

Discernment Session 3

March 8

Twenty-three people attended the third discernment session. This session sought to glean information about the congregation's identity by creating a persona of the congregation. The person would be a composite of the collective impressions participants hold about the congregation. Doing this would establish a baseline understanding of the congregation, which would provide some framework to make decisions about the congregation's next steps and its vision for the future.

Several questions posed to the group sought to tease out responses. The questions substantially encompassed the person's personal life. Additional questions included the person's financial situation, connections to the community, and vision for his/her future.

Personal Life

The composite person is a white woman in her early 70s. She is presently in her second marriage as her first marriage ended when her spouse died. She has two children and her present spouse has three children. Their children do not live in the same community as they, although two of them live within a 45-minute drive. Only one child consistently helps her out. There are two grandchildren who live within 45 minutes.

Professionally, she was a registered nurse.

She has age-related infirmities including some heart issues, arthritis, and general fatigue. She had a hip replacement as well. She is a cancer survivor. She walks for exercise.

She enjoys reading. Her has a wide range of tastes. She reads the newspaper as well as magazines: People, Yankee, Living Simply, and Reader's Digest. She like to read murder mysteries and historical novels. She also reads her daily devotions.

Her other interests include: gardening, fabric arts, cooking, and music. She loves spending time with her family. She is active in the church and regularly attends worship. Her spouse, however, only attends occasionally. She is active in the senior center as well.

Her family is greatest pride and achievement.

She has fears particularly related to age and mortality. These are: losing a child, her own death, becoming disabled without having any support, diminished capacity due to stroke or dementia. She also has concerns beyond herself: war and how it affects our children, climate change, and this nation's political polarization.

Her "bucket list" includes travel. She would like to visit Europe and the Holy Land. She would like to downsize her life and get her affairs in order. She wants to live with less and would like to write and to share her story.

She hasn't thought a lot about her life five to seven years from now, although she knows it will be different.

She lives on a fixed income. Her primary income sources are social security and her pension. She gets by and is reasonably comfortable, although she does not have a lot of money left at the end of the month for many extras. To have that money, she works part-time about 10-20 hours a week.

Community Life

She finds time to volunteer in the community. She volunteers at the church, which includes helping its food pantry. She also serves on the Council on Aging and the historical commission.

Her social network is limited. She is not deeply connected to former employees or colleagues.

She identifies herself politically as slightly left of center. Though she loves her church, she doesn't have any particular Bible story that is a favorite. Rather, she has lots of favorites.

When she thinks about her community and its needs. She identified several issues:

- Affordable housing
- Infrastructure
- Public education, specifically the need for more resources and better administration
- Open space and conservation
- Youth Activities

When she considered sociological and cultural changes she has observed, several stood out for her that were troubling:

- Church is not as high a priority in people's lives. She sees a lot of people who are spiritual but not religious (SBNR). She wonders where people, especially young people, will get their moral values.
- Fluidity of gender and sexual identity
- The role and importance of marriage isn't as valued as it was before
- Coarsening of the culture, especially due to technology
- Rapid pace of life
- There seems to be a lot of freedom without responsibility

Facilitator's Reflections

Initially, the group had difficulty making a decision to identify the person's gender. Many people wanted to embrace a genderless identity. However, no one in the room self-identified as having no specific gender identity. After considerable discussion, the group identified the person as a woman.

Some participants did not identify with the person who emerged from this exercise. They did not feel represented in the image.

The exercise sought to establish a baseline, a “stake in the ground,” of this congregation. By defining its characteristics, its fears, its desires, and its social context, the congregation gains clarity for its present needs and situation. Having this baseline, then, enables the congregation to discern its path for its future.

Regarding participants who could not identify with the persona, the baseline opens the congregation to a conversation about inclusion. What does the congregation have to do to make its own members feel included? What are the needs of those who feel excluded, and what changes will the congregation undertake to make itself more inclusive? The exclusion current members within the congregation feel may also open the congregation to seeing how its persona does not welcome or include people beyond the current membership.

Related to the exclusion was the person’s social network. She does not maintain her relationships with former colleagues or employees. Her church is important in her life. She attends church regularly and will attend without her spouse. She volunteers at church. Though she has two children who live within 45 minutes of her, she has a good relationship with only one of them, despite maintaining that family is important to her and that she considers her family her greatest accomplishment. Though she serves her town in volunteer positions, overall, this combination may indicate that she is more inwardly than outwardly focused.

As a congregation that self-identifies as being in its early 70s with age-related ailments, it begs the question of the congregation’s capacity for ministry. This should not imply that it is no longer capable of ministry, but it should generate a conversation over what activities it can realistically undertake and complete. In other words, the congregation’s age may account for its difficulty to undertake and accomplish the same activities it did ten to fifteen years ago. It may call upon the congregation to assess its present activities with the idea to modify them or drop some of them because trying to maintain them as they have been is unrealistic.

She has fears around mortality. She is fearful that one of her children will die. She is fearful of her own death. She is fearful that she will become disabled without any support, despite being presently married. She is fearful of her diminishing capacity and the potential for incapacity due to a stroke or dementia.

As such, she recognizes that the number of “good” years remaining for her is limited. She would like to go to Europe and the Holy Land before she cannot. She would like to start preparing for the end of her life by downsizing her present life and getting her affairs in order. She would like to live with less. Does this implicitly acknowledge that the congregation’s present circumstances, including its facility, are too much to manage as they are now?

She did not cite any solid plan, goal, or objective in five to seven years. Though her bucket list includes visiting Europe or the Holy Land, it was not cited as an activity to accomplish in the next five to seven years. Does this indicate that the congregation thinks year-to-year? Does it indicate the congregation does not have a practice of longer term thinking? Alternatively, does the congregation struggle with its identity inhibit its hearing how God calls it to serve?

Financially, she is comfortable. She works part-time to supplement her income in order to afford “extras” for her life. That she works 10-20 hours a week as well as volunteer for the church and serve as a volunteer in town points to having little extra time. This raises a question around her self-care. Though she has hobbies and interests, how much time does she have to pursue these pleasures?

Volunteering, working, and aging leaves me wondering if she is too busy trying to balance living and not allowing time to reflect. The desire to downsize her life, although expressed in terms of physical assets, also leads me to wonder if downsizing should include activities. Yet, I wonder if the fear of aging and mortality makes maintaining this level of activity a rejection of this fear.

The sociological shifts she notes in contemporary society do not sit well with her. She sees them as too loose as though the world is adrift.

Conclusion

The reflections were not criticisms, just observations.

The purpose of this discernment session was to obtain some image of the congregation based upon its present situation. The image will help to form an identity. An identity will help the congregation ascertain how it will respond to God’s call as the body of Christ. A clear identity will help to answer questions such as:

- What is this congregation’s passion and how can it engage that passion with its ministry?
- What can this congregation do to be its best self?
- What is essential to be the body of Christ?