

Plymouth United Church of Christ
We're Listening: How Are You Experiencing Church?
Final Report

I. Introduction

The Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (LMPC) was called upon to conduct a second phase of intervention with the Plymouth United Church of Christ (PUCC). The first phase was initiated by the Staff Parish Relations Committee in communication with the judicatory to seek to address working relationships among clergy.

The second phase of the process was initiated by the moderators of Leadership Council. The purpose of the second phase was to “initiate a lay-driven, lay-initiated look at staff relations, congregational culture and trust/communication at Plymouth.” Prompted by multiple significant staff losses over the last several years, congregants have raised question about Plymouth’s governance, personnel policy, staff relations, and trust/communication. The need for this process was confirmed through an exit interview with Rev. Carla Cain. Before Rev. Cain, several staff had departed without wanting to give an exit interview.

The results of this listening process compiled in this final report focuses on the phenomenological aspects of PUCC rather than a structural evaluation. By listening to how people experience life at PUCC, the leadership can find ways to address concerns by altering structures that may impede the quality of life together at PUCC.

II. Contract Phase

Jay Wittmeyer, Executive Director, proposed that LMPC explore these questions through two distinct processes: 1) By having LMPC staff conduct a series of phone interviews with former staff to help bring understanding to their tenure and experience at PUCC. 2) By hosting a series of focus groups involving volunteers from the congregation of PUCC.

Both of those processes were completed. The results of these listening processes are listed and compiled below in the appendices, along with some observations made by Jay Wittmeyer and Devon Miller, members of the LMPC team who guided the listening processes.

II. Listening Phase

LMPC was given a list of former staff and clergy whom the Leadership Council suggested would be important to contact as part of the listening process. Devon Miller initiated the contact of those on the list. Harmony Tucker was in charge of arranging the focus groups from the congregation.

A. Phone interviews

A list of eight former staff and clergy was given to LMPC as seeming important to hear from since many of these individuals had not completed exit interviews upon their departure from PUC. LMPC prioritized contacting those that had not completed exit interviews. Individuals responded in the following manner:

- Four people on the list that were contacted agreed to complete the phone interview.
- One person on the list that was contacted chose not to do the interview because they felt they had nothing to contribute.
- One person on the list that was contacted was not available.
- Two people on the list were not contacted because they had already conducted an exit interview, which was considered adequate.

In total, four phone interviews of former PUC staff and clergy were conducted Jay Wittmeyer or Devon Miller between June 28 and July 1, 2021. The interviews centered around each person's tenure at PUC and their experience of staff relations, particularly as it related to the senior pastor and the pastoral couple. For reasons of confidentiality, the results of those conversations are compiled with the responses which came from the focus groups.

B. Focus groups

Harmony Tucker arranged three focus groups, which were jointly led by Jay Wittmeyer and Devon Miller. The focus groups were held on Zoom and ran on three successive late afternoons: July 6, July 7, and July 8. A total of twenty-one people volunteered to participate in the focus groups.

Each group followed this identical format:

- Devotional Reading of Philippians 2:1-11
- Introduction of participants, including how long they have attended PUC; their current leadership responsibilities at PUC; and something which they celebrate or appreciate about PUC.
- A spectrum exercise in which participants evaluated how PCC is doing in the following areas:
 - Mission and purpose
 - Worship spirituality, Christian education
 - Caring for each other, volunteers, and staff
 - Caring from pastors
 - Caring for pastors, associate pastors, ministers, etc.
 - Caring conflict transformation
 - Communication and decision-making

- Structures and leadership

The purpose of this exercise was described to the participants as merely “priming the pump” for further discussion and was not intended to be a scientific method for data collection.

- The central focus of each discussion group involved providing an uninterrupted space for each individual to express their appreciation of and/or concern with how PUCC has been and currently is functioning. These comments were documented by LMPC staff, and the compiled results can be found in the supplemental materials below.
- Each focus group concluded by giving members an opportunity to offer a statement of appreciation for other participants in their group.

III. Observations

This section will offer some observations of the experience of participants made by LMPC staff drawn from conversations during phone interviews and focus groups. Observations are based on comments made by participants, the tone of in-person dialogue, and interactions between participants. Rather than assessing the structure of PUCC, these observations reflect how people experience life at PUCC. These experiences may provide a window into ways on which to improve worship, education, volunteerism, and inter- and intra-congregational/staff relations. The observations are organized in such a way that they address the guiding questions which informed LMPC’s work with PUCC during the summer of 2021. These questions include: What are we doing well? What could we do to improve? How well do we care for each other? What factors impede people from participation in the life of the church?

A. What are we doing well?

There were a number of commonalities which participants celebrated about PUCC. Here are a few that stand out and were repeated by numerous participants across all forums. People feel that PUCC:

- is an open and affirming community which welcomes diversity.
- provides a loving sense of home, family, and community.
- provides a space in which an awareness, concern, and opportunities for social justice issues in the community and around the world are encouraged and nurtured.
- is blessed with intelligence and thoughtfulness in its members that is undergirded with humility.
- is a place for people to ask questions along their life journey without being looked down upon or marginalized.
- accommodates a wide range of interests and lifestyles by offering a variety of worship times and styles.
- offers an excellent music/choir program that is appreciated by the entire congregation.

B. What could we to improve?

Although there was a general sense that PUCC offered many opportunities for people to get involved in “ministries,” those ministries lacked the cohesiveness of a shared mission. While people felt that PUCC had a clear mission, that mission was not as well advertised as it could be. For example, participants mentioned that they found it difficult to find the church’s mission statement on the website. If someone interested in attending PUCC were to try to find the mission before they attended PUCC, they would have a difficult time finding the mission statement online.

There was a sense that though it may appear to someone on the outside that PUCC has a vibrant volunteer program, the experience of volunteer workload is actually carried by a few people who bear too much of the workload. Those people may be in on the brink of burnout. People also expressed that their volunteer work is often underappreciated and not adequately recognized by the leadership.

There was some concern expressed on the care provided back and forth between the congregation and the clergy. On one hand, there is a tremendous sense of family among congregants, but care for the clergy and staff may fall short in some areas. While the church has been incredibly generous in supporting the leadership financially, it has been less sensitive to the emotional and relational needs of leadership and staff, particularly in relation to those in subordinate positions. At times, this may have led to staff and associate ministers feeling vulnerable to the senior leadership when there have been differences of opinions. People felt that inadequate structures were in place in which staff felt safe to express their concerns without directly confronting those that they were in conflict with.

On the other hand, pastoral care for the congregation may have suffered with the departure of key ministerial staff. Ministries and relationships that were supported by associate ministers in the past have suffered from their departure. One example of a ministry that people felt may be in jeopardy because of the departure of a former staff person is PUCC’s Stephen Ministry. People sense that there is a great need for this ministry, but that it lacks the leadership needed to carry it on.

Members value the care provided by these staff members during times of significant life events and felt that the pastoral care provided during these times came from associate ministers rather than from the senior pastor, who seemed distant during such times. This is the shared experience of associate ministers, who felt they were often left as the primary person to provide pastoral care during significant events in the lives of congregants.

C. How well do we care for each other?

The warm and loving care that PUCC provides for each other was perhaps the single most positive feature participants mentioned about their experience at PUCC. Because of the large membership of PUCC, the people of PUCC often find these meaningful relationships with others by working alongside others. This work ranges from the choir, youth ministry, children ministries,

education, Stephen Ministry, visiting scholars, volunteer ministries, and committee work to name a few such opportunities. Much of this work is formalized through processes of approval by the leadership. Some expressed the need for less formal ways to connect with other members by meetings in parks, in less structured Bible studies, or through social media formats. Some of this may be due to generational and demographical diversity which characterizes PUCC but may be overlooked when it comes to offering opportunities for involvement.

D. What factors impede participation in the life of the church?

People felt that even though there were numerous ministries in the church, newcomers had difficulty finding a contact person or an entry point. Even when contact was made, newcomers were sometimes turned away because no help was needed in a particular ministry. A term that was frequently used to describe how people experienced these ministries was the word “silo.” In exploring the idea of “silo” a bit further, it became clear that what people meant is that these ministries operated in isolation of each other and from the larger congregation. These ministries seemed to lack a way of communicating between each other and to the congregation.

The idea of “silos” was a prevalent description of how people experienced the communication system of PUCC in general. Many of the participants felt that communication within the various boards and ministries was excellent. However, lines of communication began to break down when involving other committees or communicating to the congregation.

Some expressed that the shift from a congregational model to a corporate model of decision-making has impeded their involvement. Earlier models of decision-making allowed for the congregation to be more involved in such things as search processes, budget decisions, and staff relations. With the exponential growth of the congregation under Rev. Chorpennings leadership, decision-making has turned more toward a corporate model in which the senior pastor functions as a CEO with a governing board. Decisions are handed down from the top and people are left wondering why the emphasis in the budget has shifted or why a staff member suddenly left. There was a sense of grieving the loss of the former structure that was more friendly to people having meaningful involvement in the direction of the church. Some even expressed their unwillingness to express their opinions since they knew their opinions, most likely would not be considered—or worse, criticized—by leadership.

E. How has COVID-19 impacted PUCC?

Though the effects of COVID-19 were not part of the listening process LMPC proposed, it became apparent that the pandemic has left a significant impact on the congregation that is worth mentioning. The pandemic was described as a Band-Aid being ripped off, exposing the wounds that had been hidden underneath it.

