

BRIDGE SUPPORT TEAM SUMMARY TO CONGREGATION OCTOBER 2017

This is the first of several reports from the Bridge Support Team to the congregation. The work of the Bridge Pastor Tom Kauffman is, in part, to facilitate a systems review of Assembly Mennonite to determine what aspects continue to serve the congregation well in light of its significant growth and other changes over the past several years as well as which aspects may need adjustment; to review the pastoral and staffing needs of the congregation going forward; and to engage the congregation in active discernment and decision-making regarding these.

Tom held over 70 household interviews, asking respondents to answer 4 questions. They were:

- What brought you/keeps you at AMC?
- How would you describe the decision-making process of AMC?
- What one thing would you change about AMC if you could?
- What metaphor or image best describes AMC in your mind?

This summary addresses two of the four questions Tom Kauffman explored in the interviews, namely questions 1 & 3. The Bridge Support Team read and discussed the 65-page Composite Summary in which Tom captured in significant detail individual responses to the interview questions. The following thematic summary is our best effort to reflect the central ideas that emerged from this process.

Responses to both questions have been summarized; for each question five broad categories emerged and are listed in no particular order. Not every single response is captured in this summary, but every response that was identified by more than one person is represented here in some form.

Question 1

What brought you to AMC and keeps you here? Strengths & affirmations

Environment / Relationships / Interactions

A significant number of people affirmed the environment/relationships/interactions that they experience as part of Assembly. Comments relating to this theme generally describe a sense of belonging, feeling welcomed & accepted, experiencing support in difficult times, the quality of relationships and vulnerability that is fostered. Strong affirmation was also voiced for the ways in which AMC cares for our children.

Sunday morning / Worship

Numerous people affirmed the Sunday morning Worship they experience at Assembly. Comments relating to this theme generally offered strong affirmation for Worship, including the variety experienced on Sunday mornings, the sermons, inclusive language, singing & music, and the valuing of all arts and creativity. Additionally, people value the participatory nature of Worship, and the ways in which AMC calls out gifts from within the congregation. People described their worship experiences as nurturing both head & heart, inspiring, relevant, fresh, & honest.

Small groups

“Small groups” was one of the most frequent responses to this question. For many, this was the way they found entry into the larger congregational life, for others it was a way to get to know, in a significant and deeper way, a subset of people from Assembly.

Theological Approach

Many people affirmed the theological approach they observe and experience at Assembly. Comments incorporated within this theme named AMC’s intentional welcoming and inclusive stance relating to people who identify as LGBTQ, as well as more broadly valuing the attention to peace and justice. People frequently described experiencing AMC as a “safe place” to ask questions, or to ask questions “in community”. People also frequently affirmed AMC’s theology and progressiveness.

Affirmations for both Karl & Lora were offered, as well as our pastoral team model.

Question 3

What’s one thing you’d change about AMC?

The building

A range of responses related to AMC’s physical space; such comments also typically acknowledged that finishing the building will bring the desired change. Examples include: more space for Christian Ed, more dedicated worship space/getting rid of the baby cave, more space for fellowship/coffee time, doing away with chair set-up.

Roles

Lots of questions were raised about the intersecting arenas of roles and expectations: for small groups; for paid staff; for volunteers; for pastors (including FTE).

Volunteers versus paid staff: Questions relating to this theme included wondering how decisions about this are made and whether these decisions are strategic and intentional. Specific areas included janitorial (including biannual cleaning), and administrative support (including the treasurer's role). Several wondered if we could hire people to reduce the need for so many volunteers, while one person wondered, "Can we resist the professionalism that tends to come with size?"

Small groups were identified as holding a range of responsibilities: from leading worship, to providing first line of pastoral care, to recommending people for membership, to welcoming/mentoring people into the congregation/leadership roles. The general question relating to each seems to be—are small groups equipped to do these well? A less frequent, related question was, are small groups asked to do too much?

Pastoral roles: A range of comments and questions were offered relating to pastoral care, some which intersected with the questions about the role small groups play with regard to pastoral care, others indicating a desire for more or stronger pastoral care. Ideas about increasing pastoral care included adding: a ministry team, a youth pastor, marriage enrichment/counseling.

A few people noted their desire for a stable and/or complete pastoral team and/or additional pastoral FTE.

Some people expressed a desire to have pastors preach more frequently.

Strengthening connections

A range of mostly individual comments coalesced around the theme of strengthening our connections with each other. Several people wondered if we could find a better way to welcome & integrate newcomers. Several wished for a "bigger embrace" for "non-familied"/single people. Individual questions included whether anyone keeps track of who's been missing, and how we might get to know others outside of our small group.

Community connections

A range of individual comments coalesced around the theme of our connections with the broader community. They included everything from partnering with a Latino congregation to assisting with immigration issues to more engagement with our neighborhood.

Worship

A range of individual comments were offered regarding worship: less singing, more expressiveness, less sharing, shorter services, dismiss children earlier, less intellectual sermons, more contemplative. A few people wondered about the "privileges of the child" versus the "rights of the child", and wondered if we could develop a common understanding of what is /is not acceptable behavior during worship. A few people wondered about worship planning and how to balance the logistics with "big picture thinking" and allowing serendipity.

Closing Comments:

While the responses to question #1 appear to be smaller than those to question #3, it should be noted that there was overwhelming affirmation for the reasons people attend AMC. And these reasons people attend AMC. And these reasons had multiple attestations from across the spectrum of respondents. It is not surprising that AMC continues to grow. These attributes are highly affirmed by many.

The number of answers to question #3 are more varied, are held by fewer people, and thus are more diverse. That does not diminish their significance, but it is good to recognize that the former question had overwhelming support from a vast number of people, while the latter question represents more individual responses.

Initial Analysis

While none of the interviews explicitly brought up AMC's budget structure of intentionally balancing internal and external spending (2/3rds internal, 1/3rd external), many of the questions raised would need to be considered in light of this arrangement, or invite the congregation to revisit this ratio.

Summary from the Bridge Support Team: Glenn Gilbert, Jeanne Liechty, Erin Milanese, Rachel Hostetler, Bruce Glick, Tom Kauffman