

Listening to Cherry Log Christian Church

Disciples of Christ

Report from the Listening Team January, 2013

Preface

“And what was God leading us to do and be? To be the heart of Jesus in this place and serve human needs as He did. We would do so as a church that patterned its worship, fellowship, study, and service after the first followers of Jesus (Acts 2:42). We visited no “successful” churches to see how to do it. We did not study the manuals of experts in church growth. We studied *The Gospel of Luke* for the life and work of Jesus, and the *Book of Acts* for the life and work of the early church. Jesus persuaded us that distinguishing between males and females in leadership would be contrary to the Gospel. He further convinced us to practice His kind of hospitality; that is, we would reject only those persons he rejected. Social locations (economic, educational, racial, political, sexual) were not factors in admission to membership or opportunities to serve....

Cherry Log Christian Church is no rags to riches story; we are both rags and riches. This church is not an experiment in anything; it is a church and has been a church since a few souls joined hearts and hands and said “Yes.” God has favored us with numerical growth, but God’s favor is even more evident in the delight, the excitement, the expectations of those who worship here, enjoy friendship here, who gather to stir one another to be servants of the compassionate Christ.”

- Fred Craddock, *The First Ten Years*

Listening to Cherry Log Christian Church

This is a report of the findings of The Listening Team, a group commissioned in 2012. This report summarizes the findings of the congregational survey and focus groups as reported by the Fanning Institute. Fanning's detailed report is available to read. In addition, this report includes recommendations of the Listening Team.

Background

In late 2011 a small working group consisting of the Pastor, the Moderator, the Head Elder, the Treasurer, Head of Strategic Planning, a Stephen Minister, an Elder, and two Committee Chairs had several meetings to explore the energy level in the church and align on momentum building initiatives.

These discussions yielded several initiatives. One of the initiatives, conflict management, was selected because of three observations:

1. Progress on some strategic objectives had slowed or stopped as a result of strong differences on near term actions.
2. There have been incidences of interpersonal conflicts strong enough to cause members to leave the church. These incidences seemed to be more than occasional disputes that surface from time to time.
3. The church has faced many changes – inclusion of people from different faith walks and experiences, increasing generational differences, implementing a second worship service, adoption of a new Constitution and By Laws – that will challenge the diverse inclusiveness the church takes pride in.

It was decided to propose a plan to the Elders to engage outside expertise in conflict to:

1. Assess the current situation
2. Identify key themes deserving attention
3. Recommend courses of action based on their expertise

The rationale for using consultants included a need for the following:

1. Objectivity. The people in the congregation who are involved are too close to the situation to see the picture objectively.
2. Trust. People need to know that their input will be treated fairly and with confidentiality.

3. Trained guidance. An expert's assessment and recommendation will help us understand where we are and the path forward.

The consultants would be supported by an internal group designed to bring congregational culture and perspective to the work of the consultants. The internal group would be responsible for:

1. Making recommendations to the Elders and the Board for next steps
2. Reporting the findings to the congregation

This was approved by the Elders in February, 2012, and the Board in March, 2012.

Fanning Institute

With diverse expertise in areas of community, economic, leadership and non-profit development, the University of Georgia's Fanning Institute helps communities and individuals plan for the future, develop and strengthen their capacity, resolve conflicts, and build the necessary skills to achieve their goals.

To fulfill these roles, Fanning's faculty offers services including community visioning, strategic planning, downtown redevelopment, and business expansion; facilitation and technical assistance; alternative dispute resolution and training; leadership development; and public authority training and certification.

These and other services are provided to a variety of clients, including:

- chambers of commerce, local governments, regional commissions and state agencies;
- statewide organizations and public authorities including development authorities
- non-profits and community-based organizations;
- individuals including youth, educators, entrepreneurs and leaders.

Planning – Understanding needs, creating a vision for the future, and setting a path to achieve sustainable results.

Capacity Building – Providing the skill and knowledge for an individual or organization to create their own success.

Conflict Resolution – Delivering expertise in the resolution of conflicts and the training to help others resolve conflicts.

Leadership Development – Specialized development opportunities for public authorities, non-profit leaders, youth and others.

David Hooker and Raye Rawls, of the Fanning staff, worked with us.

The Listening Team

The Listening Team was selected to work with the Fanning Institute to develop a congregational survey, report the findings of the survey, and make recommendations for next steps.

Members were selected to represent various interests of the congregation. The members of the Listening Team are Nancy Porter, Larry Weas, Anne Williamson, Amado Grabiell, Jerry Johnson, Teri Slemmons, Kay VanderHooft, David Griffin, Lucie Coffie, and Susan Pleasant. Ham Kimzey, then Moderator, participated periodically. Newly elected Moderator Sharon Meek has joined us since her election. This group invested many hours and heartfelt prayers to this service.

The Process

The process had three phases – listening, deeper understanding, findings and recommendations.

The purpose of the **listening phase** was to identify key themes or sources of tension. This was accomplished through consultant interview with the Listening Team and with a congregational survey. Approximately 122 people returned surveys to Fanning. The opportunity to participate in the survey was offered to every member on the current membership list, active and inactive.

With information from the survey, the Fanning consultants identified key themes and conducted focus groups. The objective of the focus groups was to gain deeper insight and understanding about the themes identified in the survey. The consultants facilitated two focus group sessions at the church. All who wanted to participate were allowed to do so. Approximately 38 people joined the discussions.

The **findings** of the Fanning consultants were not calculations or a fit to a statistical model. Some questions could be answered with more than one single answer. The survey had more than 20 pages of detailed responses offering clarifying answers to questions. In focus groups, one person's opinion that went unanswered by other members might have been given the same weight as a consensus opinion. Their findings came from their experience with organizations and sources of conflict.

The Listening Team insisted that two criteria be held important – people participating and others in the congregation could trust that confidentiality would be upheld and that the findings would not be tampered with or influenced by the Listening Team.

A report was provided by the Fanning Institute consultants. The Listening Team examined the report, considered their experiences and formed an independent assessment. The team then identified key themes and recommendations.

This report is not an analytical study. This report does not pretend or intend to be based on a statistically validated model. It consists of the findings of highly credentialed professionals who work with a wide range of organizations and specialize in understanding conflicts. It also represents the best prayerful efforts of deeply committed lay church members who love our church and want to do the work of Jesus. Both reports – the Fanning Institute and the Listening Team – should be viewed as a story describing a mosaic of snapshots at a point in time in the growth and maturation of the people of God who call themselves Cherry Log Christian Church. The Listening Team would like to acknowledge that the leadership mentioned in this report have done their best to serve the greater mission of Cherry Log Christian Church.

The Findings – A Summary

Five themes were identified.

Theme 1 – IDENTITY

CLCC is a diverse congregation by definition. What we want is Christian love without judgment. What we struggle with is having unity with such diversity. We struggle with understanding different points of view, using language of respect, moving forward without dismissing minority perspectives. We have “either/or” behavior. We allow our diverse beliefs to distract us from our unifying mission as members Cherry Log Christian Church.

Theme 2 – LEADERSHIP AND DIRECTION

We want a pastor who accepts all members and pastors everyone. In addition we want to trust those in leadership positions rather than feel a need to control. We struggle with the appearances of control rather than compassion and transparency. We struggle with consensus due to the diversity of experiences in the congregation. We struggle with having confidence that finances and change are being handled in the best interest of the church.

Theme 3 – STRUCTURE

We want Disciples of Christ practices and beliefs to be understood and lived. We want clarity of roles and responsibilities and trained effective lay leaders who are allowed to lead. We struggle with trusting and having confidence in the leaders who are in place.

Theme 4 – COMMUNICATION

We have very effective one way communication through email, website, and printed material. We want a systematic process that allows people to be heard, have input, and discussion before decisions are made. We struggle with communicating concerns directly. We struggle because we lack a reliable structure for dialogue.

Theme 5 – RELATIONSHIPS

What we want is “joy, delight, and excitement.” We want collective eagerness generated by being part of Cherry Log. We want Sunday morning welcome every day and connections that are special and unique. We struggle with cliques and lack of understanding between groups. We struggle with lack of alignment and suspicion about agendas and motivations. We struggle when those with passion work so hard, only to be criticized by those who do not participate. We struggle when someone says something that disrespects our deeply held beliefs and don’t know what to do with it. We struggle when someone is hurt and we don’t know how to respond.

The report from the Fanning Institute is available under the “Membership” tab on the church website at www.clccdoc.org/Membership.aspx.

The Future We Want

In our future state, Cherry Log Christian Church has come to understand and act upon the following:

- That there can be strength in our diversity and in our differences;
- That this is true only when there is genuine loving acceptance of the differences and of those who differ;
- That our diversity provides opportunity for personal and institutional growth as we strive together to understand but not change those around us;
- That we live by a touchstone of “both/and” rather than “either/or,” understanding that the former is a formula for addition, the latter is a formula for subtraction;
- That *what we do* is, finally, more important than *what we believe*;
- That what we do becomes the heart, the feet, the hands of Jesus in our community and in the world around us;
- That all else is subordinate to this mission.

There is humble acknowledgment that Cherry Log and its membership will need to engage in an honest process of genuine reconciliation in order for us to attain this future state.

The Recommendations

The Listening Team sought recommendations that required less outside help and fewer financial resources yet achieved a similar to superior impact anticipated by the Fanning Institute. The Elders and the Board will determine action steps.

These recommendations in priority order are:

1. Define a mission statement that aligns us and creates focus. The congregation will endorse it.
2. Develop a way to have a "Mission Moment" every Sunday. No more than 90 seconds reminding the congregation of "The Mission" and highlighting a mission.
3. Develop a first step process for people to voice their concerns through a Stephen Minister or Elder. These individuals would be prepared and trained with process to have an aligned way to deal with these issues.
4. Train elected and informal leaders in processes to handle conflict or differences people have with others in the church.
5. Generate a feedback loop for leaders and the pastor. Enable written and face to face feedback.
6. Have "Talk with Me" gathering (soon). Have a meal, some fun, and then dialogue that confronts some of the hot topics, giving people a chance to discuss them with each other.
7. Set up dinner groups consisting of people from diverse experiences to meet monthly, with a structured topic to engage in dialogue. One person serves as facilitator.
8. Encourage leaders to have a training moment in every meeting.
9. Define additional ways to present the mission in every gathering.
10. Identify people's gifts and link them with actions to reinforce servant ministry.
11. Develop a structured communication (listening and dialogue as well as telling) process. Identify what communication is needed, when, how, and who, and how feedback can be offered.
12. Every elder and deacon meets one on one with each flock member to get feedback.
13. Leaders schedule discussion times routinely – "dinner with the deacons," "eating with the elders," "brown bag lunch with the pastor."