

July 2021 Congregational Conversation Groups Summary Report organized by Question

Conversation Group Questions:

- 1) **Church life and Worship during the Pandemic:**
 - a) What did you miss most that you want to come back just the way it was?
 - b) What do you hope will come back, but improved (and how)?
 - c) What new feature did you most appreciate that you would like to see continued?
- 2) **What else do you think the church should do to help members achieve our mission?**
(Explore each one – 2018 vision statements were provided to aid discussion):
 - a) Experience God...*through daily prayer.*
 - b) Grow Disciples...*by studying the teachings of Jesus together.*
 - c) Transform Lives...*through a deeper understanding of and faithful advocacy for those living in poverty.*
- 3) **Is there a big, bold idea that we have an opportunity to try in this “emergence” period – that would address a previous/on-going Church need or issue?**

Following is a summary of major themes we heard in the Conversation Groups, with representational quotes, organized by question:

1. CHURCH LIFE AND WORSHIP DURING THE PANDEMIC

1.a. *What did you miss most that you want to come back just the way it was?*

1.a. Summary: Top expression across groups - missed being together in-person for worship.

While great appreciation was expressed for the efforts to create recorded services, it could not replace the experience of just being together. Tied to this aspect of what was most-missed was in-person music and singing – from the choir to singing hymns together as a congregation. A third consistent response was about children – their presence, opportunity for them to have faith formation and be together.

1.a. Quotes:

“Camaraderie that we had in the whole congregation. Feeling that we were one big family, seeing friends.”

“In-person with all the generations. Pre-pandemic, Sunday was the only time of the week I experienced the full spectrum of generations.”

“Live worship, people, children, coffee hour.”

“Kids groups. Nice to have somewhere to go where my kids can be together with other kids in a supportive group.”

“Faith formation for my children.”

1.b. What do you hope will come back, but improved (and how)?

1.b. Summary: Majority of responses conveyed a **desire for increased connection and engagement among the congregation and within the community.** Many ideas were given, some from other churches/organizations and some from past ways FPCW organized itself into member regions for care, communication, and fellowship. Tied to these responses was a hope for ways to strengthen our programs for children and youth as well as increase our offerings for “fun” fellowship, i.e., not necessarily with a “study” focus. A third common expression was a desire to make church communication more personal and to invite members to work together on “small” service projects (e.g., making sandwiches for a mission partner after worship service).

1.b. Quotes:

“Gathering for worship or other events, intergenerationally, with opportunities to really spend time getting to know each other across ages.”

“Connecting personally – in past, a member hosted gatherings helped start building connections and bonds. This could also be a way to ask more personally for various volunteer needs – better than emails. Personally invite someone, “We have something in common, would you do this (work project) with me?”

“Parent get-togethers – with corresponding kids’ activities. Fellowship, fun.”

“Improve our connection to our greater community, not just mission partners, but Wilmette.”

“Want support for the youth to be a top priority.”

1. c. What new feature did you most appreciate that you would like to see continued?

1.c. Summary: Top responses included ways to **continue creative features from the pandemic worship recordings, including increased member involvement and technology that makes both in-person and remote participation and attendance possible.**

Many responses to this question grew out of appreciation, across groups, for the creative work of the staff to produce recordings for worship and music, including the weekly Stories and Songs for children. Appreciation extended to the ways so many in the congregation from all ages – individuals and families – participated in the recorded worship services. This was great to see and most want to see that continued, if possible, for in-person/livestream worship. Another

common sentiment was gratitude for increased communication from the church during the pandemic shutdown and the gift of technology that made these ways of being connected possible. Many expressed great thanks for the extra effort by Deacons to check in on them, bring by notes or gifts, especially those who were isolated due to the shut-down. Another sentiment was to continue to find ways to connect outside of the church building, in neighborhood groups or on the Church lawn – for worship or social events.

1.c. Quotes:

“All the ways the Church helped us connect electronically – Zoom, etc. – really helped to be able to see each other – keep that going.”

“A member hosted church members who live near her for a small (covid safe) backyard gathering. This was really important for community. Perhaps neighborhood church gatherings could continue to be hosted periodically.”

“The many ways we found to connect made us more flexible – keep that kind of flexibility – it opens up new possibilities. E.g., whole group of my relatives in another state started watching the services, now as well during livestream – it’s a new way for us to be connected.”

“The on-line format of pre-recorded worship was really well done. My kids loved it – sometimes watch a service multiple times (SaS and Worship) because they loved seeing people they knew on TV.”

“The Deacons were a great blessing during the pandemic. My Deacons left flowers, cookies, notes. Wonderful!”

**2. HOW CAN THE CHURCH HELP MEMBERS ACHIEVE OUR MISSION TO:
EXPERIENCE GOD, GROW DISCIPLES, TRANSFORM LIVES?**

(2018 Vision statements for each part were provided to aid discussion)

2. Summary: In General, this section inspired a lot of great discussion among groups. Overall, the groups expressed **strong support for the Mission Statement, but also wanted more understanding of each of the parts** including regular teaching/communication about how we can practically live them out. Tied to this sentiment was a desire for **new/refreshed vision statements** for each part of the Mission Statement **to make sure it is connected to who we are now as a congregation in today’s reality.**

2. a. How can the Church help members achieve our mission to EXPERIENCE GOD? (2018 vision ...through daily prayer)

2.a. Summary: Many responses focused on the vision of Experiencing God through daily prayer and suggested more ways for our congregation to **learn about prayer through classes and sermons** and to have a way for us to **hear more about prayer needs within the congregation** to enrich our prayers for one another. There were also many responses that expanded on ways we do and can experience God including the importance of worship from music to prayers to sermons with **appreciation for the current “God Sightings”** feature and wishing it could garner more response from members. Several also talked about how this church has embraced **learning and perspectives from other faith traditions** and how that has enriched their own experience of God.

2.a. Quotes:

“Encourage more confidence and comfortability with praying for and with one another – in small groups, meetings, whenever we’re gathered together – to make space for praying together.”

“More connection with members through church communication – for prayers and ways to help if applicable.”

“Like recording God Sightings and would enjoy a richer way to share these examples in our daily lives.”

“There have already been many ways the Church has helped me experience God through the pandemic and now – music, sermons – keep it up!”

“I was attracted to this Church by offering of programs from people outside of our faith, sharing their perspectives. Interview Jeff did this year with local Rabbi was awesome!”

2. b. How can the Church help members achieve our mission to GROW DISCIPLES? (2018 vision ...by studying the teachings of Jesus together.)

2.b. Summary: The majority of discussion focused on our own growth as disciples through the ministry and mission of the Church with lots of interest in finding ways to increase our opportunities for fellowship, service, and outreach as well as to offer more study topics that are broadly appealing. Many responses focused on the importance of providing on-going welcome of visitors/new members, personal communication, hands-on projects, and what we have to offer for children and youth.

2.b. Quotes:

“FPCW could use more “hands-on” service projects. In pre-covid times we made sandwiches, once a month after worship, for the Night Ministry. It served a charitable purpose but also increase fellowship among church members.”

“Really want Fellowship, connection with one another. There are a number of small groups now, but I’m not involved in them.”

“Big aspect is the children, but everyone is in their own stage of growth. I want to delve deeper into spiritual topics that relate to my journey.”

“A lot of us don’t have similar background for Bible study, Church. Maybe more approachable type studies like, “Are you curious about_____”? Group brainstormed topic ideas: Women in the Bible, Bible for history lovers, Bible basics, Food and cooking of the Bible, etc.”

“We need to do more in the community – offer lots of opportunities for children and youth – fellowship, also service.”

“Always been back of my mind – I’ve been personally invited to various groups, but wonder if newer people won’t be known enough to get invited and/or won’t be comfortable enough to ask about joining a group. Can we find ways to be more welcoming in specific and intentional, on-going ways.”

2. c. How can the Church help members achieve our mission to TRANSFORM LIVES? (2018 vision ...through a deeper understanding of and faithful advocacy for those living in poverty.)

2.c. Summary: The discussions on this aspect of our mission largely affirmed the work we currently support and wanting to find ways to increase member involvement. This was combined with a great **desire to be more connected to what’s happening with our Mission partners** and for **more involvement in our community**, with encouragement to build on our local, ecumenical relationships. Desire to hear the **stories of what we are doing/have done recently** was another common theme in these conversations. An additional theme that emerged was the need to explore our current vision for Transforming Lives with examples of **Racial Justice and Inclusivity** as part of a core focus.

2.c. Quotes:

“(Our) Church supports so many great people and places. Would love to see more people, more families engage and involved. Having physical activities that involve the children will involve the parents.”

“Would love to hear more about and from our mission partners as witness to how lives are being transformed through our ministries and mission.”

“Abigail group is helping transform lives at a specific point in life that is really difficult. It has been immensely helpful.”

“Ecumenical relationships in our community are really good. Keep having/do more pulpit exchanges, offer visits to other sanctuaries, holy places.”

“Bring our mission stories to life – like when we had pictures from visit to New Life Baptist Church.”

“Inclusiveness. Feel like Jeff is already very open to others and includes that in how he preaches and teaches – keep that up!”

3. BIG BOLD IDEAS

3. IS THERE A BIG, BOLD IDEA THAT WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRY IN THIS “EMERGENCE” PERIOD – THAT WOULD ADDRESS A PREVIOUS/ON-GOING CHURCH NEED OR ISSUE? (Examples given to aid discussion: *Decreased attendance at Sunday school, worship; Harder to get volunteers for various church activities/Experiment with time/format of Sunday school, other programs; Desire to re-imagine the sanctuary space.*)

3. Summary: This question brought forth many ideas. Many were tied to finding ways for us to be more connected to one another in the congregation, to the community and with our mission partners. **Some were ideas to bring about immediate changes for improvement in our connection, communication, and care with one another; other ideas involved big changes to help us live out our mission as a church in new ways.**

3. Quotes – Big, Bold Ideas – quoted responses organized by theme:

BIG, BOLD IDEAS FOR CONNECTION WITH ONE ANOTHER

- *“Buddy System” for new members (pair them with someone who’s been a member for >2? 5? Years). Get new members engaged & coming back. Have a post-service brunch for new members & buddies.*
- *Have a reception for new members ONE YEAR after they joined (this person doesn’t see new members after they’ve joined; others agreed)*
- *Have special event on a regular basis (outside or inside) – cast a broad net, something different – not a worship service. Fellowship focused, intergenerational, community oriented, not too long in time. This could appeal to parents with young children who could come as a family.*
- *More fellowship in church member’s homes*
- *More outside opportunities E.g., singing caroling around the Christmas tree in courtyard. E.g., Last summer – outdoor movie brought lot of people.*
- *Drop-off Day for parents to be able to go out. For new parents, especially, the only way for us to give more energy is to get energy/support that really helps in practical ways.*
- *Find ways to make involvement of young people easier; remove roadblocks.*

- *Not so big/bold: Every year, when Confirmation Class ends, can we find ways to give them more leadership roles/important roles in Church life so they can practice their newly proclaimed faith? Also – need to make it a bigger celebration.*
- *Can we be (more) intentional about sending/commissioning people when they do leave. Let's them know they are important and will be missed – especially for people who are moving away – a chance to celebrate them. This has been done on occasion, but would like to see it done more. Also – is there a way to keep connected with people after they've moved/left?*

BIG, BOLD IDEAS FOR CONNECTION WITH OUR COMMUNITY, PRESBYTERY

- *Boldly go into the community (e.g., “Screenagers” event at the Wilmette Theater) to let community know that FPCW cares about our kids*
- *Given our existing Family Promise relationship with Sukkat Shalom, perhaps we partner with them. They are only a few blocks away from FPCW. Maybe we could develop a broad view of the Judeo-Christian relationship.*
- *I find it awkward to approach a new neighbor and ask them if they are interested in the Presbyterian Church. Maybe if we had some little gift as a door opener? Something with the church logo, address, and telephone number.*
- *Follow up with members who've not been seen at FPCW or FPCW events. And track the data. Important to follow up and understand “what's keeping you from coming back or joining?”*
- *I'm no longer in your target demographic, but would still like to see things offered that may bring more diversity and potential new members into the church. These could include:*
 1. *Yoga or Zumba classes*
 2. *Storytelling*
 3. *Healing through the Enneagram*
- *Reach out to those in our community who seem to be often using our playground and yard.*
- *Build a gymnasium. (Convert the Chapel?)*
- *Is there a way to use our fabulous space to help the community? E.g., Become a vaccination site; other kinds of community service that responds to the needs of now and here.*
- *Use the building more. It was part of the intent in re-doing the Church Lounge to open it up for use during the day.*
- *Bring back Mainstream Church presence/voice in mainstream media (voice that is not Fundamentalist, Not Evangelical). This is probably bigger idea than 1 pastor or even 1 Church can accomplish – maybe bring this to Presbytery... This needs an original-idea-person – need to find the person or person who are really good at penning that 300-word article that takes on real, current issues from a (mainline) Christian viewpoint.*

BIG, BOLD IDEAS FOR CONNECTION WITH WORSHIP/WORSHIP SPACE

- *Chapel use. Not sure what all it is used for. I usually pass it, it's dark – feels like a mystery. Reaction/idea: Add a contemplative service, e.g., Taizé – could be very simple, even with pre-recorded or no music. Make it a contemplative prayer space to be on your own or with others.*
- *Find ways to integrate the on-line service with the sanctuary service. Big screens?*
- *Somehow, create a more INTERACTIVE ONLINE service. Perceive 2 categories of online worshippers:*
 - *Want to come in person, but physically unable*

- *Casual viewer (“I guess I’ll check it out”)*
Is there a way to let others (in sanctuary or online) know who is participating?

BIG, BOLD IDEAS FOR CONNECTION WITH OUR MISSION

- *Find ways to interact with other faith communities.*
- *Use other formats to present information – e.g., video in Daily Bread email. Use the pre-recorded format from pandemic time for variety of members to make videos talking about mission/volunteer need.*
- *Could we have little snippets every week – e.g., Action Item under each part of our Mission Statement? (only 1 per week) – Could also be part of the Benediction.*
 - **Experience God** (through daily prayer)...
 - *Pray for _____ this week*
 - *Read this _____*
 - *Send a God sighting*
 - **Grow Disciples** (through teachings of Jesus)...
 - *Call someone you haven’t seen in a while.*
 - *Call/invite someone to church*
 - *Sign-up to be an Usher*
 - *Have dinner with someone you haven’t seen in a while*
 - *Sign-up to host Lemonade on the Lawn*
 - **Transform Lives** (lifting up those in poverty)...
 - *One of our partners needs diapers and wipes – think about that when you go to the grocery store this week.*
 - *Backpack project – illustrate how lucky we are and how much \$25 will help.*
 - *Reminder of a Mission Partner*
 - *Reminding people about our relationship with community congregations, e.g., Sukkat Shalom said thank you for use of our Fellowship Garden for their summer services.*
- *Take 2 minutes in Church service to talk about a Mission Partner and volunteer opportunities coming up.*
- *Create (Fund, Build) an actual building that is dedicated to housing homeless families – maybe partner with Family Promise. A place where those families can have a sense of stability. Family Promise very close to my heart and the families they serve.*
- *Create a storage ministry – safe, secure place for people to keep their belongings.*
- *Hold a Drive to collect things for families to better store and transport their belongings. Know of a church that gives each person in a housing program a suitcase.*