

Composite/Summary of Session #3

Curt Evatt 10/7/21

Taken from Group Leader Reports (all are on Basecamp)



Primary Insights

Group 1

- There is so much gratitude to God.
- How much we all miss church and how important church is in our lives.
- How important family connection is in our live.
- Frustration for all the things we could not do...weddings, birthdays, births, funerals, church, etc.

Group 2

- The central theme centered around the lack of interaction with church, family, friends and some “normal” activities during the pandemic, especially before any vaccinations were available.
- All had many positive outcomes including how fortunate that we are to be living in a rural community where we could continue outside activities, socialize with close friends & relatives, and return to interaction with our church family.
- The discussion about our letters and other personal stories were enlightening.
- All agreed that our letters were personal, and no one preferred to send their letter to the COS subcommittee.

Group 3

- There is a lot of value in the small group experience
- Less important to be Methodist, more important to connect with God wherever we could (let's go to church)
- We all “heard ourselves” in what others were saying
- “I thought I had it bad until I heard someone else’s story” – important perspective gained
- An overwhelming experience, to write to God
- We all felt hurt, loss, separation from relationship == physical touch
- Stories of isolation
- Also stories of being busy – tornado recovery, community aid
- Connecting through the church was very important
- There is hope in so many of the story
- There is gratitude – hope – God is in control!
- Letter writing created a way to focus on this

Group 4

- God knows my heart.
- God is in control.
- God is with us.

Group 5

- We found there were many common themes in the letters.
- Our losses are small compared to how great God is.
- God’s grace was every day no matter what happened.

- Volatile events have been so different for everyone.
- We have seen God's hand in incredible ways.
- Moving to virtual worship services and zoom small groups (Sunday School, circles, youth, parents) proved a good way to keep connected.
- The tornado and virus provided opportunities to care for others and give donations.
- Trustees did an incredible job getting the church grounds back plus more.
- Our losses were also gains.
- We all went through common valleys but yet they were very different.
- We all grew more spiritually while in the valleys.
- Looking back, it is amazing how adaptable we were to changing events.

Group 6

- Discussion about Church plans. What can be done? What can't be done?
- Covid isn't in the past.
- Worship services for major celebrations- all disciples together?
- The Heartbeat reading is sometimes overwhelming. Just need bullet points.
- Difficulty with Communion elements as it is now.

Group 7

- Hope is EVERYTHING!
- We have not all experienced the same uncertainties at the same level.
- We must accept and embrace everyone as Jesus has embraced us.
- Love is the foundation that will keep us together.
- Our relationships with other believers must be opened and maintained.
- We have been apart for too long.
- We are not alone! We have God and we have each other.
- We are all survivors! But the best is still to come.

Group 8

No notes or recap

Group 9

- The changes in church staff, specifically the youth and children's directors
- I have been sustained mainly by prayer, talking with my fellow St Mark Friends
- Besides the pandemic and the tornado the church member actions have been the cause of the majority of the disruptions
- I have been sustained by my faith and friends during the pandemic and that has greatly helped me when I was fearful
- Not being able to be with my children and grandchildren was a major concern- I was missing out on important time with my grandchildren
- I mainly stayed in touch with my friends and neighbors by telephone and text- That connection was a major cause for me being able to sustain my sanity during the pandemic.
- Isolation, question the future, fear (catching virus, or my grandchildren being ill.)
- I know that a return to worship is important and meaningful to my faith. However, this Pandemic has shown me that my connection to church through my UMW activities, the Caring Ministry, and my Sunday School Class are the people and activities I miss and are interested in resuming the most.
- We need to connect with other like-minded believers in formal and casual settings.

- There will always be a need for us to minister to (in all ways) others- not necessarily those in our own faith circle.
- I will always need God in my daily life (Need my own way of connecting)
- Read over the 2 letters that were shared with everyone and realized I had many of the same feelings and concerns they did during our volatile time.
- Concern for the young people - Really felt bad for students that were missing out on fun or memorable things, such as Proms and graduation, sports & clubs
- I have young grandchildren at a very impressionable age, I also had concerns for just how their thought process or emotions will be forever molded or changed

Group 10

- I liked that writing this letter helped me process the pandemic in a different way than I have been doing since it began
- I liked the equal emphasis on what has been lost and gained
- I liked that I had to think about the losses while knowing that I gained a lot as well
- Almost all of mine were about people and being together so writing this letter highlighted community and how important that is

Staff

- Others in the Group had experienced worse events than the pandemic, which actually helped them to navigate the pandemic better than some
- You always feel alone in your experience, but something about our faith reminds us that we are not alone. As believers, we should make space to lament and share with one another.
- Debriefing grief helps us to let go of negative things. It's good to hear others' perspectives. United Church of Canada Affirmation – We are NOT alone.
- It's good to see the balance of loss and gain – it is healthy for us to see that a volatile event is not just loss.
- Amen!

Additional Observations by Small Group Leader:

Group 1

It was evident that we all need church and our direction from God.

Group 3

This exercise was very well received. Everyone took it to heart to be open and honest, and it was quite emotional in many cases.

Everybody in the group shared their feelings. Two people in our group did not write letters but shared comments about what they felt regarding the two questions (what have we lost/what have we gained). All of the group included the pandemic in their comments about our volatile events; several brought other events as well (tornado, political and social unrest, family losses during the past 18 months).

The group voiced that they are ready to get into the next phase of this process – namely, what it is we should be doing now for the church to move forward.

Group 4

Participant said his letter to God was devoid of sympathy and empathy; "I am ashamed of not caring"

Mission outreach is what drew us to St. Mark. Also, the warmth and caring, reaching out beyond the walls of the church.

St. Mark is still standing like the 3 little pigs, our house is built of bricks.

Group 6

Only one member had letter to share. Most in the group converse with God on a daily basis anyway so letters seemed repetitive.

Group 7

I was trained in CISM, crisis management, and incident debriefing during my last 12 years as a pastor while volunteering as a Chaplain for the State of Florida Emergency Response Team and for two County Sheriff's Offices. I have walked through many nasty valleys many times. Thus, I wasn't quite sure what to expect at our session...But oh, my goodness. From the first letter/psalm shared until the last, the pain, loss and grief expressed in that little room was intense.

We struggled through tears, choked back the lumps in our throats, and (knowing well the guidelines) could not get out of the room without offering hugs, pats, and prayers of assurance for each person. WOW! The need to express the hurt, and the parched thirst for authentic community touched us all. It was one of the most cathartic and genuine debriefing sessions I have ever witnessed. There's a lot going on in people's lives that we have not been able to see or connect with because of rules and distancing. And all of that came from faith-oriented, church members. What are people around us going through still? Where is their listening ear and where will they go to express the deep feelings still harbored within? I can only hope every group experienced a sampling of the gift given to us last night.

As you can see, the primary theme of the night was HOPE. Because of our faith and trust in God, we can HOPE in tomorrow. Through what they have just lived through, HOPE is no longer an abstract idea. It has become the driving force that animates a sense of newness in the land that appears to be nothing but shadows and endings. If it hasn't been selected yet, an Advent sermon series or church-wide study on "Jesus – the Hope of the World" could wonderfully expound on the full richness of mercy, grace and HOPE that we can find in life through the gift of Jesus.

Group 9

Included comment (not sure where to disclose):

"I have been a member of this church for about 30 years. I don't mind my answers being shared but I prefer to remain anonymous to the whole group. I am participating in this group activity because I thought the church needs to know how its members feel and I didn't know it was optional!"

Some of the ministers and the adjustments needed when there is a ministerial change. The ministry of David Surrett and the unchristian like way he and his family were treated. The majority of the congregation was not aware of these behaviors. I was very disturbed and considered leaving this church when it became public."

Staff

The letters to God (attached) were very meaningful.

Small Group Leader Needs or Questions:

Group 7

I was sensing at our last meeting the desire for most of the group to move on to more of the “what’s next” kind of questions. Thus, to start getting them ready to move on to session #4 and beyond, I sent out the following in my pre-class email and invited them to begin to capture their thoughts....

Question:

As you think about your relationships with family members, co-workers, friends, neighbors, or club/association members, what are some of the primary spiritual/faith-centered questions, concerns, or needs you have heard them express? These thoughts will be helpful to capture the prevailing mood/sentiment of persons within our Church’s circle of influence. These thoughts will also help our leaders discern what programs, projects, sermon/study series, etc. will best help those around us find answers to their questions. Let’s start capturing these ideas/thoughts as they emerge over the next few weeks.

Group Responses to Question:

There is so much disagreement and division among peoples in our world today. It is hard to talk to and connect with others. Many people I know have nowhere to go to have a safe, honest, respectable place to talk through the issues of our day. If our relationship with God is strong, and the church’s connection with God is strong, then we can meet the divisions/disagreements in the church and in our culture with grace and love. We need to get back to the basics as a church that fosters relationships with ourselves and others.

Having a strong foundation on faith will help with that.

Many I know are on the fringe of the church. With the overhanging question about the future of the Methodist Church, folks aren’t interested in connecting until they can be assured of where we are going. The pastoral and lay leadership of our church needs to be clear in the direction this congregation will travel and be strong enough to lead us through the questions/divisions that may be coming.

We must create the environment where it is OK to agree to disagree in order to maintain our relationships. Must be shown how to give each other grace and acceptance.

We need to emphasize more of what we have in common than focusing on our differences/disagreements. We must model for others that we can be united in our faith, hope and love for God, each other, and the world. A broken world will see and stream to an authentic community of love.

People I know are caught in the spin-cycle of uncertainty these days. The insanity in our times, culture, and politics is driving us insane. The church must answer these challenges in the context of Christian love, kindness, fairness, compassion, and humility. The preaching of the gospel must be the compass that points a clear path to God.