

## **Transition Team Report**

### Task

In December 2019, Pastor Karl announced he was retiring from full-time pastor ministry effective January 31st, 2020. At the Annual Meeting on February 2nd, the Church Council was tasked by the congregation with guiding United Lutheran through the call process with the understanding that we would first take time to intentionally discern where God was calling us to grow as a congregation. Only after sensing where we were called to go next as a congregation would we be prepared to most adequately staff United Lutheran for the next chapter in our congregation's history.

The council, needing to focus its' attention on the ongoing responsibilities of congregational life in addition to the newly discovered challenges of Covid-19, charged the Transition Team with discerning God's dream for United's next chapter. This team of volunteers became:

Laurie Andrews, Deb Borg, Jerry Olson, Jesse Shaw, David Nyman, Mandy Stokes, Anna Vagasky, Jay Wardle, and Pastor Justin.

The Transition Team met nearly every Thursday Night via Zoom for five months. Through the course of these meetings, we

- Prayed for the Ministry of United Lutheran Church
- Studied trends in the Christian Church in North America
- Conversed with successful congregations who are seen as innovative
- Spent time becoming familiar with best practices in growing congregations
- Developed a tool that would attempt to access the spiritual maturation of the congregation
- Surveyed members of the congregation

### General Assessment

The overall findings of the Transition Team is that United Lutheran is a strong and vibrant congregation. The data—whether one measures our ministry through input from members, comparisons to other ELCA congregations, or in light of nationwide trends challenging the work of congregations—we are in a good place as a congregation. As we explain the areas of ministry we are called to grow, it will be important to remember that these suggestions are not offered in a spirit of judgment or blame but rather in a spirit of thanksgiving and excitement for the future. Furthermore, it is important to remember that while the worship component is important to the congregation, just as important is the building of Christian community (sense of belonging), having faith habits that connect us to God, and being able to make a difference in the lives of others.

## Suggested Areas of Intentional Growth

### **#1 Build a Greater Sense of Community**

First, the Good News: long tenured members who are 50 and older, believe United provides a strong sense of belonging. These members rate the congregation's sense of community astonishingly high. They trust that if tragedy would occur or they simply needed support, their fellow members would be quick to offer this assistance.

Our challenge is that this sentiment is not nearly as high among our younger and/or less tenured members. To be sure, elements of this finding are to be expected. People who have sat in nearby pews for the last forty years are more likely to have formed stronger relationships with one another than people who have only recently become involved in United. At the same time, we believe this reality speaks to another factor which United can address.

Community—friendship, conversation, relationships, etc—can be experienced in a variety of ways but when one considers the options United offers consistently (coffee in the fellowship hall, Circle Bible Studies, committees, etc...), a person quickly realizes these activities are more inclined to attract the interest of our older members.

United has the opportunity to offer community building activities for other demographics. These kinds of opportunities could include:

- Book Studies/Discussion Groups on subjects of interest (i.e. How to Be An Anti-Racist)
- Service Opportunities where members work together for a common goal (i.e. Habitat for Humanity)
- Small Groups by Area of Interest
- Home Worship Groups
- Sponsor Large Community Gatherings which bring people together (i.e. Hispanic Outreach's Festival is an example done by a non-church group that has proven effective)

### **#2 Build on Our Congregation's Desire to Serve**

United is a very generous congregation! Indeed, the congregation's level of financial generosity relative to our budget is quite impressive. In addition, if a person familiarizes him or herself with local non-profits (food shelf, Habitat for Humanity, the CareClinic, etc...), he or she would quickly discover that United is disproportionately represented with many of our members offering their time to assist others. Finally, while more difficult to

measure, United's members regularly offer aid in emergency situations. The Beer and Banter Boys recently offering a meal to the employees of Liberty's recently is a great example.

Still, in spite of our commitment to serving our local, national, and international neighbors, there is self-reported desire among our people to do more. More service could take many forms. United Lutheran could:

- Undertake a major local project big enough to galvanize a significant portion of the congregation (i.e. Zoom House or a Thistle Farms)
- Partner with an existing non-profit to supply volunteers on a regular basis (i.e. Feed My Starving Children or the Care Clinic)
- Develop a regular series of 'pop up' service opportunities that appeal to different segments of the congregation
- Discern United's role/participation in Red Wing's 2040 Plan
- Continue to Grow Stephen's Ministry, Home Communion, and Prayer Ministries

\*In addition to assisting people put their faith into practice, intentionally developing service opportunities, as noted previously, offers opportunities for individuals who feel somewhat disconnected to build relationships with others.

### **#3 Virtual Ministry**

United Lutheran dabbled in virtual ministry prior to the shutdown. Pastor Justin has occasionally offered vlogs. Pastor Justin and Brian Scott offered a semi-regular podcast. While these offerings were relatively well-received, they were often done as an afterthought rather than a priority. Or, to be blunt, they occurred if/when Pastor Justin and/or Brian Scott had the time and energy to work these tasks into their schedules.

When the shutdown occurred, virtual ministry became vital. United was blessed to be able to transition very quickly to a heavily produced, incredibly well-received virtual service which includes a large number of lay participants. Based on number of views, feedback from the congregation, and connection with those outside the congregation, virtual ministry has quickly become a vital component of United Lutheran's Ministry.

Moving forward, it is incredibly important United Lutheran puts resources (i.e. staff and volunteer's time and creativity) to use in this area. It would be a mistake to expect or allow this ministry to diminish once the Covid Crisis is over. Instead, United Lutheran should be looking at ways to build on our current success. Possibilities include:

- Offering a Series of Adult Education/Faith Building Opportunities

- Allowing Lay Leaders to share their stories
- Experimenting with Home Church Models that utilize worship materials provided by ULC

\*One over-arching goal with all of these possibilities is to leverage ‘viewership’ as a way to invite/integrate participants into face-to-face relationships.

#### **#4 Becoming a Habit Forming Community**

There is a paradigm shift happening in the Church. This change is a Godly One but it will likely leave some established congregations behind.

For most of our lives, congregations knew the recipe for *success*: call an engaging preacher, employ strong musicians, and foster a welcoming Sunday morning experience. If worship was performed well, members left satisfied.

In addition, successful congregations leaned into the needs of their context. Communities with children built strong Sunday School, Confirmation, and Youth Programs. The goal was to satisfy the religious needs of their market...er, community. Likewise, congregations with a high number of retirees offered senior citizens card clubs, visitation pastors, and other religious services to meet their needs. To be clear, all of these things were enacted by faithful leaders attempting to follow God’s Plan.

Unfortunately, congregational programming produced a generations of confused Christians. For example:

-Many came to believe worship was something religious leaders lead instead of as the way of life for all of God’s People.

-Prayer was something the pastor and a few select leaders did instead of being the primary language of all Jesus’ followers.

-Religious instruction was primarily done by church staff rather than by the families themselves.

-Ministry became understood as a job certain people do rather than a calling to which all the followers of Jesus are summoned.

As a result, too-often ‘church’ became a commodity we watched, judged, and decided to attend and/or support based on whether or not it fit our needs. When in fact, Church is a family we have been called into by virtue of God’s Grace.

Thankfully, we are being called out of these falsehoods into more Biblical understandings of Church. Fortunately, United has great strengths in these emerging areas but we will need to allow our practice of Church to continue to evolve. Here are a few examples:

- Instead of only a few leaders offering prayers, United needs to become a place where all people are given the opportunity to learn a variety of ways to pray so they have the opportunity to talk to God themselves.
- Instead of only the Pastor explaining what the Bible means, United needs to work towards helping people find ways to read and discuss God's Word for themselves.
- Instead of expecting a few people to articulate what faith means to them, we need opportunities to help people articulate their own story.
- Instead of United being seen primarily as a place of teaching, we need to become a place where everyone feels safe asking the questions most pressing to them.

### ***Staffing Recommendations***

We recommend United call/hire a person(s) with the following gifts:

1. The ability to create and foster relationships among people in the congregation and/or community with an emphasis on building opportunities for people with fewer connections
2. An understanding of how to tap into people's desire to serve through a variety of opportunities while helping them connect these experiences to their faith
3. A familiarity with virtual worship, video editing skills, and a desire to improve our current worship while growing more resources
4. A theological grasp of the emerging church described above and the ability to help lead this evolution.