

Summary of the Church Innovations Reading Team's Report to Grace Lutheran Church

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The Church Innovations report presented the major findings of a self-study by members of the congregation about the character of worship, education, and involvement of members, as well as the congregation's responses to community and congregational changes; it also suggested follow-up questions for possible use in further study. The self-study consisted of 26 interviews of Grace members (of different ages, length of membership, and depth of involvement) gathered in fall 2008 by the Listening Leaders. This summary condenses and gathers those findings and the follow-up questions into eight topics.

As we consider what God is calling our congregation to do, we hope that the report and summary will be used to build on the strengths of Grace Lutheran Church and to address problem areas as opportunities for further growth.

Worship

Worship, music, and rituals are meaningful signs of God's presence for us. Festival services and funerals offer experiences of profound worship. The participation of children in worship (particularly in the Christmas Eve children's services) is meaningful to many members. Some want more contemporary or informal worship to attract young people and more diversity, yet our identity is connected with traditional "high" Lutheran worship.

How can we strengthen the connection between worship and our daily lives? How do we decide who participates in worship, and does our excellence sometimes hinder broader participation? What kind of leadership does it take to include children in worship? How are special ideas like the Maundy Thursday footwashing and Holiday Blues services initiated? How can we innovate without losing substance and the connection to our tradition? Is there more we could do to make newcomers (including those from diverse traditions) feel welcome at our worship services and understand the rituals that we find meaningful?

Participation and involvement

Grace is large, but its many small groups allow people to feel connected and related to others of similar ages and in similar life circumstances or to come together for a common purpose.

Who manages these small groups administratively and spiritually? How are they connected formally and informally with the church's mission? The concern for excellence seen in many Grace activities is admirable, but does this concern sometimes hold people back? Can we do more to ensure that all types of people feel welcome in our community? Are there ways that people are kept "out"?

Outreach and service

Outreach is a strength at Grace and is crucial to its identity. Most see growth in the numbers of young families, greater vibrancy, and more diversity as desirable. At the same time, the traditions of Grace are important to us, and, for the most part, we neither expect nor want much change in our congregation.

How is the internal life of the church shaped by outreach? How do we decide what outreach to do? How do we relate to the people we're reaching out to? How do we reach out to those who are different from us—people who are not as well-educated or who have different backgrounds, sexual orientations, or economic levels? In what ways can we reach out to our local community more? And how do we discover the gifts and strengths of our members so that they are matched to the most appropriate opportunities for service? How can we make our

special experiences at Grace meaningful to the wider community? What would we be willing to part with to attract more young families and become more vibrant and diverse?

Caring and support

Many of us perceive Grace as a nurturing, emotionally supportive congregation. In times of grief and stress, we see signs of God's presence in the caring words and deeds of fellow members. People also appreciate small groups started for particular needs.

How have we learned to give this nurturing and support so well that so many people mention it as a sign of God's presence, and how might we teach other congregations to do this? How are the support groups started, and who is involved? Who is managing these small groups administratively and spiritually?

Learning

Adult education, and learning at all ages, is highly valued at Grace.

How does God's mission for us shape the learning that we offer? How can we use our strong intellectual tradition, our ability to learn, and our habit of gathering information as we work to discern the mission God has in mind for our congregation? What is our role as a learning provider in the community? What public learning events might we host for nonmembers as well as members? And how might our particular gifts and our fondness for children shape the planning of potential public learning events?

Grace Lutheran School

Grace School is seen as a large part of our church's identity. The importance that we place on our youth and the school helps give us hope for Grace's future, but the school is also a source of concern. There is some concern about how families from outside the church membership fit into the school.

What is the mission of the school? 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? Most of our members want a continued school presence, but is this a universal desire? How can we promote open and honest discussion about the school, its pupils, its faculty, and the way it is administered?

Handling of conflict

As is natural in any congregation, conflicts do surface at Grace. Mentioned most often were concerns with Grace School, staff issues, and the decision to serve as a shelter site for the homeless. We deal with conflict in both positive and negative ways.

When things go unresolved, how do the unresolved complaints tend to surface later? When things are resolved well, what goes into reaching the positive resolution? Do we have a process people know about, and if not, how can we arrive at one?

Stewardship

As in most churches, finances are a main cause of anxiety. Grace members are committed to the church's mission and benevolences, but these require a large budget.

How do we see stewardship and giving as part of God's mission at Grace? How does the size of the church help giving and hurt giving? What place does tithing have in our congregation? How does Faith Promise Sunday help to generate interest in giving of time, talent, and resources?