

REPORT ON THIS PAST FALL'S AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

In October and November, the Capital Campaign Planning Team invited a dozen families to host a series of meetings in their homes or at church for church members and friends. There were several goals for the meetings. The first goal was to simply invite people to come together for fellowship and support after pastoral transition and global pandemic. The second goal was to hear from people about their experiences with the church; what they enjoyed about the church's ministry, and their hopes, dreams and fears for the congregation in the present and future. The third goal was to present materials about the repair and maintenance needs of our church building.

It was called the "Awareness Campaign" because the team hoped to raise the awareness of church members about building issues on the "horizon" that will need to be addressed, as well as to raise awareness of church leaders and get feedback from church members about their feelings on a range of issues. During the two months, out of the scheduled 12 meetings the team planned, only six meetings were able to be held, due to lack of attendance. The team made hundreds of calls, but the pace and busy lives of our church members was clearly an issue in finding suitable dates for meeting. The six meeting that did take place were attended by 52 people from the church.

Each of the meetings followed a similar pattern. Everyone was invited to introduce themselves and to share a favorite memory of their time with the church. Then there was conversation around what folks felt was going well with the church and what they were concerned about - what did they value about the church's ministry in the present and what did they hope would change? The last part of each meeting was a presentation of the building issues that our Property Team has been discussing for the past several years.

The favorite memories that were shared were an inspiring mix of reflections about how the church has touched people's lives in a variety of very positive ways. People recalled moments of insight in meaningful worship, the care and nurture of the congregation through difficult times in their lives. There were funny stories of mishaps that turned out to be blessings in disguise, groups that were especially meaningful and fun, the warm welcome on that "first visit" they received from a stranger that soon became a close friend, the way the Church School had embraced their children, the sense of "family" they feel, even in a diverse group, whenever they are at church. All these stories, and more were uplifting for all who were present to hear.

When conversation shifted to the things that people valued about the church and wanted to hold on to there were several refrains that came up again and again. The strong musical tradition of the church was extremely popular in discussions. The talent of our musicians; our three pianists, the different directors of the Children's Choir, Chancel Choir and Handbell Choir; and the choir members themselves who are so faithful in rehearsal and presentation of music for worship. Everyone agreed how fortunate we are to have all of these musicians as part of our music ministry.

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The office staff was also highlighted as being extremely valuable to the church and vital to the ongoing work of the congregation in almost every meeting. Another area of mutual admiration was the kindness and friendliness of the membership. The value of accepting and affirming everyone was lifted again and again in the meetings. The church members have a diverse range of opinions on every issue, but it is important to make sure everyone knows they are welcome. There were others topics of special value lifted up such as the church school program, the preaching and worship leadership, the fellowship times and the Fellowship Team in general, were all lifted up several times in the meetings.

In discussing the things people were concerned about, it was not too much of a surprise to hear money being perhaps the topic lifted most often. People were worried about the financial needs of the church and deficit budgets. There was anxiety that the church couldn't continue forever with such large deficits year after year. This topic then usually transformed into fear that cuts would be made to the budget in such a way as to hurt the long-term health of the church—cutting the music program or the office staff was seen to be the worst thing to do - "You can't cut your way to growth" was one memorable phrase. The conversation about financial worry, then usually turned into a conversation about reaching out to new people or to trying to reconnect with members who hadn't returned since the pastoral transition or pandemic closures.

Then conversation turned to things we might do in the future. There were ideas about doing outreach events and inviting folks into the church. Perhaps the church could coordinate with the Library to mutually sponsor activities or host things at church. There were ideas about adult education events, such as learning about other world religions, or simply coming together to have fun. There was conversation about the possibility of offering Church School every Sunday instead of once a month. One group discussed the idea of moving back to one worship service on Sunday instead of two, and if that's not possible, then making sure there were more fellowship events, so folks had a chance to see people from the other worship service. Another group discussed highlighting our music program to attract new people, making sure we are reaching out to invite people to events and introducing ourselves to visitors in worship. Each of the meetings talked in some way about how important it continues to be a warm, welcoming, open and affirming congregation for all people.

The last portion of the Awareness Campaign meetings introduced the issues on the horizon that our congregation will need to address for the long-term health of the church building. Next month, in the February "Congregational Connections" newsletter, those needs of the church building will be described in detail. Thank you, once again, to all those who participated in these meetings, whether organizing, leading, hosting or attending one; your help, assistance and sharing are very much appreciated!