

Holy Conversations: A Strategic Vision Process

Westminster Presbyterian Church

February 2022

Revised

“If God calls you, you shall say,
‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’”
– 1 Samuel 3:9



“There is no power equal to a community
discovering what it cares about...
Real Change begins with the simple action of people talking
about what they care about.”
– Margaret Wheatley



“Don’t ask what the world needs.
Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”
– Howard Thurman



“Strategic planning is a structured conversation
about what a group of people believe
God calls them to be or to do.”
– Gil Rendle and Alice Mann

Table of Contents

Page 4 Team Members

Page 5 Executive Summary

Page 11 Slogan & Purpose Statement

Page 12 The Effect of a Pandemic

Page 13 Recommendation One

Page 19 Recommendation Two

Page 23 Recommendation Three

Page 25 Recommendation Four

Page 27 Recommendation Five

Page 29 An Invitation to Discipleship

Holy Conversations Team Members

Jim Cramer

Catherine Fessenden

Aja Hahn

Shavonn Lynch (co-chair)

Linda MacKay

Susan Marteney

Kim Patch (co-chair)

and

Rev. Patrick Heery

Executive Summary

WHAT WE'VE DONE

Holy Conversations had its first meeting in October 2019. At that time, we were a group of seven individuals, chosen by Session, and joined by Rev. Patrick Heery, with the goal of conducting a purposeful and meaningful conversation about who we are as a church, what God is calling us to do, and how we are going to achieve those objectives. Some of us had been members of the church for many years, and others of us were relatively new. What we all had in common was a shared love for the church and its future, as well as feelings of uncertainty as to what this process would entail and where it would lead.

In the early months of this process we engaged in deep prayer about the presence of God in our individual lives, the church, and the community. We read Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* and excerpts from the book after which the group was named, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*. These readings provided context for what we were being asked to do. They were a guide to help us navigate the ambiguous waters of this process.

We then delved into the history of Westminster Presbyterian Church. We read Westminster's New Beginnings and Mission Studies as well as *150 Years: A History of Westminster Presbyterian Church*. Each of us interviewed a long-time member of the church. We knew that if we wanted to write the story of Westminster's future we had to understand the story of its past. That history has shaped the identity and values of our congregation, clarifying for us what should—and should not—change. A lot of good work was done with the New Beginnings and Mission Studies. We did not want to simply replicate (or discard) what had already been done, but rather we wanted to build upon its legacy and move forward.

Our next task was to listen. Through this journey, it was important that we didn't create a plan solely based on our own desires and vision. We needed to hear what the congregation was desiring and seeking. We needed to hear how God was working through our church. The goal appointed to us by Session was to listen to the people and the Spirit moving among them. It was to ask what makes Westminster come alive, and go do it. To accomplish this, we organized adult forums, regularly communicated with Session, invited feedback through newsletter articles, and we each conducted one-on-one interviews with members of the church. We asked them the following questions:

1. During this COVID-19 shutdown, and its new way of being church, what have you liked? What have you missed? What haven't you missed?
2. Tell me about a time when you have felt really alive and felt joy. What gives you purpose? What is most important to you? Have you ever felt that at church?
3. Tell me about what worries you right now. What are you concerned about? What keeps you up at night? What is causing you stress?
4. How do you practice your faith, in both your personal life and in the community? What's missing that you wish was there?
5. What do you seek/expect from Westminster? What would you change? What would you keep the same?

Our goal was to discern faith practices, expectations, and deepest hurts and joys. As we listened to the congregation, we gleaned patterns and commonalities that became the basis for our recommendations.

As we conducted our one-on-one interviews, we read and reviewed information that would help us gain a deeper understanding of the church, the community, and the Holy Spirit. We read Joan Gray's *Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice*, which contrasts rowboat churches (driven by their own efforts toward a set destination, often leading to burn-out, risk aversion, and an inward focus) and sailboat churches (which cooperate with the wind of the Spirit, allowing God to empower us and guide us to unknown destinations).

We reviewed data from the church and the community including membership statistics, worship trends, and neighborhood demographics. We recognized that as a church we are not an island. Rather, we are part of a larger community. The data we reviewed allowed us to appreciate how God is at work in and around our church. It led us to acknowledge the discrepancies that exist between Westminster and the surrounding area. Understanding this allowed us to envision a way for our church to better serve our members and the community.

We also immersed ourselves in Scripture to let God's word guide us. We each were tasked with finding a Scripture reading that called out to us as being relevant to our church and the process of Holy Conversations. We came together and discussed these Scripture readings. We selected 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and Matthew 25:35-40 as being the foundation and guide for this season in Westminster's life. In Samuel 3:1-10, Samuel is being called by God, but he doesn't realize that it's God who is speaking to him at first. Once he realizes it is God calling to him, he is able to open his heart and truly listen. We felt that this perfectly described our goal: to recognize God's voice and to listen. The second Scripture reading of Matthew 25:35-40 was selected to be the vision of where we are going as a church. It describes that in serving the hungry, the poor, the sick, we are serving Jesus. Westminster has made it clear time and time again that service to others is a priority. Session voted to join the Presbyterian Church (USA) and our Presbytery of Cayuga-Syracuse in becoming a Matthew 25 Church, which means that we are a church that meets Christ in our neighbor—in each other. We are a church that values, above all else, relationships, community, and love, whether that's in greeting an old friend at worship or volunteering at a soup kitchen or advocating for the full inclusion of God's people.

We conducted an adult forum with the congregation to summarize our work in April 2021. We felt that it was important that the church knew what we were doing and had the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback to us. We then worked to analyze the information before us and draft our recommendations.

After presenting our draft to Session and the congregation in January, and receiving feedback, the Holy Conversations team prayerfully reflected on what we had heard and made changes to the report accordingly.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

As we journeyed through this process, several themes emerged including feelings of burnout among members, the importance of interpersonal relationships and the need for a sense of belonging, the desire for a deeper faith and prayer life, a love for the special services and events offered by the church, and the importance of mission and service of others. We heard about the love for the traditional style of worship and desire for alternate worship styles as well. We learned that our congregation is home to remarkable individuals. Though not the main goal, an added bonus of this journey was getting to know our church and its congregation more intimately.

Whereas Westminster may have once had a fairly homogenous profile (Presbyterian-raised, affluent, well educated, and white), that is no longer the case. We are a congregation of diverse religious, family, and economic backgrounds (though our racial diversity is still limited). Many of us did not grow up in Auburn or Presbyterian. Many are new to Westminster, having joined only in the last decade—while there are many others who have belonged to the church for more than 30 years and even grew up here as a child. Most members have children but not all; we have people who are divorced, widowed, remarried, or living as single parents; we have families of adopted and foster children, people with disabilities, immigrants, varying education levels, and experiences of both affluence as well as poverty. Many members have experienced great pain or loss in their lives, and that hurt drives them to help others out of empathy—which seemed to be the one linking element in this diverse congregation, a desire to love and be loved in a safe place.

Many members struggle with intense and demanding jobs and health and family situations, making it hard to participate in church life. Many who do not regularly participate reported a desire to do so but were prioritizing family (a spouse, grandchildren, etc.) who may worship elsewhere or not at all (or who may live elsewhere).

Members find the greatest joy and purpose in relationships (family, friends, church, children), music (singing at church), and helping others. Other prominent joy themes include nature (animals, hiking, and gardening), the arts, reading, cooking, and physical activities such as cycling, skiing, golf, and running.

Many are concerned for the state of the nation and world but the issues of concern ranged widely: racism, immigration, women's rights, gun violence, the economy, the environment, healthcare, loss of civility, the pandemic, and political polarization. There was, however, a near universal concern for family, with many worried for the health, aging, or welfare of a child, grandchild, parent, spouse, sibling, or themselves. Some reported loneliness and estrangement.

Faith belief and practice vary widely also, ranging from the very committed to those who aren't even sure they believe in God. Major emphases included helping others, personal prayer, music, and experiencing God in places such as the woods, concerts, or at home. Many do not regularly participate in the life of the church, and do not perceive God as being active in their daily life. They primarily want to be good people who help others and live happy lives.

As for expectations for Westminster, members almost universally seek a welcoming, inclusive congregation that offers friendship and belonging, strong member care, community engagement,

and meaningful music, sermons, and learning opportunities. Many value our traditional worship style and music, placing great importance on our organ, choir, and congregational hymn singing, though a significant minority expressed a desire for more modern expressions of music and worship, and many were pleased with Westminster's online offerings. A number of people said that social justice was important to them, but not everyone, not even a majority. Many spoke of a church that is open to questions and different ideas and beliefs, a church that fosters critical thinking and the life of the mind. Others named special services, children's programming, and adult forums as important to them.

When asked about what they would like to change, many expressed a desire for more opportunities to worship, more community engagement, and strategic church growth. Many were adamant that they did not want to lose our buildings, our traditional Sunday worship and organ, or our commitment to intellectual, theological, and identity diversity.

More than anything, this is a church that wants to love each other and provide a welcoming place for all, where we can grow closer to each other and to God. That may sound generic until you consider the possible alternatives: churches that prioritize doctrinal orthodoxy, passionate worship, social justice, earth care, evangelism, piety, overcoming sin, or exclusivity. Some of these are important to members and to both our church's history and theology, but they do not define the prevailing culture of Westminster or represent all members.

SPIRIT OF RECOMMENDATION

Much of what we are recommending in this document is occurring within the church already. Times are changing, and with it, the church must change as well. It is not our intention to throw out all that is good and right within Westminster currently. It is a wonderful church, filled with hard-working, dedicated people. Our sincere hope is to build on the sounds of change that are whispers at present, but long to be loud roars in the future, thereby rejuvenating the weary, healing the broken, calling to the outsider.

We believe that these recommendations will thus feel familiar and hopeful, as they seek to build on what we are already doing so well.

However, we know that some of these might intimidate us. That's OK. Westminster Presbyterian Church has a robust history of embracing Spirit-led change in order to be more faithful to the needs of the time. When our founding pastor, Rev. Henry Fowler, was removed from his pastorate at Second Presbyterian Church for his strident abolitionist leadership, he and many others formed what was then Central Presbyterian Church. Whereas many congregations at the time sold pew seats and thus segregated the wealthier from the poorer, Central was bold: it distributed pews on a random lottery system, thereby inviting people of all economic strata to sit beside one another. Just as bold was its decision to give its women members a vote in the decisions of the congregation, roughly sixty years prior to women's suffrage in the nation. Over the years, Westminster has embraced other significant changes: the ordination of women as elders (Midge Drummond being our first) and pastors (calling Rev. Cyndie Crowell as our pastor and sponsoring the ordination paths of a number of a future women pastors); the building of the education building in the 20th century for expanded ministry; the hiring of an associate pastor; the creation of the unique Children's Worship Center; the decision to become a welcoming and

affirming church for people of all sexualities, gender identities, and (dis)abilities; the creation of REACH and a new approach to children's and youth ministry.

Westminster adopted these changes through careful listening, planning, and prayer, and always balanced its transformations with a clear commitment to what does not change: our Presbyterian identity as the people of God saved by grace, called to love God and neighbor, to serve the community, to thoughtfully engage questions of faith, to welcome all, and to honor the lordship of Jesus Christ over each person's conscience (such that we embrace a diversity of ideas and beliefs).

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATION

Our recommendation has emerged from the lengthy process of listening and discernment detailed above. It has five components:

1. Reorganize our ministry leadership: Westminster replaces its traditional committees with a seasonal structure, consisting of a single team coordinating all ministries during each liturgical season, augmented by staff, the necessary administrative committees, and a leaner Session and Deacons.
2. Invite small group ministries: Westminster develops a small group ministries program, allowing for individuals to deepen their relationship with one another and strengthen their faith.
3. Prioritize special services and events: Westminster plans at least one special service or event each season, with the goal of meeting the needs of the church and larger community by offering a space for healing, celebration, and outreach.
4. Enhance the worship experience: Westminster adds an additional weeknight worship service as an extension of Sunday morning worship. With a less formal structure, this complementary service provides an opportunity for members to explore additional worship styles while deepening their faith.
5. Grow our community witness: Westminster communicates to its members and those in the community that they are loved by God and by our church. It does this by having a strong community presence with a consistent message of love. Westminster adopts a church slogan that represents the essence of the church to those in the community and helps us define our mission.

We encourage Westminster Presbyterian Church to experiment with these recommendations for the next 12-18 months. Have fun with them! Try them out! We recognize that our recommendations, while rooted in years of research, prayer, and listening, are theoretical at this time and, when implemented, may look different than we had anticipated. Some of these recommendations may need to be altered or even abandoned entirely. The Spirit will reveal this to us in time if we open our hearts and listen. Along this journey of experimentation, we recommend frequent opportunities for review, providing church members an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and on the effectiveness and faithfulness of these recommendations. We recommend quarterly adult forums and Session discussions, as well as surveys to be conducted every six months, a Facebook group where feedback can be shared, and exit interviews with ministry teams after each season (to be conducted at their final meeting).

You will also notice that these recommendations do not provide a measurable, quantifiable end point. That is intentional. We are to be led to where the Spirit intends, and these are the recommendations that will hopefully get us there. These are intended to be action-oriented, process-focused recommendations that will spark changes in the church that will grow and lead to beautiful, meaningful, life-giving, faith-strengthening outcomes. While we certainly hope those outcomes may include increases in church membership, we cannot make that promise. Our goal is simply to practice God's calling better—to be an even more loving home that shares the good news of Christ, to cultivate an even deeper sense of belonging, to take this vision of home into the community where we can engage new people. In being a home to the spiritually homeless, we believe we have discovered God's purpose and vision for our life together as a church. So, let's go do it, and see where God takes us!

In addition, we encourage Session and the congregation to consider how best to resource these ministries. The Holy Conversations team believes that additional staffing may be necessary, such as the creation of an associate pastor, but recognizes that such changes would bring considerable financial and other implications and thus warrant further examination. Whatever is decided, however, it is essential that there is adequate leadership and support to fulfill these recommendations.

Westminster Slogan

Where You're Already Home

Westminster **Vision** Statement

Westminster is a church that seeks to love each other and provide a welcoming home for all, where we can grow closer to each other and to God.

Westminster is called to be a home to the spiritually homeless, where we share the good news of Christ, worship God with all our mind, body, and soul, cultivate inclusive belonging, and take that vision of a loving home into the community and its hurting places.

We do so because God first loved us.

Explanation

Over and over again, we heard the same thing from members: what they seek in Westminster is *home*. It may be an extension of their experiences of home, or it may be the home they never had. They seek—and we believe others in our community seek—a place where they belong, fully and authentically themselves, without judgment, safe, loved, and empowered to love. Home can challenge us, unsettle our assumptions, demand better from us, and invite us to grow, but it always does so in a context of welcome. We know that even when we fall short, the door will be open to us, arms waiting to embrace and forgive us. Home is a calling to take that same love out into the world and share it with others.

Home is God. For, God is our source and our being.

Home is whenever we perceive God in another human being, as Jesus instructs in Matthew 25, stating that whatever we do to our neighbor, we do to Christ.

Home is meeting God in relationships and community.

Home is never homogenous. We have different desires, beliefs, and experiences. We may disagree fundamentally. We may not even always “like” each other; differences may grate or challenge us; we may disappoint each other. But, because we love each other, and are commonly loved by this home, we remain. We remain committed to one another and to the shared purpose of this home.

Home is knowing that, no matter what else happens, this place you call “home” will still be there. Home is the grace of God, and Westminster has the special honor of being the bearer of that grace, that home.

The Effect of a Pandemic

When we began this process in October 2019, no one anticipated a pandemic that would close the church buildings and fundamentally alter how we do ministry and even live our lives. We also did not anticipate a number of personal tragedies, including family deaths, and other stressors in the lives of our team members. Combined, these changed our timeline, mission, and tactics. We are not where we thought we'd be when we began this process.

One team member had to take a hiatus from the work for nearly nine months. Another resigned from the team altogether, in order to focus on personal needs. And yet another left the team in September 2021 due to the acceptance of a new job.

Our timeline was extended by at least six months. Many of our meetings took place online. We had intended to conduct all one-on-one interviews in person, followed by house meetings. The restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic led us to adapt. Some one-on-ones were conducted in person; some transpired over the phone or via Zoom. In place of the house meetings, we organized a couple adult forums. While we conducted approximately 80 one-on-one interviews, we were not able to interview everyone, either because of lack of response, health safety concerns, or the loss of team members and time in the process.

The lack of in-person worship and the changes to the internal functioning of the church challenged communication, and meant we were not as front and center for the congregation as we intended. Some members may have, as a result, felt disconnected from the process. Indeed, many of us have felt disconnected in general over the course of the last two years of mandated distancing—to church, to family, to community, to everything.

Nevertheless, the Spirit of God empowered us to persist, leading us in unexpected, blessed directions.

The pandemic propelled much change by necessity, prompting some of the changes Holy Conversations may have recommended (such as live streaming). It inspired us to become a sailboat church, open and adaptive to change, inspiring us to live into the ambiguities of listening prayerfully to God and God's people. We discovered an immensity of creativity, resourcefulness, and gifts we didn't even know we had.

Holy Conversations seized the opportunity to conduct an audit and examine what we could live without and what was vital to our life as a church. We discovered that our committee work had already changed because of the pandemic and could indeed become more creative and efficient. We discovered that worship could remain traditional while also growing more intimate and passionate. We observed the small groups, such as Refresh, which not only persisted but grew. We witnessed members and leaders step up in new ways to love and serve each other and our community. We also noted the increased exhaustion of those same members and leaders.

We believe that God has been present with us through this pandemic to help us become the church we are called to be and to clarify the mission of Holy Conversations.

Recommendation One: Reorganize Ministry Leadership

SUMMARY

Westminster replaces its traditional committees with a seasonal structure, consisting of a single team coordinating all ministries during each liturgical season, augmented by staff, the necessary administrative committees, and a leaner Session and Deacons.

RATIONALE

Several years ago, Session and the pastor recognized that Westminster's existing model of ministry leadership was no longer working as effectively as it once had. Some committee chairs were struggling to recruit members, or lacked even a chair. The Nominating Committee was increasingly find it difficult to recruit elders and deacons. A small cadre of devoted individuals were doing the majority of the work of the church; many, including the pastor, were reporting exhaustion, over-extension, and burnout. Members who had given decades of faithful service were seeking to lessen their commitments, due to retirement, grandchildren, travel, health challenges, or simply a desire to pass on the baton to a new generation. There were of course fewer members of those younger generations in the church to begin with, and while many sought to serve just as faithfully, they contended with modern pressures of work, parenting, finances, and education.

In response, Session, Deacons, committee chairs, and the pastor began to explore new ways of organizing our ministry. Some committees began meeting every other month, in order to reduce the commitment and foster more long-range planning. Some recruited temporary project leaders (someone to coordinate a single project/event for a discreet period of time) rather than committee members. Some conducted spiritual retreats, team-building efforts, and vision-setting conversations. Some overhauled their agendas and meeting structures. It's of course hard to change (despite our church's history of it), and some of us reverted eventually to the old ways or did not follow through on initial momentum. Other efforts didn't succeed (and we learned as much from what didn't work as we did from what worked). And yet other endeavors were quite successful.

During Holy Conversations' one-on-ones, we heard from many who felt strongly called to serve God and neighbor and to grow in their faith, but who did not want to do so through our traditional committee structure. Either their lives were too fluid and fluctuating to make such long-term commitments, or they did not find the committee experience rewarding and productive. Some reported serving on committees and experiencing redundancy; there were instances when several groups were doing the same thing. They also reported breakdowns in communication, with each group doing its own thing. Most profoundly, it was observed that we often spent more time on church work (administrative tasks) than the work of the church (mission, spiritual formation, worship). Committees, by their very nature, were spending more time on details such as choosing a cake or planning a program (tasks which could have been delegated to an individual) than on prayer, creativity, and vision setting. This wasn't the fault of

any of our dedicated and faithful leaders, who gave abundantly and with great sacrifice. It was simply the result of our structure.

People join a church because they want to grow closer to God and to be shaped as disciples who make a difference in the world. They want to experience wonder, share love, and serve in ways that feel impactful. They don't join to hear reports or debate color of paint or attend committee meetings. Administrative tasks are necessary, but are means to an end, and must never be confused with that end: spiritual growth and discipleship. If we as a church are spending more than half of our time in administrative tasks, there is a problem.

This wasn't always the case. Clearly, Westminster's existing committee model worked effectively for many decades, with the involvement of many faithful leaders. Nationally, the church committee model took shape in the mid-20th century, when pews were full and the culture was largely Christian. It drew its inspiration from the booming economic sector, which employed many of its church members: middle management.

Times, however, have changed. There are fewer members; the culture is largely secular; in many cases, both parents work outside the home, sometimes several jobs, or households are led by busy single parents; we are connected (and exhausted) 24/7 through technology and media; and there are far more options and demands competing with the church. Moreover, the middle management model has decreased in the economic sector, increasingly replaced with more entrepreneurial, collaborative, and creative models (picture Google).

In order to be faithful, effective, and efficient, Westminster's model of ministry leadership needs to change with the times. Our commitments do not change; it's simply our way of implementing those commitments that changes. Indeed, in many ways, Westminster already practices the recommendation of Holy Conversations through its monthly program planning meeting of committee chairs. This recommendation invites us to streamline and encourage broader participation in that process.

Currently, Westminster's internal organization structure looks something like this:

- Monthly Session (12 members), Monthly Deacons (12 members)
- Monthly or Bimonthly Programmatic Committees (Christian Education, Membership and Evangelism, Mission, Worship)
- Monthly or Bimonthly Administrative Committees (Finance, Personnel, Property)
- Seasonal Committees (Nominating, Scholarship, Stewardship)
- Temporary Committees (Holy Conversation, Organ Restoration)
- Program Leaders (Book Group, Refresh, Westminster Women, etc.)
- Staff (Pastor, Children's and Youth Ministry Director, Organist/Choir Director, Administrative Assistant, Housekeeper, Worship Center Storyteller, Property Caretaker, Nursery Care)
- Monthly Program Planning Meetings and Twice-a-year Calendar Planning Meetings of Staff, Committee Chairs, and Deacons

Feel exhausted reading that? Exactly. This was an effective model for a larger, mid-20th century program-driven church, not a smaller, 21st-century congregation that needs to be nimbler and more community and experience-driven.

RECOMMENDATION

Holy Conversations explored a number of successful ministry leadership models and best practices and resolved on two options: a bicameral model that reduced us to two committees (a spiritual formation team and a mission team), and an emerging **Presbyterian** practice called the “Seasonal Structure.”

To better understand the latter model, the Holy Conversations team researched best practices and congregations already employing a Seasonal Structure. One of the leading churches of this model is The Presbyterian Church of Palatine in suburban Chicago. A number of churches in Central and Upstate New York also employ this method, and have done so for more than a decade, such as the First Presbyterian Church of Caledonia, Twelve Corners Presbyterian Church, and First Presbyterian Church of Chili, each in the greater Rochester area. In fact, that presbytery seems to be one of the originators of this model. Other examples consulted include Trinity Presbyterian Church of Harrisonburg, Virginia, Sashabaw Presbyterian Church in Clarkston, Michigan, and Open Table United Church of Christ in Mobile, Alabama. They have told us that this model is especially good for churches (like Westminster) with older members, snowbirds, busy parents, and others who can’t commit year-round. It’s also very effective for congregations with smaller numbers and people who are burnt out (though it’s also proven effective in larger churches as well). They report rapidly increased participation in the day-to-day ministry of the church. Throughout our experimentation period, we recommend regularly consulting with some of these congregations and their leaders.

Holy Conversations proposes adapting and blending these two models to meet Westminster’s particular character and needs.

Under this new model, Westminster wouldn’t have traditional committees that meet every month. Instead, we would have a single team each season of the liturgical church year, responsible for planning all the ministry and activities of the church, including worship, mission, Christian education, children’s and youth ministry, fellowship/community, communications and witness, special events, and small groups.

There are six seasons (which parallel our newsletter):

January-February (*Epiphany and Life of Christ*),
March-April (*Lent/Easter and Resurrection*),
May-June (*Pentecost and the Holy Spirit*),
July-August (*Life of the Church and Growing with God*),
September-October (*Hearing the Story of God and New Beginnings*),
November-December (*Thanksgiving/Advent/Christmas and Incarnation*).

In each season, the ministry team would consist of four types of people, thus giving everyone a chance to participate in their own way: annual members, seasonal members, advisors, and staff.

Annual members (ideally four to seven leaders) will be appointed by Session and the Pastor and will serve throughout the seasons for the whole year. **Special attention should be given to leadership experience and gifts, as well as an understanding of the Reformed spirit, theology, and principles of our congregation.**

Seasonal members (can be any number) join a single season. Many will serve as project managers, e.g., worship volunteer recruiter, special event organizer, loose change liaison, adult forum coordinator.

Advisors (can be any number) are who may feel like they can't commit to the work of a team, for physical reasons or because of extensive travel, but would still like to participate. Advisors attend the first planning meeting to participate in the study, prayer, and planning, and then they decide how they wish to be involved going forward.

Staff (particularly the Pastor, Music Director, and Children's and Youth Ministry Coordinator) will assist, as consultants and spiritual guides.

Each season, the ministry team studies Scripture together and discerns a theme, and then uses the Scripture and theme to plan all the ministry and activities of the church for that season. The liturgical calendar guides us on our faith journey as we encounter different aspects of Scripture, God's call, the relevant needs of our community, and the life of Jesus.

Each season lasts two months, plus a planning period of two months, so the total time commitment for the seasonal members is approximately four months. **Ordinarily**, no one (other than the annual members or staff) **will serve** on consecutive teams, so each season has its own flavor, and no one gets burned out (**exceptions can be considered by the annual members**). Anyone can join a ministry team; all that is required is the ability to attend the initial planning meeting. The annual members will likely do targeted recruiting, but an open call will be issued through church communications. Each season, the ministry team will select its own chair and will ideally feature a diverse array of voices, including newer and long-time members, youth and young adults, people who have not significantly participated in leadership before, and people of varying backgrounds, theologies, gifts, and abilities. Each team prays, studies, discusses, and works together to do what they feel God is calling us as a church community to do right now. No team is bound by previous teams' activities, only by their own discernment and energy level.

In the event that not many people volunteer to participate in a ministry team, the existing team (annual members, staff, and any seasonal volunteers) will pray and confer to discern why and ways to encourage more participation, remembering that Jesus also struggled to convince people to follow him and become disciples. We invite Westminster to see such challenges as an opportunity—to be creative and collaborative, to better understand barriers to participation, and to turn these problems over to God in trust. Tactics might include testimonials and invitations during worship; adult and youth forums; visual displays and other multisensory approaches; personal invitations; changing meeting times or workload to accommodate working/parenting

and other individuals; social media posts; congregational prayer; and consulting churches already practicing this model. If, after those efforts, there aren't enough people to do a ministry or task, the team is encouraged simply not to do it, rather than overextend the existing leaders. In that way, the congregation will come to understand that ministry truly is a shared calling, and it only happens when all pitch in.

We are also recommending that we reduce the size of Session and Deacons, in order to free more members to serve in other meaningful ways. Every year, we seek 24 elders and deacons, approximately a quarter of our active membership. A reduction is sensible, while still allowing for shared and diverse leadership.

Why do church this way? Short-term ministry teams mean more people can be involved without making year-long commitments, but by having multiple people who are committed to the whole year, we allow for consistency, historical memory, accountability to Session, a clear budgeting process, and the transference of experience **and Reformed theology** from season to season. The work of each season begins with Bible study, and Scripture is the focal point for all that we do. Session and Deacons can concentrate on the work they were meant to do—administration of the church resources and pastoral care of its members. The entire congregation has a hands-on opportunity to plan and implement the ministries of the church with less risk of burnout. Our staff helps the teams bring meaningful and awesome faith experiences to the congregation. Every season brings new encounters with God & new blessings from the Spirit!

In many ways, Westminster has been practicing something like this already with its program planning group. This invites us to grow what we're already doing, inviting more people to be involved and fostering a more spiritually driven and efficient process. In addition, this recommendation is an expression of the 2017 Vision Statement of Children and Youth Ministry for Westminster, proposing an integrated, intergenerational approach to ministry that blends worship, learning, and service.

What about ongoing things that need their own committees? There would still be the necessary administrative committees that oversee the financial and property sides of the church, and some ongoing ministries may still want their own leadership (Gilchrist Scholarships, Pride House, etc.). Everything else falls under the leadership of a season's ministry team, or of the Session and Deacons directly.

So it'd look something like...

- Monthly Session (9 members), Monthly Deacons (9 members)
- Ministry Team (operating seasonally with annual and seasonal members, advisors, and staff)
- Administrative Committees (Finance, Personnel, Property)
- Occasional Committees (Nominating, Scholarship)
- Staff (Pastor, Children's and Youth Ministry Director, Organist/Choir Director, Administrative Assistant, Housekeeper, Worship Center Storyteller, Property Caretaker, Nursery Care), Technology Director, and Assistant/Associate Pastor (small groups, community among members, responsible for additional prayer/worship service)

IMPLEMENTATION

Begin the implementation of Holy Conversations recommendations and this new organizational structure with a season of Sabbath before actual implementation: March and April 2022, Lent and Easter. We reduce everything to provide rest and breath for the church, its members and leaders, and spiritual discernment, allowing us to begin this process with energy and holy guidance. Give people a break; also help them identify what's important to them and what's not.

During this Sabbath time, worship is pared down to the essentials and freed to be led by the Spirit. In addition, some programs go on hiatus or are practiced in non-labor-intensive ways. Only the life-giving, Sabbath ones remain for those two months. Committees don't meet except when necessary. Session, the Program Planning Group, and the Pastor will help guide determining what's essential and what's not. Individual program leaders can decide if they want their program to continue for those two months or not.

During that time, Session (which would continue to meet) processes and takes ownership of the Holy Conversations recommendations. Session chooses the four to seven members who will constitute the 2022 annual members and prepares a way for people to sign up for the seasons' ministry teams. It begins the process of disbanding existing program committees.

To implement the reduction of the number of Elders and Deacons, if there are those who are truly feeling spent and burnt out, we invite them to step down immediately (in consultation with the pastor and their respective body). Otherwise, there will be a gradual reduction of Session and Deacons over the course of the next three years. Until rewritten, the bylaws will still call for four elders and deacons each year, but the Nominating Committee can nominate only three, leaving one position vacant (just as it did for the congregational meeting in October 2021).

Bylaws will also have to be rewritten and approved by the congregation, but we need to live into this new reality experimentally and transparently before that can be accomplished. Therefore, we recommend that Session acknowledge that certain bylaws during these season of experimentation will not be fulfilled, until an evaluation has been completed and final decisions made by Session for bylaws to be rewritten. For example, some of these committees will still "exist" but not populated or active for this time.

After that time of Sabbath, in May, the new ministry team can form and plan the next season, including the launch of some small groups and other new initiatives, as well as the elimination of programs that are no longer life-giving. That planning process will take one or two months. So they'd plan during May and June, and their season would be July/August. A fuller launch would take place with the next season in September/October, understanding that some things might not be ready for a long time. But the ministry group can plan monthly special events, some small groups (limited number), dynamic worship, education, mission, and so on.

The full slate of small groups, the additional service, certain children's programming, evangelism campaigns, etc. might not happen until 2023. It will take time. But steps can be taken. Perfection doesn't need to be the enemy of the good. Some small groups can start right away. Maybe there's a monthly additional service to begin with. And so on.

Recommendation Two: Invite Small Group Ministries

SUMMARY

Westminster develops a small group ministries program, allowing for individuals to deepen their relationship with one and strengthen their faith.

RATIONALE

Historically, Westminster has always engaged in aspects of small or large group gatherings. Some may recall hearing stories or reading about the “Couples Club” of the 1950s, “Welcome Wednesdays” in the 1960s, and “Music and More” in the 1980s. Groups of members have sometimes gathered informally to share meals, socialize, pray together, or discuss current events. Today, Westminster offers a number of small groups, which gather around a shared experience, interest, or demographic: Westminster Women, Refresh, Book Group, Prison Ministry, Contemplative Hikes, Pride House, Prayer Shawl Ministry, Card Ministry, REACH Children’s and Youth Groups, the Lenten soup and study. Others have served a season and ended, such as Sensory Mitts, the Elder Care Support Circle, the Wednesday Noon Study, or the Rummage Sale.

Regardless of their different goals, one common element unites these disparate groups: the love of people and the hope that the door will open for a relationship with one another and with God. In Holy Conversations’ one-on-one interviews, members consistently expressed a prevailing motivation: love of each other. Members enjoy being together, sharing in the love of Jesus Christ and building strong relational ties.

One long-time member said it well: “Our church family *is* our family; we feel a permanence about that, just as we do about our biological family.”

At the same time, Holy Conversations’ research indicated no single uniting interest. We had thought that certain themes might emerge, like maybe most would be interested in hunger ministry or earth care or children’s education. Interests, instead, varied widely. Thus, it didn’t make sense to recommend that Westminster focus on any particular topic.

What did commonly interest members was relationships.

RECOMMENDATION

Small group ministries are an opportunity for people to deepen those relational ties around shared interests or experiences and connect them with their faith, without becoming an exclusive or secular “social club.” Small group ministries meet people where they are in their faith journey, recognizing some members have experienced different religious upbringings and have varying degrees of comfort with open prayer or displays of spiritual devotion, even while being hungry for spiritual leadership and guidance.

Small group ministries also are descriptive, rather than normative. Instead of telling people what they should care about and getting frustrated when they don't, small group ministries invite people to gather around the topics and experiences that already interest them, the things that are already core to their identities, joys, and hurts. It then invites them to meet God in those spaces. In other words, in our keeping with our theology of grace, God comes to them.

Love gardening? That could be a small group. Want to study the Book of Acts? Small group! Like cooking, or eating Italian? Small group! Want to pray with other people? Small group! Enjoy cycling? Small group! Coping with the challenges of being a parent? Small group!

Small group ministry may take on the appearance of existing groups such as the Book Group or Refresh. It may also take on the appearance of something new. They will all connect an interest or experience with Christian discernment, empowering us to make choices that draw us closer to God's will (*Sailboat Church*, p. 95).

Small group ministries will also nurture leadership among our members. Leadership is a concept we often resist, according to Parker Palmer, who says that we often think "it's immodest and self-aggrandizing to think of ourselves as leaders." Spiritual leadership will be a key component in making the small groups effective in offering spiritual nurturing. Westminster has stand-out individuals who have deep insights into the matters of God, whether sharing a prayer, telling a story grounded in Scripture, expressing words of wisdom gifted from the Holy Spirit. These individuals are resources that may open the way to growing in faith.

Finally, small groups are an excellent way to engage prospective new members, those who are presently only marginally involved, and those who may be uncomfortable with traditional modes of church. Research demonstrates that more people start attending a church through small groups than any other means.

Holy Conversations recommends that we support existing small groups and add more groups, giving structure to a small groups program, which would enhance relationships throughout the church.

IMPLEMENTATION

After the recommended Sabbath, Westminster will organize an adult forum or other opportunities for the congregation to discuss and learn about small groups and how they can enhance spirituality and our relationship with one another. Small groups will be promoted consistently in the bulletin, on social media, on bulletin boards, in paper and electronic communications, and during worship services.

Session and the Pastor should appoint two volunteer assistants to work with the ministry teams, each season, in launching the small groups.

Small groups can relate to any topic or experience but do need to align with Westminster's mission and welcome. A form will be created by Session for anyone interested in forming and leading a small group. The Pastor and assistants will review the form and contact the person when they are ready to hear more about the idea and consider approval, communicating with the

ministry team. If resources will be used by the small group, such as a Bible study or a book, they should accompany the form, for review as well. The two volunteer assistants can help with review.

Church leaders will not appoint small groups. Small groups are Spirit- and leader-led. Thus, church leaders will educate and generate excitement around the idea of small groups, inviting members to consider what kind of group they might like to lead. Church leaders will wait for members to come forward to lead small groups. This allows small groups to be organic, not forced. If someone feels they are being called to lead a six-week small group, we should hear them out on the idea. If we try to coerce someone to lead a group who doesn't want to, it will be resented and not Spirit-led. This is why education is so important. If people do not know about small groups, they might miss a calling to lead one.

Small groups can be held in the church or in a person's home or in venues in the community. If it is held in a home, the home-owner is the host. The host is not the facilitator. The host should only be concerned with hosting. The facilitator should only be concerned with facilitating. If a small group is in a home, under the church's name, being promoted by the church, it still has to be approved by the church.

The duration of small groups will vary. They can be seasonal, last a year, or operate indefinitely.

Attendance should be reported to the appointed volunteer in charge of small group attendance, giving the church an idea of interest, growth, and group expansion.

The other appointed volunteer should check in with each facilitator (in person, via phone or email) at least once during the run of the group. If the group is an indefinite group or a yearly group, then once-a-quarter would be appropriate. It will be a short check-in.

The facilitator and host (if being held in a home) will determine the days and times when the small group meets.

The number of participants will also vary. Small groups can be three people, or fifteen, or anything in between.

Small group facilitators should personally tell people about their small group and extend invitations, and not rely on church communications. This reinforces the relationship-building aspect of the small group model. The excitement of facilitators will bring excitement to others. Positivity is infectious, as is negativity.

Holy Conversations recommends having at least two new small groups in place for the July/August launch, promoted as a "summer splash" into small groups. They will be short four-to-six week groups. At least one of the groups, assuming interest of a leader, will be a Bible study, and hopefully the other will be another form of spiritual practice. We feel that educating the church on a small group model will grant permission to people to come forward who have felt they wanted to lead a Bible study or another type of group.

Small group meetings will share a covenant to:

- Respect everyone's time (end on time; do not go more than 15 minutes over);
- Welcome everyone;
- Start out doing what you came to do but not be surprised if led to something else (trust is built in these groups, and people come with emotional and spiritual needs);
- Be ready to grapple with hard or impossible-to-answer questions;
- Respect each other, with confidentiality (when appropriate) and loving interactions.

Facilitators and hosts may or may not want to offer refreshments.

Many questions will arise as Westminster tries out this model. For instance, do we train facilitators? Some churches do. Holy Conversations, at this time, is not recommending training, unless requested by the facilitator. We recommend a less labor-intensive and more organic model. We also recommend and trust that the Pastor and ministry team know if someone is qualified or not to lead a small group.

Each Bible study group should be visited once by one of the appointed volunteers or the Pastor. This is not necessary for support or commonality groups, such as hiking, singing, cooking, or book club.

This is a start. We look for more to be added as we proceed. There are many different ways that churches run their small groups. Regardless of how they are run, there is but one goal, however: more intimate relationships are developed between people in a church.

Recommendation Three: Prioritize Special Services and Events

SUMMARY

Westminster plans at least one special service or event each season, with the goal of meeting the needs of the church and larger community by offering a space for healing, celebration, and outreach.

RATIONALE

Special events and services have been a beloved and cherished part of Westminster Presbyterian Church's ministry to its congregation and the community. In fact, when asked what they love most about Westminster, or why they came to Westminster, members often listed our special services. We have witnessed church growth as a direct result of these special offerings.

These services and events provide the opportunity for people to worship with one another and grow closer to God in a different manner than the traditional Sunday service provides. Many of these services and events address the challenges that people often face, validating the struggles of our congregation and community, while also allowing for people to express authentic, raw emotion that so often we are encouraged to hide and suppress. In addition to being a source of healing for people, these special events and services also are a rich source of celebration. As followers of Christ, we have so much for which to be grateful. These services often allow for dedicated thanksgiving to God for God's many blessings. Finally, special services offer a unique opportunity to welcome and serve guests, seekers, and the unchurched, thereby allowing Westminster Presbyterian Church to let all know that they are loved by God and by us.

Some examples of our recent special services and events include but are not limited to:

- Longest Night Service
- All Saints Sunday
- Blessing of the Animals
- Easter Sunrise Service
- Veteran's Day Service
- Scout Sunday
- LGBTQ Pride Service
- Day of Service
- Deacons Brunch
- Music Festival
- Racial Justice Vigil
- Permaculture Park Day

RECOMMENDATION

Through our conversations with members of the church, Holy Conversations learned that these beloved services and events are a strength of the church and an opportunity for growth. We recommend continuing to build on our offering of special events that specifically identify with the needs and interests of the larger community beyond the walls of the church. The goal is to have one or more special service or event each season to allow for healing, celebration, and outreach. The event or service will meet the current needs of the people, adapting to the ever-changing world in which we live.

IMPLEMENTATION

To implement this and to keep these events and services special and authentic, Holy Conversations proposes that the ministry team for the church convene and recommend, plan, and implement one or more special event/service for that particular season. This would reduce the number of events that are taking place just for the sake of tradition and encourage the creation of events that are serving the current needs of the congregation and the community. These services and events may be combined with our Sunday worship service, but they may be separate as well. There would be opportunities for events to blossom from the formation of the small group ministries as well (instrumental concerts, a shared meal, service to those in need in our community, a time of collective prayer).

Recommendation Four: Enhance the Worship Experience

SUMMARY

Westminster adds an additional weeknight worship service as an extension of Sunday morning worship. With a less formal structure, this complementary service provides an opportunity for members to explore additional worship styles while deepening their faith.

RATIONALE

Westminster Presbyterian Church has long enjoyed a traditional worship service marked by familiar hymns and a comforting order of service. It is from this tradition that many seek refuge from the chaos and stress of life outside of Sunday morning. Each worship service provides an opportunity for people to grow in faith. It is, however, not the only way of growing in faith. There are many in the congregation and the larger community who would appreciate a different style of worshiping and sharing the love of our great God. In addition, while many one-on-one interviews communicated a clear desire to maintain our traditional worship and music, many also expressed a need to extend their discipleship, prayer life, and worship beyond Sunday morning. It is from this desire and longing that our recommendation comes.

RECOMMENDATION

Our recommendation is for an additional, complementary worship experience to take place on an evening each week. The worship service would be less formal and incorporate various styles of music and worship. There would not be a formal sermon or order of service, and the type of service would be open to change and adjustments based on the needs of the congregation. It would probably be offered both online and in person. Options for worship include meditation, collective prayer, music, a time for study and questions, a shared meal or Communion, artistic expression, or devotions. **The complementary service would not need to be static, but could change based on the season, the needs of the congregation, and the vision/talents of the ministry team. For example, the complementary service may look very different in Advent than it would during Lent.** The service would build on the learnings of past offerings, including our 2021 music festival, Real Talk, the Midweek Devotional Service, the Lenten Soup and Study, and the Maundy Thursday service.

Sunday morning will continue to be a “traditional plus” service. The roots of it will continue to be traditional and Reformed, with permission for our congregation to expand upon this tradition where it is fitting and meaningful to do so (as it does currently). The Sunday morning service and the additional, complementary service will build on each other, give meaning to each other, and allow participants to grow in faith using resources that have yet to be tapped into.

This new worship service would be a continuation of Sunday morning’s service rather than an alternative or replacement. Our hope is not to divide our congregation but unite it and offer additional ways of deepening our connection with our Savior and with one another.

IMPLEMENTATION

To start, the additional worship service would take place once a month rather than on a weekly basis. This would allow time to adjust to this change and provides ample time for planning. Each season, the ministry team would be charged with assisting in the planning of each service and recruiting volunteers to participate in leading these services. **There may be seasons where the complementary worship service would be less frequent than weekly. This would be left to the discretion of the ministry team and will likely be dependent on the number of people who are volunteering to plan and implement the service.** Additional staffing may be required to enable this to function smoothly without overburdening any one or few individuals. Small group ministries may complement this additional worship service by contributing music, talents, leadership, prayer, etc. This would be coordinated by the ministry team, each season. It might take place in the sanctuary, the Great Hall, the chapel, outdoors, or elsewhere.

Recommendation Five: Grow Our Community Witness

SUMMARY

Westminster communicates to its members and those in the community that they are loved by God and by our church. It does this by having a strong community presence with a consistent message of love. Westminster adopts a church slogan that represents the essence of the church to those in the community and helps us define our mission.

RATIONALE

Historically, there have been many different ways Christians have sought to share their faith with others. Some of us may immediately conjure images of the crazed preacher waving a Bible and shouting verses at what is perceived to be a sinning crowd with the hope of saving them from eternal damnation. That is clearly not how Westminster chooses to share the gospel. We choose to share the good news of Christ through loving relationships, mutual listening and learning, prayer, and working for change, like our founder Rev. Henry Fowler.

Westminster's welcome statement is clear, and Holy Conversations recommends including disabilities:

*Westminster welcomes everyone, no matter where you are on your faith journey or your life journey. In faithfulness to our understanding of Christ, Westminster affirms the full inclusion of all God's people in the life and ministry of the church. We welcome persons of every race, gender, age, sexual orientation, family status, **ability**, and economic status into full participation in our faith community. We value questions as much as answers. We encourage curiosity, discovery, and honest struggling with questions of faith.*

We wear our love and support of others on our sleeves by installing controversial signs in the front yard. We host LGBTQ services and support youth who are finding their true self through Pride House and its programming. We open our doors to various not-for-profit agencies which have found a comfortable and accessible home. We have long participated in the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Community Service. We engage in respectful interfaith dialogue, seeking to learn from our differences and similarities. We volunteer at soup kitchens, in homeless shelters, and in prisons, loving our neighbors and telling them about the Divine Love that brings us there.

Several years ago, Westminster decided to be a Matthew 25 Church living the theme of loving others, sharing the love of God, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry in spirit and body, offering care to any and all, and doing "good" in the world. Each of us approaches that conclusion from a different direction, but with the same end result in mind.

When new friends attend a service, concert, or public event, our goal is not to convert that person to be more like "us," but rather we seek to meet God in one another, show love, and invite each of us to grow in our life journey with God. We believe each person is on a life journey searching for meaning. We hope people know they are loved by us and by God.

To that end, Westminster seeks, above all else, to share God's love and exhibit actions which show love. Westminster is the "Downtown Church" located in the center of the community and, with our dominating stone building, we are quite visible.

The Holy Conversations team resurrected work done in the past by members as they sought to find a unifying identity, which can translate into a slogan and, perhaps, a logo. "Where You're Already Home" received the most votes. See page 10 for more.

It's been noted numerous times that Westminster does a great deal of good, and is a profoundly loving church, but many in the community don't know about all we offer (though the last few years have seen a great increase in our public presence). It's time to help the community know about us.

Every recommendation in this report will help us affirm God's love in the community and invite new people into the life of Westminster. New leadership structures will invite more people to participate in the dreaming and planning of our ministries. Small groups will provide an interesting and accessible invitation for many who may be seeking "more" but are hesitant to walk through church doors on a Sunday morning. Special events will engage the needs of the community, often bringing people into Westminster who wouldn't typically worship with us. An additional, creative prayer service will provide a friendly, relevant opening to worship. **Through these means we hope to proclaim the gospel and act as the disciples that Jesus would have us be.**

It is the hope of Holy Conversations that some or even most of our concepts catch hold with the congregation allowing us to all spread the Love in our community.

RECOMMENDATION

The team recommends the addition of **ability** to the Welcome Statement to be more inclusive and to align with current practices.

The team recommends that Session adopt the slogan and purpose statement located on page 10, and explores (or appoints a committee to explore) the development of a logo and communications strategy, which creates a buzz and alerts both members and the community when we are out and about spreading God's love. This strategy would build on the already exemplary work done by Jill Fandrich and others through social media, the *Citizen*, photos and videos, PSAs, clothing apparel, banners or signs, events, and other communications.

The team recommends framing recommendations one through four as opportunities to bear witness, share the love of God, form relationships, and potentially grow the church.

IMPLEMENTATION

These steps are fairly simple, but require Session, or appointed committee, to discuss the slogan/logo and to make a decision about augmenting the Welcome Statement.

Westminster can and should continue to be active in community events, mission work, and welcoming people to services and small groups while remembering we are a Matthew 25 church.

An Invitation to Discipleship

From the beginning, Holy Conversations has been motivated by curiosity. We wanted to know this congregation better—its relationship with God, its joys and hurts, its desires for a life of faith. This was never about judging or saying what we wish Westminster was. It was about discovering who we are, and how God is already at work in our midst. We were moved by the love and faith you shared with us, the passion, the insight, and the conviction.

There are many ways to be church.

Westminster (then Central Presbyterian) had a great sense of its mission when it was founded. We were an abolitionist church seeking to model among ourselves and in the world the egalitarianism of the kin-dom of God. For much of the 20th century, there was also great clarity, even though the identity of the church had shifted: now we were a large, program-driven church enjoying the social and intellectual ties of a largely well-educated, affluent congregation. In the 1980s and 90s, we may still have had some clarity, as a congregation centered on families and children's programming. In the 2000s, however, like many churches in a post-Christian national culture, Westminster began to struggle to know its identity and purpose. Some longed for the social justice roots of the church; others longed for the intellectual and social forum that was Westminster at its height; others sought a more vibrant relationship with Christ, or continuity with tradition, or a church brimming with children; some just wanted a place that would love them and bury them when they died. We weren't the big program church anymore, even though in many ways we kept pretending to be, and thus exhausting a lot of our volunteers. As our New Beginnings study stated, we were a church vacillating between a medium-sized pastor-led congregation and a small, family church (where everyone pitches in to care for each other).

The New Beginnings (2011) and Mission Studies (2015) both encouraged Westminster to become a missional congregation, taking its love beyond its doors out into the community, engaging the community in its areas of deepest need and growing the church through intentional, strategic ministries. We were to be the church that loved out loud. They envisioned numerous new ministries for us to begin. Our current pastor, Rev. Patrick Heery, was called by the Pastor Nominating Committee with this express purpose. It's why we've expanded mission in the community, created the LGBTQ Pride Service and Pride House, planned new special services and events, introduced new creativity to worship, partnered with organizations to advocate racial justice, expanded Bible studies and spiritual formation groups, deepened our prayer life, created our new children's and youth ministry REACH, partnered with Scouts, and so on.

Indeed, when Holy Conversations began, part of the expectation was that our visioning would lend focus and clarity to this missional identity, which presently has been "scattershot." We would, for instance, become an earth care congregation, or focus on hunger in Auburn, or concentrate our energies on children's ministry. You may have noticed, though, that Holy Conversations isn't making any of those recommendations. That's because we heard something different during our listening sessions. While many members share this missional vision, it's not representative of the entire congregation—which explains why much of the congregation hasn't participated in many of the new ministries and outreach named above.

The New Beginnings and Mission Studies got this much right: we are called to be a church of love. But what unifies our members in a single purpose isn't a call to missional outreach. That's important, but our identity lies elsewhere: first and foremost, Westminster is home. That's what we universally heard from members.

Westminster is a church called to love each other and God—a congregation that thrives in opportunities to deepen relationships, a people seeking God in their busy, everyday lives, a community committed to the full embrace of all God's children. Our mission is to offer a home to the spiritually homeless—to the person who is seeking belonging, who craves a more “thinking” faith or is at a different place on their spiritual journey, who is lonely or grieving, who has disabilities or health challenges or doesn't know how they're going to pay the next month's rent, who craves a church that embraces the playfulness of children and the gifts of older members, whose sexuality or gender identity or relationship status has been shamed elsewhere, whose race or ethnicity rendered them invisible, who just wants a church where they can be fully and authentically themselves.

In short, we are a relational church. Mission, justice, and outreach will frequently grow out of those relationships, but our core identity is in the home we've discovered here at Westminster.

In this home, there are opportunities for each to choose their own level and areas of engagement.

There are those at Westminster who are content to enjoy Sunday worship, the music, the sermon, and their church friends. They want a place that cares about them and others, and a place that will be there for them when they're struggling. They may join us regularly, or we may only see them a few times a year. And that's pretty much as far as they want to be engaged—and that's OK. There are people whose health or the health of loved ones just doesn't afford them the time or energy. There are people who are retired and travel a lot to visit family or take vacations or winter elsewhere. There are parents who prioritize their children's sports, scouting, and other activities. There are people who work long hours or for whom Sunday morning is their only time off. They care about church. They love God. They have faith. Their priorities, either by necessity or choice, are just elsewhere right now.

At the same time, there are many people who want to be more engaged. They may be parents who want more programming for their children. They may be young or middle adults who want more community and peers, or retired adults who are seeking new purpose. They may be people of all ages who want to grow closer to God and deepen their faith and understanding. They may want opportunities to put their faith into action and participate in the mission of the community. They may want more passionate worship, music, and prayer. They may want more awe and wonder in their lives. They may want the church to grow.

Westminster is already a home. We could change nothing, and we'd remain a home. Indeed, as we experiment with these Holy Conversations recommendations, we may find that we don't want to adopt them—or we may want to reduce their scope (hosting just a few small groups, for instance). We may lose some people over time who will drift to larger churches that offer more. Others may return who drifted away, unsettled by the new directions of the church. The

congregation will probably continue to get older, and Westminster may close in a few decades, possibly seeding a wonderful monetary gift to a new ministry of God. But in the years to come, there will be a loving community that expertly cares for each other, interesting and meaningful worship, and a faithful expression of God's people. And if that's what we want, or what we have energy for, then we should say that, and lovingly accept who we are—stop trying to be things we're not. In that, there would be clarity, relief, and the ability to focus on what is most important to us: Sunday worship, fellowship and member care, occasional educational opportunities, and financial giving to mission causes. We wouldn't need to change much. In fact, we could eliminate a lot that is causing exhaustion or diffusion.

On the other hand, we may discover—may even be surprised to learn—that we are excited and enlivened by these Holy Conversations recommendations and their opportunity for us to be more engaged. They may invite energy, participation, and growth. They may shape a vision of our congregation that has a chance of growing members and in faith. They will do so, not because they're what some consultant advised or the pastor wants or a committee thinks we "should" be, but because these recommendations grow directly out of the joys, gifts, hopes, and faith life of our members. You told us who you are and what you want from this church. These proposals are strategic ways to help Westminster live out your shared vision as a congregation. They are ways for us to build our home, deepen our experience of home, and invite others into this home.

Building a home, of course, takes work. It takes you. The question each of us needs to prayerfully explore over the next 12-18 months, and especially during the upcoming season of Sabbath during Lent and Easter is: Am I willing to be a part of building this home?

You may not know the answer immediately. That's why the Holy Conversations team is recommending a period of experimentation. We want you to try out different forms of engagement and see what fruits the Spirit may bear in your life as a result. Westminster is a brave congregation; we can do this, even if it's new or scary.

There will always be a variety of forms of engagement in our congregation, and that's OK. But we also need a significant portion of this congregation to engage with these recommendations in order for them to be successful.

Once, long ago, along a lakeshore, a young man proclaiming love and the kin-dom of God spoke to fishermen, saying, "Come and see. Come and follow me." Will you come and see? Will you find ways to walk with Christ's church in building God's home, so that it's even more spiritually nurturing, healing, and engaged with the community? When we together say, "Yes!" we become the disciples Jesus imagined: a brave people facing the unknown, with the conviction that God is with us, and the joy of getting to be a part of this wondrous new home God is building for us all.

Amen.