

# Listening Phase Report & Recommendations

## FAITH LUTHERAN CHURCH

VALDERS, WISCONSIN

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KAIROS & ASSOCIATES

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### **The Current Reality**

Faith Lutheran is a moderately sized ELCA congregation in Valders, WI. It is the primary ELCA congregation in the area and has a large and diverse geographical area as its constituency base. Being the primary faith community in the area and having once boasted hundreds in Sunday school and worship, the church now struggles with aging facilities, staffing needs, shrinking membership and the rapidly changing role that the church plays in the community. This is not particularly unique to Faith LC, as most mainline denominations find themselves in similar circumstances. What is unique, or significant, is that the leadership recognizes these challenges and has made the commitment to invest the time, energy and resources to discover how they can be creatively addressed and the trends reversed.

One of the initial efforts from congregational leaders was the conducting of a Vision 2016 process. This process helped identify some key areas of need and opportunity for the church to move forward with its desire to grow and enhance its mission. Most of these areas involved additional financial resources that the congregation didn't readily have available. Discovering how those resources could be realized became the next area of focus.

It was determined that the best way to move forward with this need was to bring in outside help to provide expertise and guidance around these financial issues. The congregation approved the hiring of Kairos and Associates and the consulting services of Pastor Jeff Kjellberg. The intention of this relationship was to conduct a listening process to help gather the necessary data and input to provide meaningful intelligence to leaders for making faithful and impactful decisions around financial capacity and mission and ministry expansion.

### **Process**

Three primary areas of focus were given to this Listening Process. The first was an initial engagement with the leadership culture of FLC. Pastor Kjellberg conducted separate meetings with the staff, board of directors and past presidents. The purpose of these meetings was to get a deeper understanding of the congregation's mission and ministry desires, review the work that had been done leading up to this listening process and explore the institutional memory of the FLC community.

The second focus was the conducting of a survey called the Church Assessment Tool (CAT). 232 members of the congregation responded to this survey either online or in paper form. (This was an excellent response rate that represents over 90% of worship attendance). Russ Crabtree of Holy Cow

Consulting and creator of the CAT delivered his assessment report on December 12, 2011. 35 church leaders and staff were in attendance for this Leadership Summit event. (The written report can be acquired through the church office).

The third focus was the conducting of several interviews and listening groups from a wide spectrum of FLC members. Nearly 60 members participated in the listening groups and 40 members were interviewed. There was a diverse representation of members involved with this phase - young, old, newer and long-term members, male and female, strong supporters and occasional participators of the ministry. This provided a very broad base of viewpoints and attitudes regarding FLC's mission and ministry, its impact and effectiveness, and the broader impressions FLC has in the community.

### **Discoveries**

The main objective of this Listening Process was to gather input, both qualitatively and quantitatively, to equip leaders with key organizational intelligence to be better informed to make critical decisions for FLC's future. All organizations benefit from a strong sense of self-awareness and missional identity. How people feel, what they are thinking, how engaged and satisfied they are, all become important markers for defining what calls a congregation to act. Some key discoveries about FLC's membership base and the greater community are important to note as decisions are addressed. The following are what were perceived to be some of the more enlightening elements of this listening process.

#### ***The Local Culture's Influences***

- One of the more prominent cultural influencers is the divide between the local multi-generational residents and those who are perceived as newcomers, or transplants, into the community. This divide creates an element of conflict between those who want to bring about necessary changes to adapt to the ever-changing world around us, and those who want things to stay the way they always have been. This finds its way into the church community as it looks to address changes and adaptations to accommodate a new look church for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (It is important to note that this divide is not always clear. There are many lifers in the Valders community who see change as critical, while some of the newcomers have moved to the area to find a place that isn't changing quite as rapidly as the rest of the world).  
An additional component to this dynamic is the ability, or challenge, for newcomers to feel accepted or seen as a significant part of the community. If you aren't at least a third generation resident you never really become a local.
- Connected to this reality of local vs. newcomer are the diverse family systems that exist within the larger community. There are several long-standing family histories that have exerted their influence on both the Valders community and the church culture. The challenge that results from this reality is the inability to find true unity behind a common goal. If one family system finds fault with a decision or direction it tries to leverage its influence to insure that the decision is never reached or the hoped for outcome successfully achieved. The obvious impact this has on the FLC community is the struggle to find common ground to make meaningful decisions that are best for the church and not necessarily for any one particular family system.

- The broader community of Valders is heavily influenced by both the WELS and Catholic faith expressions. This, in and of itself, is not a negative. The challenge comes in the more conservative and literalist nature of these communities. FLC is a member of the ELCA, which by its very confessional and theological heritage, is a more progressive and liberal expression of the Christian faith. Trying to live this out faithfully in a community that is heavily influenced by these more conservative Christian witnesses provides a number of challenges for creating unity around mission priorities, worship experiences, preaching, teaching and social engagement.

### ***The Faith Lutheran Culture***

- As one listens to the institutional memory and general history of FLC it is apparent that there has been difficulty in making critical decisions for the sake of the church's mission and ministry. There are a number of reasons behind this, but the most obvious are the fear of hurting feelings or alienating families. This is directly connected to the first two identified cultural influencers noted above. Instead of making important and necessary decisions, the leadership opts for the route that causes the least amount of conflict, or dissention. Rarely does this type of action serve the greater good of the church vs. the needs of individuals, or family systems.
- One of the more troubling elements of the FLC culture is the willingness to speak ill will of others when there are disagreements or personality differences. There are a number of people who expressed the fear of sharing their true feelings or perspectives for the real concern of being victimized by backstabbing or hurtful street corner conversations. This isn't particularly unique to FLC but is a major contributor to forming a culture of distrust and disharmony.
- FLC experienced a very difficult Pastorate that resulted in the community being hurt and disillusioned around pastoral leadership. There is evidence that the healing process to move beyond this experience has not been fully achieved. Several comments reflecting back on this time, as well as comments made regarding current pastoral leadership, reveal a deeper reality that the negative impact and influence is still present.
- Related to this issue are the unrealistic expectations that come regarding the pastoral role. The presence of distrust, lack of respect and misplaced hurt and anger seem to heavily influence people's attitudes and feelings about who and what the pastor should be, or is. It seems that much of this can be attributed to the inability to fully recover and heal from the previous experience the church went through. In addition, this issue can be connected to the churches struggle with its own self-understanding. Are we a small, family sized church? Or, are we a larger regional sized church with diverse needs and staffing demands? Claiming and naming this identity would go a long way in addressing some of these challenges around pastoral expectations.
- Today's role of the church in our communities has changed dramatically. This isn't necessarily the churches fault, but being responsive to this reality is essential. No longer is the church looked to for being the main driver of community values and ethical behavior. Instead, the church has been pushed to the far edges of cultural influence. The church has a choice to accept this new role or become more proactive and being in control of its redefinition and influence

going forward. This has particular relevance to FLC as it once played a prominent role in the Valders community on a variety of levels that no longer seems to be in effect.

- The good news is that there exists within this faith community a group of leaders that see the need and urgency to make necessary changes and adaptations in order to engage the community in more meaningful and impactful ways. This group understands that if FLC doesn't make these necessary changes it will be destined to slow decline and eventual dissolution. The challenge is that there is a shadow side to this group consisting of members who believe that change isn't needed. Rather, reclaiming what FLC had in the past is the obvious solution to its current challenges. Both of these groups are not defined solely by how long one has been at the church. These groups are made up both of long time members as well as those who are new to the community. Regardless of the particular make-up of these perspectives, the reality is still very real – change is not optional. How we deal with it is.

### ***CAT Insights***

- FLC scored in what the CAT calls the “Recovery” quadrant. Two very important elements to this placement are the identification that FLC struggles with “issues” (both past and current) and needs significant change to take place for health and vibrancy to occur. Bringing about shared victories and celebrations is a necessary component to help make the move out of “Recovery” and into “Transformational.”
- FLC was also placed in the “Hearth & Home” quadrant. This suggests a fairly stable family like community that adheres to certain values and norms. The gift of this community is its warmth and welcome that offers a comfortable place to belong. The challenge is its tendency to be judgmental towards newcomers who may not fully conform to the community's standards or ways of thinking.
- The overall results from the CAT indicate that there are a high percentage of members who are on the fence, or at the tipping point around engagement and satisfaction. The good news that comes from this is that FLC is poised to help move people into a more affirming and supportive position through clearer direction and decision making. Who are we, where are we going, how do we plan to get there are all questions that need deeper definition and clarity that will move the membership off the fence and into greater engagement. This is a huge encouragement for leaders who are looking at the need to move forward with a capital funding program. The desire is there once clarity is given.
- Three key missional priorities were identified that crossed all age groupings. This is significant in helping leadership embrace areas of unity and common purpose for FLC's future planning:
  - Developing ministries that work toward healing those broken by life circumstances. *(Mission & Vision Development)*
  - Developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and incorporate them in the life of the congregation. *(Mission & Vision Development)*
  - Make necessary changes to attract families with children and youth to our church. *(Mission & Vision Development)*

- The giving trends reflected in the results indicate that there is plenty of room to grow and expand the culture of generosity, both in FLC mission support and the broader sense of giving away ones blessings back to the world.

### ***Opportunities and Focus Points***

- There was no unanimous declaration about which area should be given priority for a capital appeal program. The discussion centered more on the why and the hoped for impact. With that in mind, it is clear that leadership be tasked with creating a more decisive and focused picture of how any direction or decision will impact FLC's ability to do greater ministry. This includes the elevator, narthex expansion, staffing needs, or any other facility or ministry area that calls for attention.
- One of the key affirmations and assets to FLC's mission is the fact that it serves as a meaningful place to belong, where people feel welcomed and a part of a greater family culture. In spite of some of the dysfunctional elements that come with any family system, this is a significant gift the FLC community has to offer to anyone who comes into its midst.
- FLC is not a Valders community church alone. FLC draws from a very wide geographical area that brings uniqueness and diversity to its DNA. This is something to be celebrated and built upon as FLC desires to move its ministry forward. This reality directly speaks to the need for FLC to address its identity of being a small church or a regional church culture.
- Yoked to this reality is that FLC is truly poised for expanding its mission and community impact. It is the only ELCA congregation within a significant geographical area; it is the primary faith community in the Valders area; its local reputation is very positive; there is tremendous need that exists all around you and it has a spectacular location for visibility and influence.
- Although there are differences of opinions for how to make changes and move ahead, there is an impressive group of leaders who care deeply about the future of FLC and see the urgency to make the changes and adaptations to become more viable and relevant in today's culture. With the good work that has been done for gathering input and important data, this group is well equipped to step up and courageously make decisions for the sake of FLC and the work of the Gospel in this greater community.
- It is difficult to make any fair determination about FLC's financial capacity in conducting a capital funding appeal. There are several variables that need to be addressed that will impact just how willing and excited members will be to share of their gifts for this purpose. It should be noted that FLC carries no indebtedness. This adds to its financial capacity depending on the willingness of the faith community to take on debt to increase the scope of work wanting to be accomplished.

### **Recommendations**

As FLC considers its next steps and how to go about moving forward, it is important to lift up the fact that the overall culture of this church is deeply longing for something to happen. A commonly shared expression is "We need to stop talking about doing something and just start doing it." Every faith community carries with it challenges and concerns that can often cloud the points of possibility and

opportunity. For FLC, taking the next step is more about demonstrating the resolve and courage to make decisions and move, than it is about exactly what that looks like. The following recommendations are based upon the above discoveries and the belief that moving forward with these recommendations will put FLC in the most favorable position to grow its ministry impact and experience a high level of financial response to a capital appeal program.

- Commit to a vision clarity and focusing process that would build on existing strengths while dreaming together where God is leading FLC into the future. This would be accomplished through a strategy that engages leadership and other laity in building from FLC's work that has been done while discovering what opportunities exist that would help grow its reach both internally and externally.
  - Clarifying the existing strengths and how they can be translated into defined missional priorities and focuses
  - Discovery of the community and culture surrounding FLC and developing new ministry initiatives for more impactful engagement
  - Forming a renewed plan for mission and ministry that is born out of the above process
- Development of a comprehensive communications plan that is focused on sharing the renewed priorities for mission and ministry and the desire to more deeply engage and connect with the surrounding community. From this work, a clearly focused vision needs to be created for a capital appeal that directly connects the goals of this appeal to the impact they will bring to FLC's vision for ministry.
- Implementing a capital funding appeal to secure financial resources to accomplish the identified priorities developed from the above processes. Integrated into this effort should be intentional focus around the overall stewardship ministry of FLC and how that can be deepened and enhanced for greater outcomes.
- Transparent and open dialogue needs to be lifted up so concerns are addressed in helpful and effective ways and people's agendas do not become paramount to the church's greater mission.
- The development of an accountability and strategic assessment process to help keep the outcomes of these efforts moving forward and ever evolving

In conclusion, there is little doubt that Faith Lutheran needs to act. Failing to do so will only allow things to progress as they are, which is obviously creating anxiety and unnecessary conflict. FLC is loaded with potential – faithful and passionate leadership, a rich history of impact, and the reality that God's work is not finished with this congregation. It is with confidence that I believe our God of abundance will truly provide the tools and imagination needed to move forward with bold anticipation. It is my privilege to partner with FLC through this new season of ministry.

Gratefully,