



Congregational Conversation

MINUTES - September 9th @ 2PM – from Pastor Deb’s perspective

PART FOUR: *SO, WHERE ARE WE NOW?*

Our group gathered and began promptly at 2PM with prayer that acknowledged the spectrum of feelings in the room: excitement, fear, curiosity, reluctance, and even a little anger that we all have to even be thinking about these things at this point in our lives. Present were Ben, Diane, Kathy T, Norma, Jim, Carol, Joe, Carolyn, Heide, Mary Lou, Mary D, and Laurie. Steve and Jen had sent their homework papers in because they were out of town Diane and Mary Lou read them, respectively.


Pastor Deb clarified her role as one of resource and guide, but that she has “no horse in the race and no skin in the game,” i.e. ministers come and go but the church is the congregation. She answered a few questions clarifying that:

- No decision will be made about what we are going to do without a vote of the congregation following a recommendation from the Session.
- South Presbyterian’s future should not be a consideration in that South will continue regardless of what IPC chooses to do.

After that, the first thing we did was to look at this chart and discuss what each of the quadrants represents.

For churches to move into new realities, there has to be KNOWLEDGE and ACTION.

Church leaders and members generally fall into one of four categories:

ACTION → INFORMATION ↓	Don't know What to Do	Know What to Do
Don't have Information	<i>People may feel overwhelmed and hopeless.</i>	<i>People may sense that something needs to happen – things can't stay the same – but they don't know where to start.</i>
Have Information	<i>People may have a sense of changes our churches are facing, but may not have an idea of what their options are, or how to achieve them. Common question: What can we do?</i>	

It was pretty clear from our discussion that most of us were in the bottom-left and top-right.

We went around the room and shared the first answers in our Summer Homework. Everyone contributed. The consensus seemed to be that: 1) Whatever we do, we want to stay together, 2) Worshiping together is important to us all, and 3) We are very committed to helping others through mission work, whether we are boots-on-the-ground, or pay-and-collect-for specific-programs people.

From there, we walked our way through the Decision Tree (end of these notes) that was first presented as the last page of this year's Annual Report. We followed along the Tree, making our way down the LEFT side because we all answered YES to the first question. Most of our discussions for the next 45 minutes were around the green and blue boxes.

Here are some of the points shared and discussed:

- Could we go somewhere else in Irondequoit and still stay a church? Yes.
 - **How would that work with the Presbytery?** *As long as we are continuing our ministry, either as an independent church or as part of another church, the money from the sale of our campus can go with us.*
 - **Where might we go?**
 - Rent space in another church -- but the point was raised that they will probably eventually be facing this same situation we are in now.
 - Rent space NOT in a church – we could consider relocating with one of our mission partners or renting space in an office setting.
 - Worship at Cameron? *They have a beautiful space, but concerns were expressed about everyone's comfort and feeling of safety in the Lyle-Otis Neighborhood.*
 - Perhaps there's space in the new Food Cupboard going up next to the church. *We can check on that. They may not want us to hold worship services there or there might not be room.*
- We discussed possibilities of **combining in some way with another church**. Some of the ones we talked about were Webster, Summerville, and South which led us to affirm that our church building is no longer centrally located for where members live. We are all over the map (literally) from Gonondagon to Greece, from Henrietta to Irondequoit.
- Things that were stated as important for us as we continue in the future are:
 - Worship
 - Choir and the music program
 - Small groups
 - Our Mission work
 - The close-knit feeling of “family”

At that point, we stopped and went around the room with each person asked to state how they were feeling and what they were thinking about just then. Here are some of the highlights.

- **There is still some reticence to believe that we cannot attract young families**, but increasingly, the group was able to quote some of the data they've learned and to pragmatically look at the

fact that families with young children want to be with other families who have young children. Additionally, school-aged children and teens want to be in groups that reflect what they are used to – diversity of race, religion, gender identification, etc. Those things come with large churches, not small ones like ours.

- **Two points arose from the perspective of P&M:**
 - **Increasingly, our volunteers can no longer care for the building** as they have been (some for as long as 40 years). Paying \$20/hr would only give us someone to mop the floors. To do the other things that our volunteers have taken care of in the past could cost \$200/hr. We can't afford that. And our volunteers are no longer physically able to care for the campus as they used to.
 - **There was some discussion about selling the building and renting back** the space we need for ourselves. However, for our people who have poured heart and soul into maintaining our beautiful space to sell the building and then remain here to worship would most likely break their hearts. They would have no say in how the building was maintained if we were renters only and that thought is untenable.
- **We briefly discussed the option of “doing nothing” and staying where we are.** Pastor Deb drew a parallel with aging in our homes and needing to downsize. If we don't and we just hang on as long as possible, either we will die in that house and someone else will have to clean it out, or we will lost the option of moving where we want to and end up someplace we don't want to be. At some point, someone is going to be saddled with packing up and moving. If we love our children and grandchildren (or our youngest members of the church who, themselves, are mostly in their 50's) we don't want to burden them like that. In addition, wouldn't it be better to leave and move into a new place when we still have the energy and health to enjoy ourselves?
- **Questions arose about South Presbyterian coming to worship in the IPC building.** Pastor Deb, Kathy and Norma (who have both worshiped at Fellowship of Faith and been part of the choir and bell choirs there) explained that Fellowship of Faith is only one of South's 14 Acts of Faith. And it has created a new worshipping community from residents at the Meadows who could not travel to IPC for worship. Nor would they want to because South's members prefer to no longer be tied to a building.

Over time, as everyone spoke her/his mind and heart, more specific questions arose.

Regarding South Presbyterian.

- ✚ South Presbyterian is a 100% missional church, meaning they have no building or centralized location for ministry. Everything they do is done where the people are. So when you think of South, picture foreign missionaries, in a way. Their ministries are in the workplaces and central locations in the community and they are there to be the presence of Christ.
- ✚ The Acts of Faith model encourages small groups to spring up around the community wherever they are needed or wherever there's interest. They don't necessarily have to have anything to do with traditional church. Currently, at South there are Bible studies, choir, bell choir, book groups, senior spirituality group, Evening Prayer, support group for 20-somethings, a bread ministry, online and DVD ministries with weekly services, and the New

Life Food Cupboard. Some are online only (like our Wednesday small group) and some are in-person.

Because of this structure, there are many non-South Church members who have become part of the church through attending these groups: Roman Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, American Baptist, Baha'i, an atheist or two and those who don't belong to anything but just question what's going on. Maybe they'll join someday, maybe they won't. Getting more members is not the goal of South. Their whole mission is to "go out and train everyone you meet, far and near in Jesus' way of life" (Mt. 28:19) however it is that people can understand that.

South currently has 34 official members, but if you count up the attendance in their Acts of Faith every week, the number is close to 100. They're just not all in one place at one time.

✚ Currently, by South's standards, IPC already has 6 things that would be considered Acts of Faith: worship, choir, two small groups, Cameron, and the Rochester Food Cupboard.

✚ **Questions arose from the group:**

- **If we were to combine with South in some way, could all our ministries continue?**

Yes. They would just become Acts of Faith like the other AoF's at South.

- **Where would they meet? Where would we worship? What about our office?**

Wherever you want to. If there's a place in Irondequoit – or anywhere else – you could continue by yourself, or you could come to the Meadows and worship together with South. If the churches combine, the offices would combine. Kevin Fuller has already combined offices and is well-acquainted with rental options that would suit our needs. (Yes, we would take all of the choir music with us.)

- **What would happen to our identity?**

Some churches merge. Others remain separate. Sometimes when churches combine, they don't plan very well and members never really connect. IPC and Dewey have already done this once and the result has been terrific. Everyone is comfortable with the shared history. In South's case, they combined with New Life Presbyterian Church. Pastor Deb shared information about that process.

- **Does South even want us to join them?**

The answer is yes. The experience of South and New Life joining was so positive, that they would welcome IPC for many reasons: your commitment to the Spirit and living your faith through mission, you emphasis on education and music, and the ways you have connected through the joint potluck dinners.

- **What kind of music program does South have?**

Kathy and Norma spoke to this at some length as both have participated in them. South's choir (Sing for Joy) and bell choir (Ring for Joy) rehearse and lead worship from September – June, very much as IPC's choir does. Guest musicians are invited to participate regularly. In fact, Kathy will be directing the choir and playing for worship for a half-dozen Sundays during this next program year.

Both groups rehearse on Wednesday night (choir at 5:30 and bells at 6:30). There is also a resident hammered dulcimer duo made up of South members.

Andy Pratt, Minister of Music, is director of music for Blackfriars Theater and teaches high school music at Aquinas. He is a graduate of the Eastman School of Music and brings a lot of jazz to worship. He has also been an Elder and a member of South for many, many years. He and Kathy Thomas are getting to know each other.

The bell choir is very new – just beginning its third year. It is conducted by Holly Powell, an ordained minister who works as a Recreational Therapist now. She is a graduate of the Ithaca College music department and Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, a member of the choir, co-chair of Deacons, and a life-long bell leader.

All are welcome in both music AoF's. As with IPC, there are no auditions. But alas, there is no organ present ... just a grand piano.

South and New Life Presbyterian

Just as IPC and Dewey joined forces, South has experience with welcoming and integrating new members, too.

In 2018 New Life Presbyterian Church dissolved and joined South with its five Acts of Faith (worship – which became New Life on Monroe worship at Cobbs Hill Manor, Monroe Milers youth running group, Adulting 101 Group, Love our Lord (LOL) Youth Group, and the New Life Food Cupboard).

Together, the two sessions – working with the Committee on Ministry – created a Blending Plan which laid out a three-year process for combining identities, having seats on South's Session that were designated for former New Life people, combining the Deacons' Boards, how to handle the finances, etc. and preserving the New Life name/identity by using it with two of the AoF's (worship and food cupboard). [Truth be told, the new Session discontinued it after two years as all of the benchmarks had been reached by then.]

Today, as with all Acts of Faith, some of those brought on board by New Life no longer exist. The Monroe Milers outgrew South's ability to manage it with close to 100 kids involved for two 6-week sessions twice a year so they are now under the umbrella of a non-profit organization. The families whose kids were involved in the Youth Group all moved ... which brought about an end to the LOL Youth Group. The Adulting 101 group all aged out and without a youth group to feed in new members there was no need to continue it. New Life on Monroe was no longer allowed to meet at Cobbs Hill Manor because of COVID ... but South's DVD ministry continues there and almost a dozen residents worship with South through the DVD's every week. The New Life Food Cupboard (hosted in partnership with Congregation Beth Shalom on Monroe Avenue) continues to grow and expand.

There were about 19 members of New Life when it closed. 13 came to South. Some have died or moved away from church and five remain active members at SPC.

As we neared the end of our two hours, the group was asked about whether to meet again in two weeks – the morning of **Saturday, September 23rd**. Rev. Ray Jones – director of Evangelism and Theological Formation for the PC(USA) will be in town for South's Gala. The group decided to ask Ray to come and share his observations around the country of what works and what doesn't when churches are facing a situation like IPC is right now.

Pastor Deb also suggested three things:

1. Plan on attending the 1PM panel discussion on **Saturday, September 23rd at Third Presbyterian Church** when members of the Presbytery, South and Ray Jones will be talking about the changing church and what we can do.
2. Immediately after the panel discussion will be a **3PM Time of Recognition and Reception** also at Third Church when members of the community will speak about the Acts of Faith Model and how it works. PLUS – all of the current AoF's will have a presence there so you can see for yourself and talk with people involved to ask questions and see what's involved. (Just a heads-up ... some AoF Leaders belong to other churches. It's all part of the model. We are there to make Jesus open to everybody! Feel free to ask them why they do this with another church.)
3. For those who want to see what South's music program is like, and to figure out if you would fit in with it or not, some to the **Celebration Communion Service on Sunday, September 24th at 1PM**. Both the new (still learning) bell choir and the singing choirs will be leading worship.

For more information about South or the Acts of Faith model, please visit their website: <https://southpc.org/> and if you would like to view testimonials with members, click on **WELCOME** in the upper left corner.

Individual members who were present will speak on behalf of themselves, but by the end of the two hours, more than one person seemed to have moved moving closer to the “star” position on the opening chart, i.e. we all agreed with various degrees of reluctance that we have to do something, that it most likely means moving out of the building, and several people expressed excitement over exploring options with South Presbyterian Church. We agreed that we will be inviting the Committee on Ministry to be a part of our process beginning with our October Session meeting.

Feel free to talk with any of those who were present. I (Pastor Deb) taped the 2 hours so no one would have to try and take notes during the meeting. These are my best renderings from the tape, but I am always open to the fact that I may have misunderstood or misinterpreted and answer, so if you were there and this doesn't comport with what you recall, please say something and I will gladly share your thoughts with everyone else.

It was pretty clear to me that God's Spirit is at work here at IPC.

I hope everyone else in the room felt it, too.

Respectfully submitted,

Deb Swift

Decision Tree for Congregational Future*

Q1 ::: Do we want to stay together?

YES

NO

Emphasis shifts to Ending Well

Need to figure out how to:

- Leave a legacy for the future that represents the people who came before us.
- Schedule memorials in the name of the church to provide longer-lasting support for things we have historically supported.
- Donate to other church initiatives through our denomination or larger community.
- Where will our spiritual needs be met?

Q2 ::: Stay together how?

As a Worshiping Community

As a Social Group

Need to ask ourselves:

- What would that look like?
- How would we accomplish that and stay in touch?
- Where will our spiritual needs be met?

Q3 ::: What kind of worshipping community?

As an Attractional Church
in a traditional church building

As a Missional Church
as a 1st century model

Q4 ::: Where will we meet?

Someone else's building

Rent space OR another congregation from another church

We continue to own & pay for our building OR We sell & Rent back our Space so we can worship here

Our own building and utilize our building missionally for groups that need a place to meet

Not in a Church Building

- Choosing a model that works for us
- 1st century church
- Missional Mindset

GO TO

DECISION TREE

#2

Need to ask ourselves about:

- Longevity of financial viability
- What will happen with our identity?
- Affordability
- Do we have (and can we afford) the people needed to fill important roles (music, cleaning, leadership, etc.)
- How will we react to others making decisions about "our" building?

TREE #1: What is God calling us to do or be?



Firebird Spirit team members, experienced in all these areas, are standing by to help with these and related questions of discernment for your congregation.

Where is God leading us?

*This information (c)2023 by Firebird Spirit, Inc. All Rights Reserved.