission or Call	
• Aspirations	
V. Parallels between Current Findings and Earlier Surveys and Reports	12
VI. Observations	13

I. Executive Summary

The Transition Team (“the Team”) was formed on August 3, 2006, with the dual mission of (1) investigating the opinions of as many members of the Congregation as possible on the characteristics that define us as a faith community and (2) developing a set of recommended goals for Church action. The Team is hopeful that the Report will be helpful to the Pastoral Search Committee, pastoral candidates and to the entire Church community in planning its future activities, policies and programming. Using the categories provided in one of our resource books, *Discerning Your Congregation’s Future*¹, the Team focused its attention on the strengths, weaknesses, mission and aspirations of the congregation.

The Team has periodically communicated the status of its work to the Congregation through announcements during Sunday services, written summaries in the bulletin, letters in the mail and newsletter articles. It has been our intent to ensure an open and inclusive process.

The Theory of Congregational Size is set forth in Appendix D of *Discerning Your Congregation’s Future*. It was the topic of some discussions led by Rev. Jim Roghair and informed our analysis and goal setting. In the Section of the Report on Congregational Size, there is also a brief analysis of the size dynamics of First Congregational Church.

In Section V of the Report, we provide a comparison of the results of our investigation with earlier surveys and evaluations carried out by the Church. In Section VI, we offer some general observations about the feedback from members of the Congregation throughout the process. Along with the formal findings and goals we present, this additional commentary should be good material for further discussion and useful background information for the Pastoral Search Committee.

Finally, on the next page is our list of goals. In using the term “goals” the Team wishes to emphasize that we are recommending areas of focus for the Church going forward that we believe reflect the collective wishes of our congregation. We are not prescribing a set of specific actions we think must be taken. Rather, we believe that this document and the goals in particular, will guide future discussions in the Church and also inform the Pastoral Search Committee and the pastoral candidates who are considering our church. We believe this approach will allow the Church and its new pastor the flexibility to develop next steps for this Church that balance these findings with their own priorities and strengths.

Respectfully submitted,

Hal Sprague, Chair
Transition Team

¹ *Discerning Your Congregation’s Future; A Strategic and Spiritual Approach*, by Roy M. Oswald & Robert E. Friedrich, Jr., The Alban Institute, Inc., 1996.

Goals

1. Maintain our tradition of high quality worship (preaching, readings, prayer, music, communion) that provides an intellectual and spiritual basis for our collective faith journey and our lives.
2. Strengthen children and youth programs to model Christian beliefs through intergenerational fellowship, mission and other activities.
3. Enhance our sense of family by improving “inreach” to all members through intentional actions (e.g., increase fellowship events, increase connection with the homebound and others not attending regular events, provide copies of worship on audio/video.)
4. Address the issues that cause some visitors to perceive us as less warm and friendly, less welcoming and affirming to all people, than we believe we are.
5. Improve our outreach by matching our strengths with community partners.
6. Create a safe environment in which to express our individual beliefs. Have open and fair discussions about controversial or challenging issues in an atmosphere of love.
7. Arrange an open and fair discussion about the Church’s affiliation with the NACCC and the UCC.
8. Take the time to clarify our shared mission (vision, ethics, and sense of purpose: who we are, why we are here, what we are called to do.) Commit our congregation to supporting this mission through action in the community and the world. Use this action to develop a positive church identity in the community.
9. Have a discussion about the purpose of, and strategies for, the growth of the Church and how growth would change the Church.
10. Develop a long-range (multi-year) financial plan to address chronic problems. Integrate the financial plan with the mission/vision/faith values of the congregation.

II. Overview of the Transition Team Process

From August 3, to November 30, 2006, and from January 4 to 31, 2007, the Team met about every two weeks to deliberate over its mission, to develop a strategy for carrying it out, and to implement that strategy. We reviewed several books and other documents, ultimately selecting one book, *Discerning Your Congregation's Future* ("DYCF"), to be our guide to investigating our congregation's views of itself. Among the documents reviewed were the Church's Constitution and By-Laws, the Church History, and reports from goal-setting exercises, surveys and self-evaluations of years past.

On October 22 and 23, 2006 Team members met with members of the Church Council in a weekend retreat to discuss the process and come to a common understanding on the mission and strategies. We also reviewed our own opinions on the characteristics of the Church. Soon after the retreat, the Team began to schedule small gatherings of 6 to 10 congregants each, to discuss their views on our Church's identity. In each of these small gatherings, we focused on the same four questions suggested in DYCF, to elicit personal opinions on four basic areas. They were:

- a. If our congregation did not continue to _____, I would lose interest in remaining a member.
- b. The things that concern me most about our congregation are _____.
- c. If our congregation would _____, I know I would call my friends and tell them what wonderful things they are missing.
- d. If, with a stroke of a pen, I could change one thing that our congregation, I would _____.

In general, these questions are intended to encourage participants to talk about the strengths, weaknesses, mission and aspirations of the Church. Many of the small gatherings were held in the homes of our church members. The Team wishes to thank all those who graciously hosted these small gatherings and in some cases led the discussions. We also hope that this exercise has inspired interesting and productive discussion between members of the congregation outside the context of these scheduled small gatherings. The notes from each of the small gatherings are provided in the appendices to the Report.

To provide an opportunity for members of the congregation to participate in the dialogue without attending a small gathering, on three occasions we handed out the question as an insert in the Sunday bulletin and accepted responses in the offering plates. Between the small gatherings and written responses collected during the church services, about 65 members of the congregation provided their comments, representing well more than half the size of the average Sunday attendance.

Three community leaders were contacted and asked: (1) their opinion on the reputation of the Church in the community and (2) their views on the opportunities for a church such as ours to help address important social issues in the community.

During February 2007, the Team met five times to review its findings and begin drafting the Report. The last two meetings were focused entirely on the development of our recommended

activities or programs. Clergy are still at the center of the Program Church but their responsibilities are more heavily involved in working with lay leaders to ensure quality programming. The pastor in a program church is often involved in volunteer recruitment and training, and supervising and evaluating programs and administration. Lay leaders provide structure and guidance for these programs and may also provide pastoral care.

Corporate Church

350 + average worship attendance

The duties of a senior minister in a Corporate Church are centered on Sunday worship and staff leadership. The senior minister is respected in the Corporate Church but few in the laity have a personal relationship with him/her. Associate or assistant ministers handle the remaining duties along with lay leaders. Harmony within the parish staff and their ability to keep momentum going are the keys to success for this church size.

The Theory of Congregational Size in Relation to First Congregational Church of Evanston

At first glance, FCCE looks like a Program Church. We have a paid staff of eight, a church/sanctuary building and a separate building with classrooms, kitchen and an auditorium/gymnasium. We have programs which include a renowned choir with 4 compensated soloists, special music programming, a children's choir, Sunday school and youth program. We offer mission opportunities locally with Hilda's Place, a warming house, and with the Night Ministry in Chicago. We reach out globally with participation in the Crop Walk, the Heifer Project, and mission work in Mexico. We offer a Lenten bible series and a variety of adult educational and intergenerational fellowship opportunities. We have a book group, an electronic prayer circle, and a club for seniors. We are also fortunate to have an endowment to help secure our financial future.

The definition of a Program Church is 150-350 people attending worship on average each week. FCCE averages between 80 and 125...more closely fitting the definition of a Pastoral Church.

At one time, our church had the membership to support its programs with abundant financial and volunteer resources. (Fifty years ago, the church had well over 1,000 members.) Today, as a result of reduced membership, the church suffers annual budget deficits and a lack of participation in programming (planning and attendance).

In the past decade, although we have enjoyed the trappings of a larger Program Church, with its professional staff and programming, we have only had the membership size, pledges and volunteer energy of a smaller, Pastoral Church. A true Pastoral Church would look solely to the pastor for spiritual guidance, policy development and administrative leadership, and run its programs largely with volunteers. We, on the other hand, have enjoyed the services of several highly skilled professional staff, along with a pastor who has been consistently accessible for solace, leadership, spirituality, and joy. We have done this at the expense of a sustainable budget. We have frequently passed deficit budgets, making up the difference with our endowment resources.

We have continued living beyond our financial means because, in spite of our small size, we

clearly want to be a Program Church. We love our programs and we feel that our programs make us attractive to new members. According to Oswald and Friedrich, “moving from Program to Pastoral church will present the congregation with a difficult transition. An identity needs to be relinquished. The wonderful team of volunteers that made everything happen in the church has largely disappeared. Many probably left the church because of burnout”. “Soon cynicism, disillusionment and fatigue begin to permeate the whole parish.” “Some serious downsizing needs to take place.” Oswald and Friedrich refer to downsizing in terms of structure and programming so that the parish may re-group and create a vision of its new self.

For FCCE, there is a tension between our structure, our expectations and our actual numbers in worship. The challenge for FCCE moving forward will be to find a balance between the two congregational sizes...to eradicate volunteer burnout and maintain strong financial health while offering a variety of programming opportunities.

Reference: *Discerning Your Congregation's Future; A Strategic and Spiritual Approach*
By Roy M. Oswald & Robert E. Friedrich, Jr.
An Alban Institute Publication

IV. Assessment of Findings from Small Gatherings with Congregants

The following sections summarize the comments made by those people attending our small gatherings. We have grouped the comments according to each of the four questions asked of all participants.

Question 1: If our congregation did not continue to _____, I would lose interest in remaining a member.

In response to this first question, three values within our church community emerged as being shared by the majority of our members. They are:

- A preference for intellectually challenging sermons
- Strong support for our traditional music program; and
- Strong support for Christian Education centered on children and teens.

It seems clear that Sunday services are the basis of intellectual and spiritual growth from which members find the energy to give of themselves for the rest of the week, whether church related or not. Sunday activities are the primary reasons people value and attend the church.

Many congregants value other interests such as mission and outreach work that would not be possible without the fundraising efforts of events such as the rummage sale and pancake breakfast. These fundraising events are also fellowship opportunities valued by the congregation. These interests have emerged as secondary reasons for participation and membership of many current members.

Additionally, fellowship and intergenerational activities, as well as adult education are highly valued in the church. The congregation recognizes the importance of these activities with respect to continued growth. Recent events with the best attendance (100+) have been Rally Day, which occurs each fall immediately after a worship service and the Christmas Pageant and dinner. The Rummage Sale also brings significant numbers of people from the community into our Church House each year, as well as a high level of participation by our volunteers.

While attendance has been lower at other church events (20-30), the congregation recognizes the importance of having these opportunities for fellowship and community building, and there is continued interest in these events.

Members of the church appreciate the varied interests of their fellow congregants and, as the church maintains all of these opportunities, hope the church continues to strive toward being an open and accepting community.

Question 2: The things that concern me most about our congregation are:

The most commonly stated concerns were:

- The reduced size of the congregation and its lack of growth in recent years
- The risk of burnout among a small group of volunteers

Congregants expressed the opinion that the burden of running the church increasingly fell on a small percentage of the overall congregation. Statements such as “We have a few people who do everything” and “they will be/are exhausted” were common phrases from congregants. Desire by some to promote more missions or outreach into the community was expressed as being thwarted by a lack of energy from the congregation. While many have high expectations a lack of volunteerism often stifles suggested initiatives.

Additional concerns that appeared in over half of the small gatherings and feedback from Sunday bulletin questions were:

- Lack of benevolence and mission activities
- Poor financial health of the church related to an unwillingness or inability to balance the budget
- Poor communication among and across groups, teams and staff
- The perception of the Congregation as not warm and welcoming to outsiders, not interactive, not effective in building lay pastoral care (members ministering to one another)
- Lack of outreach into community – minimal efforts to “tell our story”, explain to others who we are
- Lack of a strong minister/leader

Many themes that came from the responses related in some way to the question of church size. The question of church size arose as discussions took place, also during this time period, of FCC being a “pastoral” size church with the staff and programs of a “program” size church. Looking at the concerns that emerged, half seemed directly related to the tension between our current church size and the size church we strive to be.

Other concerns voiced during at least two gatherings included: The church’s apparent greater worry about money than serving God; the need for vision and direction; the question of denomination affiliation (current denominational isolation and the possibility of joining the UCC); the need for more intergenerational collaboration in our congregation; and the fact that the church is not “Open and Affirming” to gays and lesbians.

Question 3: If our congregation would _____, I know I would call my friends and tell them what wonderful things they are missing.

For this question, by far the most often cited things that the group would like to see happen... that they would be willing to tell their friends about were:

- Bring in a dynamic speaker as pastor,
- Organize more events surrounding social justice and mission.

Adjectives used to describe a new pastor that would generate excitement and enthusiasm included: “Young blood”, relevant, intellectual, thoughtful, challenging, spellbinding, extraordinary, warm, exciting and dynamic. Bringing in the “right” person as our new permanent pastor was the most frequent response to this question. Another high-ranking response was to bring in a strong leader as a pastor... one with management skills who can handle the issues of the church, the weekly administrative responsibilities and also work well with the staff.

Most all of the groups felt that we have a responsibility to reach out to the community, to help those in need and take a stand on social issues. A related suggestion was making the church a community center that would sponsor speakers or community-wide events. These events would nourish others, but also showcase the FCCE.

Other issues/activities that would motivate members to tell their friends about the church were:

- Enhance children and youth programs as a way to bring families to the church. Some felt strongly about activity-based programming where kids and kids with adults could accomplish a goal.
- Join the UCC.
- Offer high-quality adult education opportunities.

- Offer more social events that encourage people to do things together (Team events, picnics, etc...)
- Do a better job of taking care of our own.

Items mentioned by only one group included: Communicate more proactively with the public about our church, communicate and develop relationships with other churches in our area, be financially sound, be friendlier, and continue to offer special music.

Question 4: If, with a stroke of a pen, I could change one thing at our congregation, I would:

This question invited participants to share their hopes and dreams for the church. Certain consistent themes emerged in these conversations. Some “high profile” themes focused on our more immediate and often-discussed needs. These include wishes for:

- Grow the membership (“Fill the pews”)
- Hire an inspirational and effective senior pastor
- Resolve our chronic fiscal challenges
- Optimize the use of our physical facilities.

Membership growth was the wish most frequently cited by members responding to this question. The majority of comments about increasing Congregational membership focused on the immediate and practical benefits of higher membership numbers: Solving budget problems, increasing the volunteer pool for ministries, filling pews on Sunday, expanding programs, etc.

No participants in our meetings mentioned increasing membership as a means of sharing/spreading a theological message. Also, few members were concerned about how increasing membership would change the demographics – and the personality – of the congregation, even though many told us how strongly they value the current social and interpersonal dimensions of church life.

Other recurring themes related to the character of the congregation and how we define ourselves as a faith community. These were expressed as desires for:

- An increased commitment to volunteerism, especially in activities focused on mission, social justice, world issues, etc.
- Working toward an affiliation of our church with the United Church of Christ
- More assertiveness and less timidity in sharing ideas, especially in defining our mission, our theology, and our Congregational priorities.

Overall, the congregation expressed a desire for more energy, more vitality and greater interpersonal connection linked with a more clearly defined focus on the vision and mission of the community.

V. Parallels between Current Findings and Earlier Surveys and Reports

The work of this Transition Team is not the first time in recent years that our church has considered its priorities, goals and opportunities. Early in its process, the Transition Team reviewed the results of previous church surveys and considered the findings of earlier assessments.

The surveys reviewed by the Transition Team were a Long-Range Planning Committee Report of 1992, a Church Survey compiled in July 1999, and the Long-Range Planning Report prepared in 2000. Within these three documents, we found striking parallels with the results of our research. We believe this indicates a long-term consistency in the character of the church as well as a strongly entrenched culture that reinforces and perpetuates the status quo.

The oldest document, the *1992 Long-Range Planning Committee Report*, suggested a number of objectives that closely parallel desires expressed in our recent small group meetings. Among the goals identified in this report that matched our latest research are:

- Increase church membership
- Increase opportunities for fellowship – member participation in life of church
- Develop a sense of mission (purpose) for the congregation
- Maintain and expand youth programming
- Publicized existing benevolence activities, financial and non-financial
- Raise consciousness of members about financial needs and provide more opportunities to support the operating budget (Activities, etc.)

The *July 1999 Church Survey* reinforced many common themes we heard about characteristics of the Church that members find attractive. It also supported our findings about the collective personality traits our congregation. Some of these common themes include:

- Reasons for joining the church: High-quality sermons and music, fellowship
- Religious tolerance, respect for beliefs of others is highly valued, appreciated
- Sermonizing and “Jesus talk” is not considered effective by some in worship
- Congregation is perceived as unfriendly
- Members want to serve more but feel “time pressured”

- Wishes/Hopes include:
 - Increase community visibility, programs outreach activities.
 - Make worship less formal, more intimate, and more personalized.
 - Limit high number of requests for money.
 - Increase membership.

The most recent document, the *2000 Long-Range Planning Committee Report*, also reinforced many points of continuity with both the earlier reports and with our findings. These include the description of the First Congregational Church community as a congregation that values intellectual acuity, challenging sermons and respect for individual conscience and personal integrity.

This report noted that religious beliefs tend to be expressed “intellectually, when at all”. It describes the Church as a place where people connect with other people, live out their values, and obtain spiritual and aesthetic refreshment. The Church was also described as a place to learn moral values, practice hospitality and reach out to the community. This report encouraged greater participation of members in church teams and committees.

VI. Observations

At its heart, this is a Fellowship Community

- The common element that seems to bind the members of this congregation together is fellowship – or, stated more accurately, “connectedness” – being in relationship with one another. People gather on Sunday to be a part of a community that shares, nurtures and celebrates their values – values built on a shared foundation of traditional Christian faith.
- This congregation places a high value on individual conscience and personal integrity. That expresses itself as a respect and high level of tolerance for, and acceptance of, the opinions of others.
- This congregation is conflict averse. The flip side of our respect and tolerance for each other is a strong impulse to avoid open disagreement. Members of this community go to great lengths to prevent the “unpleasantness” of open conflict. As a result, one way we tolerate differing opinions is by simply not discussing them. Simmering disagreements are often subordinated or even suppressed.

Fellowship in Two Houses: A Challenge and an Opportunity

- While the broader congregation shares core values and a fundamental desire for connectedness, it is currently subdivided into two distinct affinity groups with related but

varying priorities. These two groups have their respective centers of gravity in the Sanctuary and the Church House.

Characteristics of the Sanctuary Fellowship include:

Older demographic, reserved, a respect for tradition, high standards, independent, values the arts, especially music, prefers to live out religious values rather than talk about them, resistant to change that could threaten the traditional character of the community, etc. Key expressions include: Coffee hour fellowship, strong support for music program, participation in annual rummage sale, long-standing clubs or groups, mission activities, etc.

Characteristics of the Church House Fellowship include:

Younger age group, primarily children and their parents. The parents seek to inculcate in their children Christian values represented by the Church (reinforce values, ethics taught at home.) This group is independent, links religious values to social values, sometimes feels separated from the “center” of church life, and tends to believe that its interests and programs are undervalued by the greater congregation. Key expressions include: strong support for Christian Education program, active involvement in Sunday school and events such as Rally Day, Christmas pageant, Vacation Bible School, Christian Ed., fellowship activities, church-sponsored mission activities, etc.

In order for the church to present a clearer, more united and more coherent vision to the broader community, these two subgroups should be more intentionally aligned. Steps to integrate Sanctuary and Church House Fellowship might include: Encouraging coordination between Senior Pastor and Christian Education planners on communicating a clear and focused theological message to the entire community, scheduling regular sermons by Christian Education Director in Sunday morning worship, encouraging Senior Pastor to appear as guest speaker or participant in Sunday school classes, etc.

The Impossible Dream: Growth without Change

- For at least 15 years the congregation has voiced a desire to increase membership to resolve financial problems, expand programs, increase the pool of volunteers for ministry and committee work, etc. Despite this consistently expressed wish, growth has not occurred. The problem: The longing for growth appears to be subordinated to an overriding desire to retain the character of the congregation. The unspoken message is, “We would like to continue pretty much as we are, except have more people”.
- The congregation seems to have been hoping for something virtually impossible: growth without change. Such a hope would fail to consider two fundamental realities of group dynamics -- new people will bring their own priorities and agendas. They will also change the basic demographics of the community.

God for 20 Minutes:

- Transition Team research shows that the core of church life occurs on Sunday morning either in worship or in church house Christian education. Theological messages are communicated eloquently from the pulpit and through the choir. Teachers convey curriculum messages effectively. However, we also see that “God talk” is rare in our community.
- People are uncomfortable with theological discussions, especially involving personal faith belief – perhaps as an expression of our respect for individual conscience.
- Seekers visiting our sanctuary on Sunday for a religious message will hear a good one for 20 minutes from the pulpit. However, when they attempt to build on that experience to pursue spiritual growth, their options are essentially limited to one-on-one conversations with the ministerial staff. At this time, we offer little “soil” in which visitors can plant the seeds of a spiritual quest. Such seekers are likely to go elsewhere. (Stated differently, our “Front door outreach” is currently limited in its ability to attract and retain new members.)

Who Are We? The “Vision Thing”

The Transition Team found that many members believe the broader church does not communicate a distinctive faith message, nor does it place strong emphasis on how to implement or manifest faith beliefs in the real world. This may reflect our non-creedal polity, our respect for individual conscience, our aversion to discussing potentially divisive issues... or all of the above. It might also be caused by a fear of uncovering differences among us that might threaten our fundamental connectedness as a community.

One result is a lack of focus in our sense of purpose or mission. The church now has only a vaguely defined sense of what it wants to do or be in the world. The hands-on mission efforts we currently pursue tend to reflect either long-term commitments of the church or strong personal commitments made by ministerial staff or active members committed to a cause.

Steps to clarify a church vision may include a formal review of the church Mission Statement, Statement of Faith and Covenant by and for the congregation. This may include asking hard questions about why these important expressions of faith are not central to our life as a church community. We may then decide to restructure these statements as appropriate to reflect our shared and agreed-upon values.

With a more clearly defined sense of purpose and mission, the church will be better able to organize relevant activities/social action/hands-on events, either unilaterally or in partnership with other churches. With these activities in place, we can be more intentional about inviting outsiders to our church. By publicizing our activities broadly in the community, we will be able to bring people together with a common purpose within the welcoming home of the church.

Counterintuitive Congregationalism

Congregationalism is intrinsically democratic. It also limits the authority of ordained ministers and lay leaders to ensure the freedom and authority of the congregation. This concept is captured clearly in Article VII of our Constitution: “The government of this Church is vested in its members, who exercise the right of control in all its affairs.”

In recent years, our Church has pulled back from this concept by investing a great deal of planning and decision making authority in the Senior Pastor and church staff. Many new policy initiatives tended to flow in a “top down” direction from the minister through the council to ministry teams, committees etc. and finally to the congregation. Critical ideas about the philosophy and organization of the Church originated with ministerial staff and were then reviewed and approved by lay leadership. (Examples include the development of the church Mission Statement and the new church administrative structure.)

As this pattern became the norm, Congregational participation in the development of vision, programs, policy, and other key areas in the life of the church diminished. In some ways, the church family seemed to become increasingly dependent upon, or at least comfortable with, the “CEO leadership model”.

As the Transition Team listened to the many ideas and suggestions of our members in these meetings, it became apparent that many would like to take a more active, participative role in charting the direction of the Church. Steps we can take to recapture our Congregational philosophy of leadership by the congregation might include: Increasing the frequency of congregational meetings, encouraging and supporting the development of small-group and outreach programs by ministry teams and interest groups, etc.

Our Community Wants our Help

During our interviews with community leaders, one interviewee made the following point:

Evanston is just a smaller version of big cities like Chicago, New York or Los Angeles. It has all the same problems and challenges that those big cities face. Whatever your church decides to do, you can find a place to do it right here in this town. And your contribution will be welcomed.