

SUMMARY OF DISTRICT LISTENING CONFERENCES

AND CLERGY CONSULTATION

January – March 2010

Despite the worst winter in decades for most of Pennsylvania, our co-moderator, Janet Hellner-Burris, and our regional minister, Bill Allen, successfully held eight listening conferences with the logistical assistance of members of the Transformation Team. Though each conference was different in its concerns, all were well attended with 30 congregations represented and 193 participants. Though our initial desire was to model a transformation process with deep listening to scripture and for the general mission of the region, we realized that we needed to open the floor to questions about the region, since there is still much healing and rebuilding of trust which needs to happen. Therefore our Transformation Team's proposed agenda changed from district to district as different concerns were addressed. However, in all districts, the proposal on mission teams was presented and received valuable feedback. Also, we gave an update and answered many questions about regional finances. One of the great advantages to holding these district listening conferences was the feedback and healing which happened afterwards as Bill and Janet met, emailed, talked on the phone and sent letters in response to those who contacted them after their district conference.

Below are the general concerns and comments we heard in the majority of the districts and during the Clergy Consultation:

1. There is a deep grief over the loss of the Nordmont camp ground throughout the region, which has caused a concern over our commitment to youth ministry and the survival of the remaining camp ground at Laurelview. Churches in the east and north are particularly worried about how the region will touch the lives of their children and youth given the distances between their congregations and Laurelview.
2. While appreciation was expressed for this administration's transparency about regional finances, there is still great concern over honoring designated fund requests and receiving a full accounting of the Capital Campaign monies.
3. The regional church needs to improve communication with the local congregations. Dates should be advertised months in advance, especially for the camp. Because of the different styles of communication between the generations, the regional church needs to use multiple and varied forms of communication, including letters, phone calls, email, texting, Keystone newsletter, Keystone on line and web site as well as new forms of communication such as web cam conferences.
4. The local congregations need to see their regional minister at least once every two years between regional assemblies, for a visit other than for a celebration or a congregational crisis.
5. The local congregations need the regional leadership "to come to us" with workshops/retreats which are offered in locations throughout the state, instead of having one central training session.

6. We need to strengthen, and in a few cases where districts are not functioning, potentially redraft the district boundaries. We have congregations which feel isolated and apart from the region and from Disciples in general.

7. The local congregations welcome the regional leadership to assist them in inspiring and evaluating their ministry in order to help congregations discern the transformational changes they need to make to thrive in ministry and mission. Where we were able to share the General Church's Transformation process, there was great interest in the Eight Habits of Fruit-bearing Congregations. In more than one district, we were told that the local congregation wants the regional church to hold them accountable, even as the local congregation wants to hold the regional church accountable to our mission and vision.

8. Local congregations need the regional church to connect them to the General Church. In particular, the regional church needs a way of communicating the concerns of the local congregation to the General Church, which feels, for some, to be "out of touch" with the local church.

9. The local churches need help with training members in the identity and practices of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). An audio-visual by the regional church is needed, since the General Church has not produced one in many years.

10. The local congregations need training and a sharing of resources between congregations for stewardship, evangelism, youth ministry, women's ministry and men's ministry. Several districts spoke of needing a regional resource center, a regional on line resource list and a way to share resources between congregations, such as programs and presenters. The regional church may not have specific resources, but can network congregations to share ideas within and beyond the region and also with our ecumenical partners.

11. We need the regional church to help us know and care about each other better, especially our new and developing congregations.

12. In the past, the regional church has been at its best in providing camp, January Leadership Training Conferences, regional assemblies, Miracle Day at the Wilkinsburg church and in developing new congregations which bring great excitement to our region.

13. Overall, though some congregations understand the language and the need for transformation at the local and regional level, we are still at the stage of what Rebecca Hale terms "making the case for transformation". There is still much healing, listening, praying and grieving which we need to do as a regional church over losses in our past. Yet there clearly is also great energy and enthusiasm in every gathering for the promise of transformation to form a closer bond between the regional and local congregations as we grow in mission and witness together.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS FOR VARIOUS AREAS OF THE REGIONAL CHURCH

This is not an exhaustive list, but what was heard within the two hour limit of the conferences.

For Executive Committee

*need a full accounting of the sale of Nordmont and a letter to the youth explaining why it had to be sold. (Janet sent this as a follow-up) Folks want to know who bought it and what it is being used for. They need closure on this.

*acknowledge and appreciate Executive Committee and Regional Minister's work to make our finances and transformation work "transparent"

*quarterly Moderator's letters are helpful.

For Regional Office

*need an updated list by district of every minister, licensed, ordained, retired, "inactive" in the local church and beyond, with current contact information including phone numbers, email addresses and spouses names. This needs to be updated annually from the Standing forms and then quarterly throughout the year.

*need clearer and varied communication from the office to the local congregations and to have dates months in advance for our local church calendars.

For Stewardship Committee

*most churches could not use the Christmas Offering DVD, but want to be able to use one in promotion

*liked Good News stories from different congregations

*need Good News stories in insert format

*need information sent electronically

*only used offering envelopes from General Church resources (do we need to invest in General Church materials in the future if we are going to create our own?)

*give us updates about new church starts in Philadelphia and Mansfield for the Pentecost offering

*education on estate planning

For Camp Commission

*need to be intentional about reaching out and ministering to the children and youth which were served by the Nordmont camp. For instance, it is too far for mini-campers to come to Laurelview. What can we do on the eastern and northern parts of the region for these younger campers. Also, it is too far for youth to come for retreats and reunions over the weekend from the northern and eastern parts of the region. Can we do retreat and lock-ins in their areas?

*need to publicize dates 6 months in advance so families can plan their vacations

*need to keep the cost down for camp

For Commission on Ministry

*need photo IDs – some hospitals are requiring them

*concern among licensed clergy that they are not receiving enough training and mentoring after licensing especially

*encourage new ministers in the region to have mentors for approx. one year minimum to learn about the region

*extend the use of mentors beyond the ordination and licensing tracks

*continuing education requirements for both ordained and licensed

*provide resources to enhance clergy as catalysts

*provide resources/support for single-pastor congregations (almost all congregations in the region)

For Transformation Team

*in addition to specific feedback on the Mission Teams, we need a picture of the whole regional ministry structure, including committees, teams and the board

For the future Cabinet for Community:

*continue the work of transformation. (1) Explore the possibility of forming regional elders/shepherds. (2) Study the district and regional board structure and see if we need to redesign both the boundaries of some districts and the membership of the regional board

*continue listening for the mission priorities of the region and make recommendations for the next biennium for mission teams

*keep a regional calendar for all regional activities so that we do not have major regional events happening at the same time or near each other which burns out leadership

*help us get to know and care about each other through pulpit exchanges, sharing a minister or a church a week through the Keystone on line in an insert format.

*network resources and expertise between congregations. For example, get urban or rural congregations in dialogue with each other. Get congregations with active youth or women's or men's ministries to share resources and leaders with each other

* use Keystone Christian to spotlight each of the mission teams in each issue. What are they doing?

*connect the local church with other regions and the General Church

*study how other regions are meeting the needs of their congregations with less finances and staff than in the past

For the future Mission Team on Congregational Vitality

*to provide an evaluation tool for congregational strengths and growing areas, such as the 8 Habits of Faithful and Fruit-Bearing Congregations(General Church Transformation Document) or Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations (book and DVD)

*some of the congregations are not well, so if the region, as doctor, needs to come and ask questions and assist the congregation in their health

*to provide updates as churches in the region undergo transformation

*to be intentional with updates about new church starts in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Mansfield , especially around the Pentecost offering time

*needs to be spiritually oriented

*spiritual gifts inventory

For the future Mission Team on Missions

*like idea of identifying mission experiences in our region – by our region and for our region

*missions should be Disciples oriented, not Habitat for Humanity

*blip about mission opportunities for the next summer and for Thanksgiving or long weekends

*inter-generational work camp experiences

* become a global mission region

For the future Mission Team on Spiritual Life and Leadership:

*to encourage a region wide study (Bible, spiritual growth, healthy churches, Disciples heritage, etc.) so that the majority of churches will be working with the same material and we can engage in a region wide dialogue

*develop 1,000 partners in prayer across the region

*create retreats and take them on the road into the local church or a location where several churches can participate

*encourage all the churches in the region to pray for the Church of the Week in all that they do throughout the week

*In our leadership trainings, be proactive in teaching multiple ways of doing things. Encourage thinking “out of the box”

*use web conferencing for leadership training

Future Mission Team on Stewardship

*develop a congregational stewardship training workshop and take it to each district

*create a resource list of what churches have done to raise money and trainers who can come and talk about raising money, especially beyond church budgets

*need training for financial officers

*need to promote estate planning

Future Mission Team on Youth and Young Adults

*develop mini-camp for northern and eastern children near them. Laurelview is too far

*offer retreats and lock-ins for eastern and northern youth near them because Laurelview is too far

*determine the age range of young adults: what about those young adults between 25-34?

*encourage youth participation in all levels of the region. Is there an active Youth led commission? Do we hear their voices as the church of today?

*need to identify that our relationship with Christ is our priority and that we are the people of the book and our relationships with each other are formed out of that.

*increase participation at camp

*grow in knowledge of scripture. We don't need to be topical as much as scriptural

Future Property Committee on Laurelview

*need to coordinate our work at Laurelview. The left hand does not know what the right hand is doing

*need to make a list of jobs that need to be done and prioritize them

*need to offer work projects at the camp throughout the year to keep it in good repair

*need to coordinate with regional staff, especially the camp staff, about work camps coming and the numbers who are coming