



A REPORT TO GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH
ABOUT ITS INTERVIEWS ON
CONGREGATIONAL MISSION AND MINISTRY
from
The Congregational Discovery Reading Team
Church Innovations

How to Use this Report

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This report gives the major findings of a self-study by members of the congregation about the character of worship, education, and general involvement of members, as well as the congregation's responses to community and congregational changes. It is based on 26 interviews, gathered in fall, 2008, by several members of the congregation.

We believe these findings should be taken seriously even though they are based on information from a moderate number of interviews. Leaders should consider their own reflections and use common sense about the issues raised in this report, building on the strengths of Grace Lutheran Church while addressing problem areas as opportunities for further growth as a congregation.

We believe that both the interviewers and those with whom they talked have the best interests of Grace at heart and gave information they hope will help the congregation.

Our recommendations are meant as questions, not to tell the congregation what to do. We believe that your congregation's continuing work in its transition period may help it address some of the opportunities discovered in these interviews. We also believe the congregation's leadership has the wisdom and ability to best address its own situation.

All of the people who took time to answer these interview questions, and most certainly the Listening Leaders who did so many splendid interviews, should be commended for their willingness to think seriously about your congregation's members' past and present experiences of worship, learning, change, and mission. Such careful and helpful work will be of dramatic value as we all consider what God is up to in the community and what God is calling Grace to do here. As we seek to build on strengths, we remember that God equips us for every good work and that we lead by the grace of God's gifts to us.

Question 1: Tell a story about how you sense God’s presence and activity in this congregation.

26 interviews, 88 remarks

(the number after a response indicates how many people mentioned it)

people being there for each other during hard times (especially illness, death) – 11

reaching out, the “touch” of comfort – 11

singing/music – 8

prayer – 6

small ways, good deeds – 4

at worship services – 4

Christmas Eve – 3

Festival worship – 3

Holy Week – 2

Easter – 2

Sunday School – 2

Women’s groups – 2

Funerals – 2

Dinners/meals – 2

Raising money – 2

Mentioned once each (24): building one another up, gathering and sharing, small groups, Eucharist, laying on of hands at Confirmation, bells rung for saints, children get a sense of morality, Bach cantatas, wonderful people, serve in love, associate pastor search process, not afraid to talk about God, Thanksgiving turkeys and pies, pastor is a balanced person, memorial garden and the message there, Stephen ministry, patience and listening to people, domestic violence program, school creates relationships, Oktoberfest, tent sale, Cornerstones, visiting the elderly, trips to help with Katrina and Africa and Chicago.

Recommended questions to consider:

1. People value the genuine caring and support they receive during hard times. How have you learned to do this so well that so many people mention it as a sign of God’s presence? Beyond the usual caring that churches do for their members with funerals and meals, your people describe small groups started for particular needs. How does that group-starting happen, and who is involved?
2. Worship, music, and rituals are extremely important to your people as a sign of God’s presence. The excellence of your worship and music are a true blessing. How have you gotten to be so talented at these difficult things? How does your excellence sometimes get in the way? How do excellent rituals help to introduce newcomers to your worship experience?
3. Outreach to community members in need comes up here, but not very often. Here and in other questions, services after 9/11 and doing service after Katrina captured people’s imagination. How can you engage the community more, and in non-emergency times as well as the big moments? And how might you find God’s presence in everyday acts of service and outreach?

Question 2: Describe an experience of profound worship you have had.

26 interviews, 83 remarks

Christmas Eve- 9

Easter – 8

music – 8

major worship after life-changing event (a death, 9/11, etc.)– 8

children in or leading worship – 7

funeral services – 5

sermons – 5

Easter Vigil – 4

Good Friday – 4

baptisms – 3

witness service of confirmands – 3

Maundy Thursday – 2

Bach cantatas – 2

Eucharist – 2

Mentioned once each (13): singing the psalms, the lessons, connecting funeral pall with baptism, summer worship in the fellowship hall, God moved me to be where I was needed one day, rituals that everyone can share, using art to promote spirituality, connecting with people, Christmas Blues service, pastors' retirement and installation services, Centennial, the meals the women provide, none yet because of sitting with little kids

Recommended questions to consider:

1. High worship days and festivals and funerals come up more than almost anything else. Clearly your high worship is valued, and people are deeply moved. How does your worship, especially at these times, connect to people's daily life? How do you manage to work together so well to use individual gifts at funerals so that the service, the care, and the meal go together so well that people mentioned it here?
2. Participation of children and the next generation in worship is very profound to many members. What kind of leadership does it take to include children in worship? How do you decide who participates? Why are you so good at this? Why do you think people are so moved by it?
3. Rituals like footwashing and baptism and particular worship experiences like Christmas Blues and graduation services clearly meet the needs of your members. This is great! We want to come there and worship with you! How did these special ideas get initiated? How do you continue to connect these offerings to your congregation? To members of your community at large?

Question 3: Tell about the ways people fight in this congregation. Tell about a situation where you and other people were involved in a problem at church and how it was handled.

26 interviews, 87 remarks

haven't seen any – 6

How people fight (52)

meet and work things out – 6

stop attending – 4

feelings remain hurt – 4

indirect – 2

keep it to yourself – 2

vote – 2

continue together with respect – 2

generational in women's group – 2

express views and then back off – 2

too much poisonous gossip – 2

need flexibility not rigidity – 2

Mentioned once each (positive: 14, negative: 8): reach out, look at big picture, no overwhelming dogmatism, pastors set good tone, open-mindedness, hearing one another, not taking sides, prayer and seeking guidance, everyone acted well on a unhappy parent school issue, try to keep positions gospel-centered, cross-cultural training offered to school staff, love and truth handle the situations, few fights, not much pettiness; some prickly people, not as well as we should, should use biblical moderation, not good at closure or confrontation, members complain to one another instead of going to the source, pastor refused to act on a school issue, threaten to withhold funds, people who think they know better than others

What people fight about (29)

Related to the school – 9

Major issues – 2, disconnect – 1, evolution vs. natural design – 1, discipline – 1, excluding nonmember children from participating in Christmas Eve service – 1, school principal situation – 1, *Chocolate Wars* book – 1, role of church school board role and influence - 1

hiring staff – 4

being a homeless shelter site – 3

Mentioned once each (13): budget shortfall, Boy Scout merit badge qualifications, communication about organist's dismissal, babysitting, when church left Missouri Synod, communication and announcing things like food bank issues and services after the flood, succession planning on women's group, homosexuality, worship schedule, building addition problems, lectern and board of worship, kitchen maintenance roles, women's groups not heard by staff

Recommended questions to consider

1. In this question we tallied both *what* you fight about and *how* you fight. What you fight about are topics worthy of good discussion, and not too surprising. How you fight is a mixed bag between positive ways and negative ways—but surprisingly positive, compared to many congregations we have read. As you read these tallies, is there anything that surprises you? For example, are there topics of disagreements you expected to see listed here that weren't mentioned or were mentioned by only a few? What do you think about the habits of fighting that people mention? How might you develop some better ones?
2. When things are resolved well, what goes into reaching the positive resolution? Do you have a process people know about? When things go unresolved, how do the unresolved complaints tend to surface later? From the tone of the remarks, it seems the homeless shelter issue was resolved more fruitfully than school or staff issues. Is that in fact the case, and if it is, what can you learn from that?
3. The school is a huge part of your identity, so of course it will be a source of concern as well. How do matters regarding the school come to the attention of the church and the board that relates to the school? What is the relationship between the church staff and the school staff? How can you promote open and honest discussion about the school, its pupils, its faculty, and the way it is administered?

***Question 4: Tell a memory that has given you anxiety about the future of this church.
Tell a memory that gives you hope.***

26 interviews, 68 remarks

Sources of anxiety (33)

budget/finances/current economy and its effect – 6

people leave or stop coming – 3

more and more outsiders attending the school – 2

financial support of the school – 2

future faculty for school – 2

no anxiety – 2

Mentioned once each (16): new members who don't get integrated, discussing homosexuality and we're not open-hearted, finances of new addition, not ministering in our own neighborhood, people say we're snobby, we missed the boat about PADS [Public Action to Deliver Shelter], when pastor retired without a replacement, will our children have a saving faith?, homosexuals are not perceived to be welcomed by us, some people afraid to speak in meetings because ideas were dismissed before, a neighbor church's staffing struggle, being judged for not sending my kids to our school, how to get more diversity without losing the sacredness of our worship, former choir and clergy leadership, youth leaving the faith and not returning, the needed role of the church school board in school decisions

Sources of hope (35)

new families and kids taking part in Sunday School, school, confirmation – 7

openness to new information and thinking – 3

our music – 2

care to sick members and shut-ins – 2

baptisms – 2

Mentioned once each (19): Mustard Seeds' Halloween party, generosity of members, so many members attended and were shaped by our school, youth gathering in New Orleans, every time I walk through the door, the school builds Christian habits, Christmas Eve all together, people pitch in and work, scholarliness, Grace has grounded people in their faith lives, we have always come through tough times, female pastor and president, transitions between pastors were smooth, successful building campaign, great current staff, range of people touched by our school, resolve conflicts like the youth minister one, hope that the successor to the recently retired pastor will keep true to our beliefs and traditions, hope that we will trust in the Lord

Recommended questions to consider

1. Where is God in the answers about hope? Not mentioning God very much, either here or in almost anywhere else in these answers is not that unusual in congregations today, but yours is such a strong traditional congregation that we were looking for more God language. Why might that be absent, do you think?
2. School comes up in both anxieties and hopes, particularly its growing attendance by nonmembers. What is the mission of the school? For whom does it exist? How does the leadership of the school relate to the church leadership? Why does

the school give you hope? What is it about children in your church programs and the school that gives you hope for the future of Grace?

3. Finances are near the top of every church's anxiety list, and you are no exception. How do you see stewardship and giving as a part of God's mission in your church? How are the financial burdens the church bears spread out across the membership? A few people here and in other questions mention tithing—does that happen at Grace? How does the size of the congregation help giving or hurt giving?
4. Your outreach is part of your identity. This is a strength. We see it in many other questions. But it is not a prominent answer about the hope for your future. How do persons who are not as well-educated or who have different backgrounds, sexual orientations, or economic levels get a chance to participate and help you build your future? How do you reach out to people who are not like you?

Question 5: If you were to leave this congregation for five years, without any contact, what would you expect to see when you returned? What would you hope to see?

26 interviews, 135 remarks

Expect to see (49):

not much change – 6
the best music, as now – 5
growth – 4
vibrant – 4
great high worship as now – 4
great preaching as now – 4
more diverse – 3
great school as now – 3
same caring people – 3
more members not previously Lutheran – 2
little diversity – 2
solid Christian education – 2
be welcomed back – 2

Mentioned once each (11): easy to resume my place, any new pastor knows Scripture, worship more informal, school may have teachers from outside Lutheran training, money still a problem, same strong leadership, building exterior the same, same people, church will change to serve the congregation, same few doing everything, same great outreach

Hope to see (86):

same high Lutheran worship – 10
greater diversity – 9
membership matching the surrounding population – 5
more diverse, inclusive music styles – 5
music still excellent – 5
growth – 4
engagement with community – 4
great preaching preserved – 3
mix of young and old families – 3
maintain our mission and grow deeper – 3
whole congregation reaches out to bring people in – 3
school still a top focus – 3
more openness to gay community – 3
same caring – 3
whole congregation involves new people – 2
same staff or other equally inspired people – 2
evening or Saturday services – 2
better worship attendance – 2

Mentioned once each (15): attract young families, vibrant, tolerance of political views from pulpit, people will learn the joy of giving, better working between church and school, help those around us, move with the times but keep who we are, exuberant worship like African American church somehow, experiment with opening our eyes, service-based, elder of a nonwhite race or a gay pastor, more members contributing to

leading and not a one-man band, unity, use school for evangelism, do this interviewing process again

Recommended questions to consider

1. For the most part, people neither expect nor want much change. Most want growth in young families, a vibrant church, and more diversity. What would your members be willing to part with to get more young families, more vibrancy, and more diversity?
2. Most of your members want a continued school presence; that is clear. Is that a universal desire? How serious are the worries that members are not the only ones attending? What do you see as the challenges you face in order to maintain, build on, and improve the important tradition of a Lutheran school?
3. Some want more contemporary or informal worship to attract young people and more diversity. Yet your identity is connected with traditional Lutheran high worship, and you do it particularly well. How can you innovate without losing substance? Who will lead the innovation, and how will they connect with the tradition? How do you now make people feel welcome at your worship services? How might that need to change when welcoming more diverse attenders?

Question 6: Describe this congregation to someone new and tell how they would be nurtured here.

26 interviews, 178 remarks

Descriptions (109)

strong traditional Lutheran – 10
inclusive/accepting/welcoming – 9
great music – 8
large – 7
great preaching – 6
high church – 6
something for everyone – 6
looking outward – 5
church together with school – 5
mixture of ages – 5
mixture of backgrounds – 5
mixture of viewpoints – 4
warm people – 4
well-educated – 3
lives out the mission statement – 2
lots of families – 2
staff meets all needs – 2
solid history in the neighborhood – 2
independent Lutheran – 2

Mentioned once each (16): dynamic, suburban, small groups to involve people, meets special needs, don't ask - don't tell policy for homosexuality, no concerted effort to reach the community, committed people, many ways to serve, not stodgy, gets lots of information before deciding anything, avant-garde in many ways, knowledgeable people participate without fear, tithing, traditional German roots, priorities are education-children-music, this self-study process challenges us to grow

Nurturing (69)

need to seek out nurture – 10
choirs – 6
worship – 5
caring for one another – 5
Christian education – 4
Bible studies – 4
the school – 4
supper shuffles – 4
healing services/health – 3
committees – 3
congregation works hard to involve people – 3
prayer – 3
Eucharistic table – 2
small groups – 2
new member class – 2

visitation – 2

Mentioned once each (7) – usher, lector, tent sale, Scouts, basketball, mentor, ministry fair

Recommended questions to consider

1. Grace is large but has many small groups for people to feel connected and related to others of similar ages and in similar life circumstances. Good for you, because that is the way to make a large church feel smaller, connective, and welcoming. How are you able to do this? Who manages these small groups administratively and spiritually? How are they connected formally and informally with the church's mission?
2. You have a strong Lutheran tradition of high worship and great music and preaching, yet you have a real mix of ages, viewpoints, and backgrounds. How do you manage this?
3. Caring for one another seems to hold you together. How intentional is that? Supper shuffles are mentioned several times here and elsewhere in the answers. What function do these shared meals serve? How might you teach other congregations to do this?
4. How would a first-time visitor to Grace feel *nurtured* just by attending? How would such a person learn about the way other attenders and members feel nurtured there?

Question 7: Tell how people participate in the life of this church.

26 interviews, 148 remarks

service projects and outreach – 13

in many ways – 12

choirs – 11

committees – 9

people start up groups – 9

worshiping together – 7

fellowship events – 7

women of Grace – 6

meals – 6

education – 5

ushering – 5

the school – 4

caring for one another – 4

Bible studies – 4

homebound/shut in – 3

funerals – 3

lecturing – 3

kids learn leadership – 3

supper shuffle – 3

Sunday School – 3

Stephen ministries – 3

youth program – 2

sense of community – 2

cannot not participate – 2

Mentioned once each (19): altar guild, Scouts, deacons, retired men's group, Web site, some come to receive and some to give, pastor senses gifts and leads people to their place, harmoniously, people choose their own involvement, when asked, our views may differ but we're pragmatic, a few do most of the work, at worship only, get on the volunteer list, must connect with current member to be placed, size of church creates challenge, need to identify people's vocations, need open breakfast to talk to all instead of cliques, great talent can be off-putting

Recommended questions to consider

1. Outreach and service come up more than any other single answer. But folks are unspecific about what you do, and it hasn't come up prominently before. How do you decide what outreach to do? How do you relate to the people you're reaching out to? How is the internal life of the church tied to and shaped by outreach? And how do you discover the gifts and strengths of your members?
2. Clearly there are dozens of ways to be involved at Grace. But we were struck by the last several single answers. How does your excellence in all things work to boost involvement, and how does it hold people back? How have you learned to welcome all types of persons into your participating community? How does a person get "in"? Are there ways people are kept "out"?

Question 8: Tell about the learning opportunities here.

26 interviews, 115 remarks

great variety in adult education – 24

Sunday School – 12

the school – 10

professors/experts teach us – 9

Bible studies – 9

preaching – 6

through service and volunteering – 6

confirmation – 5

hymns/music – 3

liturgy/worship service – 3

youth group – 2

book club – 2

film club – 2

new member class – 2

small groups for persons at various stages in life 2

the Sunday lessons – 2

Mentioned once each (16): fellowship, library/librarian, Scouts, Vacation Bible School, ministry fair, high school, mentoring, blog, Saturday educational opportunities, supper shuffles, first communion instruction, Grace Family Night, baptisms, this process of Discovery, concerned there are no more children's sermons, people with small children have trouble taking advantage of adult education but want to

Recommended questions to consider

1. Adult education is the runaway favorite here. Continuing education for all, offered in a stimulating, challenging way is very important to your members. You have the best of leaders (professors and other experts) come to you, and you market the opportunities well. This is outstanding. How can you use your strong intellectual tradition, your ability to learn from people, and your habit of gathering much information in your work of discerning the mission God has in mind for you? How does God's mission for you shape the learning that you offer?
2. Of course the school and the children's education programs come up here as well. Your identity is closely linked to learning at all ages. What public learning events do you or might you host for nonmembers as well as members? What is your role as a learning provider in the community? And what might your particular gifts and your fondness for children have to do with potential public learning events?