
Holy Conversations

St. John the Apostle United Methodist Church

FINAL REPORT

October 25, 2011



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5/15/11 – “It’s the Right Place, at the Right Time”

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Purpose

Vision 2017 centers in 3 key areas of ministry...

Summary

Appendix G



youth mission trip, pumpkin unloading at the patch, special music worship service

OVERVIEW

There is a time in the life of every church when we are allowed to honor our past, examine our present and dream about the future. That time is now at St. John the Apostle United Methodist Church. God has presented us with a unique tool and a wonderful sense of timing for this process. We are now completing a “Holy Conversation” within our church, centered on 3 critical questions:

- Who are we?
- Who is our neighbor?
- What has God called us to do or be?

Formally, this process is described as “strategic planning as a spiritual practice for congregations.” In reality, what we will accomplish is to help our congregation participate in a “holy conversation” and to talk about the opportunity of planning as discernment. It is called “holy conversation” because it is about our identity as a faith community, our sense of purpose and our relationship to God.

We have been called to look at our church and community from the “balcony.” We are not here to fix problems, but to facilitate a conversation in the church and to look with “fresh eyes” on the church. We are to allow for dreams of our people. We are to listen to our congregation and community and prayerfully develop a plan for our future.

This means being called to change our thinking from “numbers” to “ministry” in our community. The three core values should be servant hood, competence and integrity. We need to always be a purpose-driven church!

It is important to remember that we are working on God’s time, and we will see results in His time. The holy conversation process has given us the freedom to follow God’s agenda, not ours. If we think that God is asking for action at SJA, we need to measure to see if it is by God, for God, dependent on God and glorifying of God. We can do this by asking:

- Does it carry the truth of the gospel?
- Does it have a prophetic voice of love?
- Are we honestly convinced that what we present as a possibility is the most genuine and honest word that we can bring?

There are other points that will apply to every discussion concerning the future of St. John the Apostle, including:

- We are here to invite reflection on where God is calling our church. We cannot force support. We invite, not pronounce in order to try to discover a shared awareness.
- Reaction solves problems, formative thinking addresses meaning. Which are we and which do we want to be?
- We are tasked to change our thinking from “management” to leadership,” from “relationship” to “purpose.”
- Caring for the poor is the ministry of the church. We need to learn how to be in ministry to develop lives to make disciples. We are a community of grace and we accept people from all walks of life, challenges, obstacles, etc. Caring for the poor is an act of grace and growing our discipleship.

The Holy Conversations group at St. John the Apostle includes Lori Strickland, Matt Hatley, Mary Ellen Jones, Buz Stewart, Katie Smith, Trish Hatley, David Lee and Pastor Marc Lowrance. We know that we do not have all of the answers, and in some cases, we are not even sure that we know the questions. But we have learned to listen, which is the first step in the process leading to a deeper understanding of our church and how we can best understand the will of God for St. John the Apostle.

THE PROCESS

Calling

The Texas Methodist Foundation (TMF) made a commitment several years ago to include leadership development in their offerings of ministry. The Holy Conversations process was born from this effort, and targeted certain congregations with potential for development in visioning and long-range planning. In the summer of 2009, St. John the Apostle was invited by the foundation to participate in the two year program beginning in January 2010.

Pastor Steve Langford presented the information to the Executive Leadership Team, and the decision was made to take it to the Council of Stewards (COS) for approval. Vision 2012 was in place at the time. COS voted to approve SJA's participation with the hope that the Holy Conversations process would help in the development of SJA's next vision statement.

After the initial retreat in January 2010, a Holy Conversations team was put in place. Holy Conversation retreats were held in Houston on four separate occasions (April and October 2010, April and October 2011).

The retreats, led by Eric McKinney of TMF, were aimed at training the Holy Conversation team from each church how to listen to their congregations and communities to help discern the will of God for the church. A total of seven churches throughout Texas participated.

SJA's Holy Conversations team has met several times since January 2010. Each member has taken an active role in the information gathering that's been done over the last year and a half.

"When I joined the HC team I truly didn't know what I was getting into, but I have gained a fully-renewed confidence in the Methodist expression of Christian faith and its focus on the compassionate teachings of Jesus. We must always think outside the box of our own building." - Buz Stewart

Cottage Meetings

Following the first planning retreat in April 2010, the Holy Conversations team organized a series of 18 "cottage meetings" involving over 150 members of SJA throughout the summer of 2010. These meetings allowed us the unique opportunity to talk with our members and to introduce them to our new pastor. You did the talking, we did the listening. The main purpose of these gatherings was to ask three questions of our congregation:

- How has God touched your life through SJA?
- What do you love most about your church?
- As you gaze into the future, what dreams do you have for SJA, and are there any concerns that challenge those dreams?

Not surprisingly, the most common responses were about the warmth and acceptance of the people of SJA and the relationships formed as a result. Educational

“Working with the Holy Conversations team has given me a greater appreciation for the love our church members have for St. John the Apostle UMC. I’ve also come to realize that our members have so much to offer and that we’ve only just begun the work that God is calling us to do.” - Lori Strickland

opportunities, worship experience, mission opportunities, the music ministry, challenges/opportunities for individual growth, and outreach opportunities also led the discussion about what our members love about SJA. Our members dream most about community outreach, focus on youth/children, and expanded facilities. Many expressed desire for an activity or family life center that would provide enough space for church-wide gatherings, as well as additional classroom space and restrooms.

The summary notes from the cottage meetings is included in Appendix A.

Discussions with Schools

In talking with the schools in our area, we confirmed that there is a great diversity of income groups, races and married vs. single parent families. While staff was not too concerned that most of the kids’ needs were being met, they were concerned about lower income kids and those from single parent households. The high rate of divorce in this area is impacting the kids’ abilities to cope with school situations. Many kids do not have anyone to turn to, to help them make their way. They want parents in their life, but don’t always have them. Mentoring can help these kids have someone to turn to, talk and interact with. There is also a need for volunteers to read to children during the day.

New Member Survey

An important part of the exploration process included talking to the most recent people who joined the church. We hoped to learn why they joined and some basic information about them to help us understand who we are attracting and what kinds of things they enjoy doing. The team used an online survey tool to collect data and had a great success rate on responses. The survey questions are included in Appendix B along with a summary of the results. Through the process we learned that the vast majority of our recent new members are in the 40 to 59 age range, are married and own a home. Most of them work full time jobs and enjoy music, movies and outdoor activities. This group was very unified in their responses to why they chose to worship at SJA. First, they felt welcomed and enjoy the friendly atmosphere. Second, they appreciate the excellent music of the various services and biblical teaching from the pulpit.

Demographics

Beyond learning about the people already at SJA, the Holy Conversations process has challenged us to learn more about our neighbors. Our first step was to gather demographic information on our area. This data can be used by our ministry teams to validate future plans as they relate to growth of our ministry.

In December 2010, we contracted with the Percept Group for a Ministry Area Profile including a 5 mile radius of the St. John the Apostle campus. A full report is available from this team or from the church office. Briefly, what we found is:

- Currently, there are 300,000 people living within the 5 mile radius of the church, a 64% increase since 1990.
- This area is projected to grow by 11% over the next 5 years.
- This area has a great diversity of ethnic groups. Anglos represent 53% of the population, Hispanics 19%, with the Hispanic population expected to increase by 31%.
- There is a great diversity of age groups in the area. The largest age group is people 29-49, comprising 32% of the total population.

- Education level in the area is very high, with 89% of the people graduating from high school and 32% of the people being college graduates.
- Some concerns of the families include parenting skills, marriage classes, divorce counseling and finding a good church.
- Overall, the likely faith involvement level for Christian religious affiliations is somewhat high compared to national averages.
- Average household income in the area is \$78,000 per year.

“The neighborhood walks were especially meaningful to me as they put a real face on the demographic data we had been studying. It put a face to the word - neighbor.” - Trish Hatley

Neighborhood Walks

Next, we conducted neighborhood walks to talk face-to-face with the people living around us. We asked them what they knew of SJA and how we could help them or their neighbors. We knocked on doors in six different neighborhoods (shown on the map included in Appendix C) and talked to 37 residents (a log of responses is included in Appendix C). During these conversations, we learned that most know us for our pumpkin patch or our sign on Green Oaks. Needs ranged from events that could bring neighbors together to activities for children and assistance with elderly residents. We also saw firsthand the diversity of the neighborhoods surrounding our church. For instance, on the streets immediately adjacent to our church, we met neighbors of multiple ethnic groups, age groups and family status.

Fire Starter Gatherings

The Fire Starter Gatherings were an effort to fan positive possibility thinking within the ranks of the congregation. We all know how communication dynamics work in church families, so this effort was done to get people talking about future possibilities. Often, the dynamic of “church talk” is about maintenance items, last week’s sermon, the person who has a kid in trouble, the details of the concern list, a gripe about something or someone, and other human community issues. But a fan of positive fire can move through a congregation when people get excited about, and are willing to talk about, great possibilities and risks for a dynamic church. We want our people to “think ahead towards Canaan’s land” and not just worry about today.

Fire Starter Gatherings were held by the Holy Conversations Team in member's homes and through the Leadership Council. Appendix D is a flyer that was used at these meetings to communicate the information that had been gathered up to that point in the process.

Prayer and Team Meetings

In addition to talking among ourselves, we also want to pray among ourselves. A deep prayerful commitment to our church, its purpose, and its future is essential to our process. A formal prayer group has begun to deal with current and future issues within the church.

"I have learned through the Holy Conversation process that we have to be actively seeking God in prayer. We have to be open to where he is leading us as his church and individually, and be willing to do whatever that is." - Mary Ellen Jones

Conversations with Council of Stewards

The Holy Conversations team has been represented at all of the monthly meetings of the Council of Stewards and has presented status, findings and directions to church leadership.

From the Pulpit

In the spring of 2011, Rev. Lowrance began a four week series of Sunday messages on the church and its future. The purpose of the series was several-fold:

- To communicate the Holy Conversations process to the church as a whole.
- To place the Holy Conversations process and the future of the church in biblical perspective.
- Create some "healthy discontent" to follow as people responded to being challenged.
- Stir the fire of excitement based on the strong position of SJA at this time in its life.

The notes from each of these sermons can be found in Appendix E.

NEXT STEPS

Vision 2017

In May 2011, Vision 2017 was drafted based on information gathered during the Holy Conversations process. After review and input by the Council of Stewards and the Holy Conversations team, the Council of Stewards adopted the final document in June 2011 (Appendix F) as the next vision statement for SJA. This document incorporates information obtained through the demographic study, neighborhood walks and conversations with area schools. Most importantly, it is a true reflection of statements made by members of the congregation at the Cottage Meetings. This document will guide SJA through the next few years as we continue to grow and expand our ministries.

Campus Master Ministry Plan

In February, 2011 the Master Plan Committee at St. John the Apostle began work to determine future growth directions for the campus. The initial tasks were to analyze current use of the existing buildings, parking and site amenities, then to begin planning for the future of existing spaces and to determine what new spaces would be required to allow the church to grow into the future. In April, the committee interviewed two architectural firms with the intent of hiring one of them to guide us through the master plan process. Dennehy Architects of Fort Worth was selected and a contract was signed with them on May 17th. After that time, the committee met with the architects twice per month through the summer, culminating in presentation of a preliminary master plan in August.

The purpose of a good campus master plan is to serve as a map for future development. The master plan team was able to establish a clear vision for the future St. John the Apostle campus based on a series of different ministry and outreach priorities, including:

- Worship outreach
 - Increase reverence within the existing worship space, expand and improve congregational gathering areas, expand and improve restroom facilities, develop an exterior courtyard and improve site drainage around the building.
- Community outreach

- Create a public outside event area to establish a “festival grounds” atmosphere highlighting the pumpkin patch, performances, worship, etc.
- Connect this area to the existing buildings
- New drive entry and parking lot improvements
- Pre-school outreach
 - Construct new building for Welcome Center, Pastoral Offices and Pre-school
 - Create new Bride and Family areas in the existing building
 - New courtyard to serve as “front door” to the church
 - Street entry and parking lot improvements, including addition of a new parking lot at the south end of the campus
 - Relocate existing portable classroom buildings
- Family and Program outreach
 - Construct new building for Fellowship and multi-purpose use
 - Improve existing athletic field and add concession and restroom areas
 - Continue site drainage work
 - Construct new outside storage building
- Education outreach
 - Construct new 2 story classroom building
 - Remove existing portable classroom buildings
- Future Sanctuary and expansion to campus
 - Expand existing Sanctuary and/or build a new Sanctuary
 - Expand the pre-school facilities

"Holy Conversations has taught me how to listen to people and to try to "look from the balcony" when determining how God is at work at SJA. I come away convinced that we have a wonderful church family with a big mission going forward. Thank you!" - David Lee

This approach will allow our campus to expand in an orderly fashion only as the ministry of the church demands expansion. The master plan documents are included in Appendix G. All of the pieces of the campus are tied together; however, they are not sequential and will give a great flexibility to the actual future needs of the campus. As God presents opportunity and direction

for the church, we will expand accordingly. We will not force unnecessary expansion of the campus on the congregation.

Conversations with the Congregation

January 2012 will begin a series of “Town Hall” discussions with the congregation aimed at presenting and discussing information from the Holy Conversations process, Vision 2017 and the Campus Master Ministry Plan. These meetings will allow our team to summarize the results of the HC process and what we learned from it. The meetings will also emphasize that the time is approaching when we will need to act on plans to ensure our church’s vital future.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As you read this report, we have already started implementing many of the ideas that have arisen through the Holy Conversation process. Our Upward Sports ministry was started last spring, discussions have begun for a pre-school at SJA, the campus master plan has been completed, a reading program is being started at Charlotte Anderson Elementary School and personal ministries have been highlighted throughout September. It is our hope that we continue to grow out of our happy complacency to be an action oriented church. The information obtained throughout the Holy Conversations process and presented in this report can be used as a measuring stick to ministry teams now and in the future as they work to grow their ministry areas.

Thank you for giving us the chance to represent you in this process. We have been blessed more than you know and have learned so much about our congregation, our community and ourselves. We have learned to try to listen for the call of God at St. John the Apostle. We are certain that this church is alive, vibrant and filled with opportunity! Now it is up to us to be the church that God wants us to be.