

REFLECTIONS BACK TO CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BIRMINGHAM

From Paul Nixon of The Epicenter Group

Based on Conversations during the weekend of October 23-25, 2020

A hearty thank you to all who shared in this weekend of holy conversation! The Future Church Guidance Team arranged such a great format, including really helpful questions to help drive a fruitful consultation process. The team was strongly in favor of a *live-on-site* consultation rather than simply an online event. In part this was due to the fact that facilities are an important consideration in your church's future. Two of the five themed conversations focused directly on facilities, and the topic came up in the other conversations as well.

I drove onto the grounds of CCB on October 23, greeted with magnificent fall colors at their peak. I walked out from the last meeting around dusk on October 25, greeted by two deer grazing on the lawn. It is magnificent land. My first response was to begin imagining the possibilities of how the church could program ministries to take full advantage of this resource. The buildings are solid, even if a modernized HVAC system is needed in order to maximize their use in the decades ahead. The design was ahead of its time for the mid-1960s, with a large gathering space adjacent to the worship room. The worship room is excellent acoustically and offers excellence as a concert venue. The kitchen is updated well for food service. Restroom capacity should be expanded. However, as I listened to one church member after another sharing their deepest longings for the ministry of CCB, it became **apparent that this land and the facilities are not clearly aligned with your vision**. It is equally apparent to me that the million dollars (or more) needed to take the campus to peak usability may not be the best use of a million dollars, given who CCB is called to be.

I believe the most pressing work ahead for you is to **articulate your vision** of how you want to bless the world (which grows from your values). This will not be especially difficult work, as you are more developed in terms of shared values than the typical congregation. **Beyond this vision clarification/articulation, two parallel explorations should be pursued: (1) consideration of how CCB might live into its vision while remaining based on its current campus, (2) consideration of what an alternative future might look like without the constraints of the current campus and a wider array of possibilities for ministry location.** In any case, no twenty-first century church should limit ministry to a single location. You can and should meet and serve in multiple locations, with greater visibility to the community around you. You can and should also use online possibilities creatively and liberally. There will come a critical moment of decision in the near future where you will move boldly ahead based on your affinity with the possibilities that emerge from one or the other of these explorations. I do not recommend investing in the HVAC or restroom upgrades on your current facility until you are clearly committed to continuing to base ministry in this facility for at least ten years. And given that such upgrades are essential, you will need to work

diligently to assess fully what your ministry could like with and without the current facility and grounds, that you sit with these possibilities for a prayerful season of weeks, and then make a call one way or the other.

I urge you to trust that the process is part of the fun! Be open to the possibilities and the costs entailed in terms of either staying or moving and allow yourself to be convinced one way or the other as you learn and imagine together. There is a show on HGTV called *Love it or List It* where a family's home is renovated by one of the show's hosts, while the other host helps them find an alternative home that contains what the family has said they most need in a home. Then the family picks to stay or to sell and trade homes. In each case, the new home is arguably more practical for that family's stated lifestyle needs. And yet, in at least ninety percent of cases, families choose to stay in their familiar home after renovations. With this TV show offering a window into how human beings relate to places they have learned to love and call home, it is clear that you would need to articulate a compelling vision of what is possible apart from the current campus in order to make such a bold move. Through it all, pray that God will help you to come together in reasonable consensus to live faithfully into your values and vision in either scenario. CCB's Readiness 360 report revealed that big decisions could be extra difficult for you. It will be critical that the months leading toward a decision about church location/facility be marked by prayer, playfulness, trust, regular reaffirmation of your vision, and clear/redundant communication. You have learned anew in this Covid-19 season that your church transcends location and facility. You have discovered that even without gathering at the historic church grounds, you are still fully CCB!

Beyond this season of discernment related to vision and facility, it will be important for you to reenter life gathered together physically outside, and then hopefully inside in 2021, as Covid-19 risks decline. **Re-gathering well is critical to your future.** This gathering may begin outdoors in summer 2021 in the same ways that you have gathered for many years during the summer months. Hopefully, by October 2021 it will be safe to re-enter your indoor facilities together, likely with safety protocols and some degree of social distancing still in place. As you gather in 2021, please do not go backwards. Move forward. Your worship will be hybrid, both online and in person physically. The content of worship, the use of video, the range of music – this has all been stretched in 2020 – don't move backwards when you gather physically! Take the joyful creative worship of the Covid months back into your sanctuary! Regardless of long-term questions about your use of this facility, make any necessary technological upgrades to the worship space for the church you are becoming. Accept that in the disruption of the Covid-19 crisis, there has also been gift to you as a church as you have adapted. (More this under point 4 below.)

The following big ideas linger with me, in the wake of our conversations:

- 1. Reimagining your ministry precedes strategy decisions, including building.**
 - Your values should drive everything.
 - Finding the intersection between your values and the lives of those around you is essential. That is where great ministry happens.
 - The clearer you are on the emerging vision, the easier everything else is.
 - You could make a case for thriving at your current campus or elsewhere. I lean toward elsewhere, but you will have to weigh the best scenario for staying versus a strong scenario that could be cultivated for elsewhere. Count the cost in staying *well* vs. leaving well. In other words, make a fair comparison.
 - You can and should do the re-imagining work before any pastoral transition and profile writing. I stand ready to work with the Future Church Guidance Team in developing an appropriate process for this work.
 - As you further clarify the kinds of people whom you believe represent significant future at CCB, it will help in clarifying the best strategies. This focus population drives the relevance conversation. As I imagine your focus population:
 - I am seeing persons of all ages who are **looking for a social justice-driven Christianity** or spirituality.
 - **Progressive Parents** who want to give their children faith in a progressive environment.
 - Persons who have previously been **marginalized** in terms of social power finding community here where their gifts can be received.

- 2. Big changes are in the offing in the way you structure your ministry financially, organizationally and facility-wise. SUSTAINABILITY!**
 - Either you will make a major commitment to ministry leveraging the current facility (with new HVAC and expanded restrooms) or you will move beyond there.
 - If you move, you will likely choose to have less building, more flexible and a good value.
 - Partnering and intensive multi-use per space is essential.
 - You may discover that partnering with non-church entities is more helpful than with other churches.
 - Ultimately sustainability is more about growing your church's relationships than money! (See point number 5.)

- 3. Online strategy is critical, from YouTube and Zoom experiences to key word optimization @ your website, helping you to find your people –**

even the ones who don't know yet that God would like to gather them with you.

- Online worship is with you forever, along-side physical gathering.
- Look for ways to build relationship with online participants, even if it is partly automated.
- Live-in-person experiences will continue to be the main driver of church life for the foreseeable future.
- Search engine optimization is critical and urgent. If I am within 10 miles and type the words social justice church, liberal church, or any other kinds of words, CCB should be algorithmed to pop near to the top of the first page of search results.
- Web-based buzz may become your primary visibility – your drive-by appeal. But even with a good online strategy – it will likely not be enough to stop your church's steady shrinking.

4. Joyful energized gathering is essential if people are to make time for church in a busy existence. Joy is at least as important as relevance, and maybe more so.

- In the coming years, in both online and physical gathering, mainline Protestants (and CCB participants in particular) will increasingly long for joy, creativity, celebration and a wider musical and emotional range. This is not about mirroring non-denominational or Pentecostal worship – at all. It is about joyfully being you as you gather in worship. And as younger and more diverse persons gather with you, both in person and online, it is about allowing worship style and tone to shift in reference to the church's shifts.
- Less physical space is needed when a certain percentage of your worship community consistently engages online any given week. When a room is too empty, the people energy leaks out.
- To this end, we recommend that the room is at least 30 percent full as often as possible, and 50 percent plus most of the time. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways. One way is by increasing and decreasing the amount of seating per Sunday, so that the gathering area is diminished even as the walls of the room stay where they are. Many cathedrals and historic churches in Europe have done this for decades with use of chairs as opposed to fixed seating.
- Those same cathedrals, which have used movable seating for many years, are also now employing video screens widely. The National Cathedral in Washington DC employs a variety of strategies to bring greater impact to their worshippers, including both multi-media screens, varying configuration of chairs and a wider range of music than they likely had thirty years ago. They do this with high church Episcopal dignity. (One reason that many Protestants with Calvinist heritage may lag in this evolution of twenty-first century worship is old iconoclastic traditions –

minimizing visual art in worship. I encourage CCB to embrace all sorts of art in worship more than ever before!)

5. Shift from Attractional Model to a Relational Model for Community building.

- Attractional growth strategies rarely work for small churches. You will reach a few life-time UCC-ers looking for a home church along with a handful of folks looking for a social justice focus – but the trickle of people you will receive this way will not enable you to grow or hold even as you lose other people.
- The key metric is accumulated types of non-member relationships. This alone could offer significant energy for the process of reimagining ministry.
- You should design ministry experiences and discern between choices of ministry investments based on the question: how does this help us to build a spiritual neighborhood.
- Community Organizing is critical – and experience with /knowledge of community organizing practices could be a critical skill for future staff.
- You would be wise to choose staff around these values and skills:
 - Are they in sync with a justice-forward approach to faith?
 - Are they willing to embrace new technology and ways of gathering?
 - Are they willing to embrace the metrics of collecting relationships? (not about extroversion)

6. Covid-19 is helping you:

- Worship is morphing in a creative and constructive direction. And it has nothing to do with a traditional/contemporary polarity.
- You are catching on to how little you need or use a big building – how much ministry is possible beyond a building.

I look forward to continued conversation with the Future Church Team on November 11 at 8 p.m. EST. The next steps beyond processing the above thoughts is to clarify agreed-upon priorities for action in 2021, likely beginning with the re-imagining work, and perhaps a couple other areas which will become clear to you as we think together.