

Mission Study Results

The Past

Over the past years, the Westminster congregation has experienced a variety of leadership styles in its Head of Staff and Senior Pastor. Each minister has had his own unique gifts and abilities that he brought to the church. Under some of these ministers, the church grew and flourished both in numbers and ministry. And under a few of the ministers, the church struggled to maintain the status quo.

It appears that one characteristic of the successful ministers at Westminster was stability. These ministers knew who they were theologically, emotionally, and spiritually and this stability translated over to the congregation. These ministers knew where they were going and how they were going to get there. They were extremely organized and administratively astute even to the point of appearing somewhat controlling at times.

It is also interesting to note that particular programs or ministries which the pastors emphasized during their tenures at Westminster are still strong suits of this congregation even today. Even the ministers who proved to be less than successful still left their mark on this congregation's ministry. Mission and outreach, the youth program, and quality worship which were the legacy of some of the ministers are still the strength of this church even today.

The expectation of this congregation based upon previous ministers is that the Head of Staff be an excellent preacher who can both craft a theologically and intellectually sound sermon, but who can also present the sermon in such a way as to capture and keep everyone's attention. Not only is sermon preparation essential, but also worship planning. The congregation fully expects the Head of Staff to work with the worship team to develop worship experiences which will not only speak to the minds of the members but also to their hearts.

Pastoral expectations of the Head of Staff have diminished somewhat as the congregation has grown in numbers. Still, based on past experience, the congregation expects the Head of Staff to be approachable and available when needed. Even though many of its previous ministers have appeared to be a bit aloof and introverted, the congregation appears to want a minister who is a bit more outgoing, someone with whom they can have a relationship and also someone who has a sense of humor and can even laugh at themselves.

It also appears that the successful ministers at Westminster were consensus builders who were able to meet significant challenges like major building programs, relocation, and initiation of new ministries and still maintain the unity which exists within this congregation even today.

The successful ministers also identified the gifts and talents of both laity and staff and encouraged them to become engaged in the mission and ministry of the church. While they were strong in their leadership and most things happened because of their initiative, the programs and projects would not have been successful without strong lay involvement and investment.

In conclusion, the following qualities were essential to the success of previous ministers at Westminster.

1. Stability
2. Excellent Preacher
3. Competent Administrator
4. Consensus Builder
5. Outgoing, Compassionate, Possessing a Sense of Humor

The Present

Congregational Identity

While Westminster has a very rich heritage and is grateful for the traditions of the past, the church tends to gravitate to contemporary ideas and trends. It seems to also be more influenced by the traits and characteristics of the Willow Creek Church than it does by its ties to the PCUSA and the Reformed Faith. As a result, Westminster has a more ecumenical flavor than most Presbyterian churches in the area.

Diversity is an objective of the proposed Strategic Plan, but this will be a significant step for this congregation to achieve this goal – for most members while they might come from different religious traditions are quite similar in values and lifestyle. 83% of the membership comes from a 5 mile radius which consists of mostly middle to upper class neighborhoods.

Westminster is also perceived by most members as maintaining a good balance between outreach & mission and care of its own members. The love of God permeates its life and this love is not only shared within the congregation as needs arise, but is also shared with the least of these. Numerous people noted outreach as a major reason that they are here at Westminster and yet it becomes increasingly difficult to recruit volunteers and to get people to serve on committees dedicated to outreach.

And speaking of outreach, it appears that Westminster is more involved in ministering to the needs of those less fortunate as opposed to taking various stands on social justice issues in the community and in the nation.

Since the church has grown so rapidly over the last 10 years, there is a feeling on the part of some that Westminster is no longer one large family but that it is a loose association of individuals and groups. Contributing to such a feeling is the number of worship services each week and the fact that the congregation is divided between two locations. These factors have certainly not contributed to the overall “feeling” of a large family, but members do appreciate the intimacy of the smaller worship and fellowship experiences.

In comparison to some of the larger downtown churches, Westminster would not be considered a prestigious church. Its prestige however comes as a result of its outstanding worship services – both traditional and contemporary – and its outstanding programs of outreach and mission. Westminster is known as one of the more vibrant and vital congregations in the community.

Organizational Characteristics

Westminster scored very high among the participants as a congregation that communicates effectively concerning the programs and activities of the church. The staff does a wonderful job via web site, newsletter, take note, church announcements, and posters so as to keep the membership informed. In order for communication to be effective; however, the congregation must assume the responsibility of keeping up with what is taking place.

It appears through the survey that members are not only encouraged to be innovative and supported when they are, but that the church does a wonderful job in helping members to discover and utilize their gifts.

For the most part, the Westminster congregation appears to be very open and honest in most aspects of its life. There is a perception of the part of some that conflicts which arise are usually taken care of in a private manner.

The only other significant response to the survey was that theological and Biblical implications were at times not considered when important decisions were to be made. The Strategic Plan which was presented to the session and congregation was grounded in sound theological and Biblical thought. The responses to the plan however seemed to be based predominantly on practical considerations and what was expedient. Open discussion on this plan was encouraged which supports the findings in the survey that no decision is made without consultation with the session and the congregation. However, it must be noted that less than 5% participated in this discussion. This either indicates supreme trust in leadership on the part of the congregation – or apathy on the part of the membership.

Program Evaluation

It was no surprise that worship and outreach received the highest marks from the respondents. These two program areas are without doubt, the distinguishing traits of the Westminster congregation. It is most unusual at least within the Presbyterian denomination to have almost 50% of the membership (1000) present at worship on a given Sunday. It is also so very significant that Westminster's outreach is so varied and expansive. Truly this congregation's impact is worldwide.

While evangelism received the lowest mark, church growth has been tremendous over the last ten years which proves that the most effective means of evangelism is to have meaningful programs of worship, service, and fellowship about which the membership is so excited, that they share these things with friends. The welcoming, friendly, and inclusive atmosphere for which Westminster is known convinces those who do visit that this is their spiritual home where they will be known and loved and be able to respond to God in service to their neighbor.

According to the survey, stewardship could have received a higher mark. This is born out from recent statistics from 2005-2008. During these years, 31% of the membership of the church who made a pledge did not completely meet their pledge for the calendar year. And during that same time, 46 people made a pledge toward which nothing was contributed. This meant that almost ¼ of a million dollars was pledged but not collected. The one thing which allowed Westminster to continue in the black was the new members and the gifts they made each year. These stewardship numbers call into question the level of commitment on the part of some of the membership.

Fellowship while deemed important by many of the respondents also was seen as a program that needed to be strengthened. Many people mentioned the small groups, reunion groups and age-appropriate activities as the reason they are a part of Westminster. Some members seemed to indicate that they do want larger fellowship opportunities, but space limitations make such occasions virtually impossible.

Besides evangelism, education received the lowest marks of any program or activity. This is due in part to the Sunday School program of the church which is diminished somewhat by the number of worship services Westminster has each Sunday. It is a fact that churches which offer a worship service at the same time as church school will not have as many participants in its Sunday morning educational program. There is a desire on the part of some to have more Bible studies which would be available to everyone in the congregation. This desire seems to be voiced by some of the older members of the church and does not appear to be the desire of most in the congregation. This is supported by the low numbers attending the Bible study offering in the WOW series and the minimal turnout for Bible studies during other times of the year. It was also suggested on a part of a few that we have a fresh approach to “Westminster on Wednesdays” and to reexamine our approach to small groups as well.

Synopsis

Westminster is known as a warm, friendly, inclusive, caring and welcoming community of faith which has enjoyed excellence in preaching, worship, music, and outreach over the last decade. There is a legitimate concern on the part of many that the congregation will eventually grow too large and thus lose the sense of intimacy and community that the congregants enjoy now. A major decision which will need to be made in the next two years will have to do with the expansion of facilities that desperately needs to occur. The question seems to be “Do we want to be a congregation of approximately 2500 members and retain the attributes that have made Westminster a special place to so many people?” or “Do we want to continue to grow and be a regional church of 4000 or more which can offer more opportunities in outreach, fellowship, and mission than we presently can offer?”

With either decision, expansion of facilities will be a necessity to take care of the overcrowded conditions which exist now especially in the areas of youth, children, and office space. It would also be to the church’s benefit if a family life center could be included in future plans providing recreational opportunities for the membership and a space in which the entire congregation could gather.

Regardless, this congregation will be facing the challenge of a major capital gifts campaign within the next 2-3 years if they wish to maintain their present ministries.

Questions still remain about the other recommendations as to the Strategic Plan. Will the members of the church embrace these objectives and work to make them a reality or will they remain just dreams – just words which remain on the page of a well written document. The time for decision is near and those decisions will certainly factor into the decision concerning the Head of Staff this church desires.