

# FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF LEBANON (UCC)

## PLANNING REPORT

### 2009 ENVISIONING TEAM

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## I. Our Foundation

### Purpose

The purpose of this Church is to proclaim Jesus Christ and His gospel, to build a Christian Fellowship in the community through worship, religious education and Christian service, and to advance in the world the Kingdom of God in cooperation and fellowship with all Christian Churches, to render loving services toward all people.

### Covenant (November 27, 1700)

In serious sense of our indispensable duty to answer to the call of Christ, who notwithstanding our sinfulness and unfitness by nature, inviting us to partake of the covenant of grace, not only in the internal but in the external privileges there of, as we have obtained belief of God; we do avouch the Lord to be our God, giving ourselves to the Lord, and unto one another, and to bear witness against sin, to walk in the ordinances of Christ and uphold the worship of God in this place, subjecting to the discipline of Christ: we do also give up our children to him, promising to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

### Interpretation of the Original Covenant as Formulated in 1983

Recognizing our need for guidance in our lives we accept the Lord as our God. We accept His grace, which frees us to do His will; we bind ourselves to the triune God and to one another. We promise to share Christian concern for all persons near and far, to be directed by God's truth now accepted and yet to be revealed, and to lead our children in Christian ways.

## II. Introduction

Pastor Sharon shared the information gathered in her sabbatical with the congregation. One of her goals was to pursue spiritually based strategic planning for the church. As a result, church council established the Envisioning Team in February 2009. The Envisioning Team began its work using the resources provided by *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* by Gil Rendle and Alice Mann.

Our conclusions were reached and goals and objectives determined by the collection of data from church members using the following methods.

A worship service, potluck luncheon, and workshop were conducted by Alice Mann to introduce the envisioning process to the congregation. In addition, data collection was obtained by:

- Coffee hour flip charts & sticky notes
- Parlor meetings and one-on-one discussions
- Online surveys to church members with children in Youth Education

Focus was placed on answering the three following questions.

### ***1. Who are we?***

Although there were extremes on both sides, consensus felt that we are a welcoming, relatively healthy congregation with adequate roots. However, to remain healthy and continue to grow, we need to make some positive changes.

### ***2. What has God called us to do?***

Educating children and encouraging new membership, especially younger families, was echoed by almost every participant in the envisioning process. How this should be accomplished varied greatly.

There was a general consensus that the church needs to be more welcoming. God has called us to cultivate the Christian family incorporating the rigors of today's society, current methods of communication, and social interaction.

God has called us to reach out to adults who are seekers but have had no formal Christian education.

Provide a Christian perspective and keep informed on issues of social justice.

### ***3. Who is our neighbor?***

The majority of responses felt that Lebanon and the surrounding areas were our neighbors as well as the global community. It was also thought that creating better connections and community among church members is important.

### **III. Goals – M I N E S**

1. **M**embership - Attract new members.
2. **I**mage – Make our church more visible to the public and portray a positive image of a welcoming church.
3. **N**eeds - Serve the social and practical needs of church members.
4. **E**ducation - Provide Christian education to children and adults.
5. **S**pirituality - Assist all members in spiritual growth.

### **IV. Objectives**

- 1) Membership – Attract new members with emphasis on families with children.
  - a) Establish a process and strategy to:
    - i) Develop a plan to attract new members
    - ii) Revitalize welcome package
    - iii) Add to the church web page.
    - iv) Set up docents at every church service who will assist newcomers not familiar with protocol.
    - v) Provide “business cards” with the names and numbers of the docent, Head Deacon and Pastor to newcomers.

- vi) Follow up with members who have not been active by expressing concern and offering assistance if needed.
  - vii) Arrange for special “bring a friend to church” Sunday services (either youth or adult).
  - viii) Utilize name tags for members.
  - ix) Have four sermons per year that focus on new members and sponsor special “open house” Sundays.
  - x) Revive the new member sponsor program.
- 2) Image – Make our church more visible to the public and portray a positive image of a welcoming church.
- a) Install signage and/or banners outside of the church. Include an area where church events can be clearly and easily posted.
  - b) Publicity – provide press releases for every event that occurs at church and submit in the following publications.
    - i) Lebanon Life
    - ii) The Chronicle
    - iii) The Reminder
    - iv) Norwich Bulletin
    - v) Hartford Courant
  - c) Incorporate current technology and communication techniques such as online social networking and text messaging.
  - d) Send group emails on events occurring at the church.
  - e) Open the church to more community events.
- 3) Needs - Serve the social and practical needs of church members.
- a) Establish youth activities that are enjoyable to the children and inspire them to live a life full of God and service.
    - i) Age appropriate dances/socials
  - b) Establish programs to help single and stressed parents
    - i) Date nights each month where parents drop their children off at the church from 5-8; dinner and wholesome child care activities provided for very small charge per child (maybe a teen youth group activity?).
    - ii) Older members mentor younger ones to help cope with issues that occur with growing families utilizing meetings and/or one-on-one.
  - c) Establish programs to help adults that no longer have children living with them.
    - i) Senior issues
    - ii) Singles that still maintain their own homes

- iii) Empty nest issues; social networking
  - d) Plan fun events where members can socialize and get to know each other better; encourage intergenerational contact.
- 4) Education-Provide Christian education to children and to adults.
  - a) Consider hiring a paid, part-time Christian Educator
    - i) With approval of Board of Christian Education and Pastor, establish and facilitate all youth education programs
    - ii) Programs should be inspiring, fulfilling and enjoyable experiences where youth tell their friends about their positive experiences.
  - b) Establish a mentor system to support middle and high school students.
  - c) Encourage youth to be more active in all levels of church life including leadership.
  - d) Establish a Christian education program for adults that have never had any formal religious upbringing and for those whose experiences are different than Congregationalism.
  - e) Establish a mentor program for adults that have never had religious background.
- 5) Spirituality – Assist all members in spiritual growth.
  - a) Have Board of Deacons and Pastor develop programs to help members with spirituality.
    - i) Re-evaluate the current church worship service
    - ii) Bible Study
    - iii) Prayer Sessions
    - iv) Discussion Groups on current events and spirituality
    - v) Expand Third Sunday Celebration
    - vi) Have other religious leaders occasionally participate in regular church services.

It is the recommendation of the Envisioning Team that the goals and objectives in this report be reviewed by the Church Council and approved with any changes they feel appropriate. The approved version should then be shared and discussed with the full church membership.

## APPENDIX A

### Summary of Feedback Obtained from Parlor Meetings – August 2, 2009

The following summarizes the notes provided from all hosts of the Parlor Meetings. Quotes indicate where comments were used exactly from the notes.

#### Who Are We?

Although the church was viewed as welcoming and friendly by many, it was also characterized as cold and reserved by a good number of others. A good number of suggestions emerged on creating a greater emotional connection among members (via mentors, via a welcoming exterior sign displaying programming announcements).

“Truly welcoming if you are a traditional white family; if you are not, members smile and are pleasant, but do not interact with you.”

“Friendly, but members don’t know a lot about each other.”

The church is largely held together by the participation of its older members. Some thought the involvement of younger members (age-range for “younger” is unclear) is lacking. At the same time, there was a clear recognition that time constraints for families are high and that there might be some resistance on the part of older members to relinquish authority within the church. Encouraging greater intergenerational involvement might be of value.

Overall commitment of members to the church was questioned. That we live in a “society of distraction” was raised as at least one explanation; once work and family obligations are fulfilled, there is not often much energy remaining. Illness and death seem to be the current stimulating forces for members to emerge; baptisms and weddings also bring people to the church.

We are viewed – and view ourselves – as a cornerstone of the community, with respect to the history of the church. The church used to be more actively involved in the political environment of the town. Although the image is one as a “server of the community,” there is also belief that there is a present lack of involvement in social issues that are important to members of the congregation. There is a fairly broad range of political ideology; we are “conservative with liberal factions.” As Congregationalists, we are very

democratic; that does not mean, necessarily, that we handle disagreements well.

The nature of the service is an expression of who we are. Many desires were raised in terms of maintaining the peacefulness of the music, enhancing the spirituality of the overall service, and creating a “deeper, richer worship experience.” Others expressed hope for more joy and excitement in the service, via upbeat and contemporary music/stories.

### Who Is Our Neighbor?

Once past a geographical answer, groups discussed outreach efforts to our members, our town, our general area (including Willimantic), as well as the larger Christian world.

Many suggestions centered around creating better connections among our own members (e.g., mentor families, introduction paragraph for new members in Circuit Rider, personal welcome at Coffee Hour, name tags, greater use of technology, cluster groups, common interest groups).

### What Has God Called Us To Do?

Work with children and educate them. There was great desire to enhance Christian Ed, perhaps with a CE director, and to create greater (and interesting) programming for young adults. Continued pressure on community organizations to not schedule Sunday morning activities was deemed of value.

Spread the word of God and practice living out God’s word to love and accept one another.

Serve the spiritual, social, and practical needs of all members (singles, families, seniors).

Consider the community and controversial social issues.



## Other Thoughts

- The church is looking run down and needs to be cleaned and painted.
- Good to remind ourselves of the history of the church, but not dwell on it – look to the future.
- We need to expose our children to other religions
- Pastor has too much work, is stressed and needs help – utilize gifted church members to help.
- There may be better participation at meetings if family meals could be served before them; a family could eat together and the parent could go to the meeting and the rest of the family to child care or back home.
- Develop a support system for members and their families like the extension service. They help distribute information through agents for farming, gardening, home care, etc.
- Would like to see a support group (not a dating club) for singles.
- Host simple joys (e.g., movie night)
- There might be an opportunity to hold an additional service (e.g., Saturday night)

## APPENDIX B

### **The following are open-ended responses to Envisioning Team Survey 2009**

#### **10. Please include other suggestions that you have for improving the Christian Education programming available for the children in our church.**

I think we should have a more scheduled youth group program. We should purchase a guide to scheduling activities.

More hand's-on activities for younger kids. Maybe not so much Xeroxed typical worksheets.

I feel the CE of our church continues to provide activities and Christian learning experiences as best as possible for families.

Ask the children (any age that can read) to do the reading vs. the deacons sometimes. Have a box for their hymn suggestions ask them to make connections either at children's message &/or in Sun. school between the message and their own lives even if it's presented ahead of time.

We need to build on our current program for middle/high school kids and ultimately strive for a stronger, more active youth program. I think that this is where we can most effectively "teach" the youth about what it truly means to be a Christian, in terms of behavior and in terms of service/mission for others. This is the best place to build spirituality - in a more informal setting, as opposed to the "classroom" where they can get the traditional Bible knowledge.

Once a month having all Sunday school classes getting together and doing some sort of spiritual art project with a story to go with it.

#### **12. Please include other suggestions that you have for improving Youth Programs for the children of our church.**

A teenage youth program is very difficult to sustain. A Youth Minister with the educational background and resources would be ideal. But the leaders who volunteer are doing the best they can.

Of course, educational programming should be centered on Biblical teachings, but kids will respond better if it isn't pushed onto them. My children have grown the most as Christians as they have been involved with the youth programs OUTSIDE of Sunday school and learned what it means to help others and to conduct themselves as Christians. Faith and fun should be able to go hand-in-hand.

Having more times to get together

### **13. How can the church assist you in raising your family or with your own personal spirituality?**

Take more time to explain other religions and the difference between our traditions and traditions of other religions to teenagers. Give older kids more responsibilities/chores on Sundays in worship

Never let Pastor Sharon retire!

I am very comfortable with the church at this time.

I think it does well so far. Plus having been a part of Christian education over the past 5 years, I would say it has improved.

Honestly, we're not looking for help in raising our family. Personal spirituality - there are opportunities offered, but there is not the time, unfortunately, as working parents already involved in church activities already.

We really enjoyed the services that incorporated more of the contemporary music. It is hard for us to attend service on a regular basis because the weekends are the only time we have as a family and all of our extended family lives out of town. We use weekends to make trips to visit family, or to do everything that needs to be done at home; and since church generally takes up a block of time from 9:30-noon (by the time we get home) that is a huge amount of time for us as a family (it becomes an entire half of a weekend day). We have attended another church in town that service lasts 30-40 minutes, and the children are able to be home-schooled in the Christian education portion. Your summer Sunday worship (30 minutes) works very nicely. Is there a way to mix a little bit of the two to make the regular Sunday worship a bit

shorter? We attend church to hear the sermon and for fellowship. We wouldn't mind reducing the amount of song within the service, and it seems like some of the traditional parts of the service could be condensed. The most important part of Sunday for us is hearing "the message." We hope the church will provide us with the opportunity to hear a message, say thank you to God, and take a moment out of our busy schedule to refocus. It would be nice to have one or two lively songs incorporated into the service as well. Also, since the children's program generally runs longer than the service, it becomes hard to head home when the service ends. When the children come into the fellowship hall they become interested in eating and want to socialize more. This is great for some Sundays, but it is hard when we are trying to get right home. This seemed to become an issue after the music portion of the children's program was added. I LOVE the music portion, and wouldn't want that to be eliminated. But, could it be incorporated within the regular time of the program? Maybe the group could be broken in half--younger children and older children, and then Bertie could work with each group within their own program? I feel horrible even writing these suggestions, because I don't sound like a Christian at all! But, from talking to other Christian families, these issues seem to be the ones that prevent people from even attending church AT ALL. They would rather just stay home and do the things they need to do. I wish there was a way to allow for both things. I think if the services were similar to the summer services during the year maybe more people would be able to fit in church! Church SHOULD come first, but the reality is that it unfortunately too seldom does for today's busy families.

It would be nice to have a mom's group