

March 27, 2015

Report to First Christian Church on Educational Leave/Sabbatical

By Chuck Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor

*“What will the ministry of your congregation be like ten years from now if you with faithfulness, effectiveness, and innovation live into God’s call on your congregation?”
(George Bullard)*

Preface. It was my privilege to undertake a Ministry Board-approved educational leave/sabbatical during January and February of 2015. The topic I concentrated on was to learn more and go more deeply into the habits, practices, and structures that will continue to facilitate First Christian’s growing into a solidly “program-sized” church (i.e., averaging 250+ in worship). To that end I read widely, had in-person interviews with pastors who had help lead their congregations to significant growth, and had in-person, phone or email consultations with a number of others. It was also extremely significant that the congregation did their own study of these topics through reading of “homework” that I had made available and discussion of these materials in small group and “town hall” settings. I have also read the notes from those venues.

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**Section I. Written resources read/consulted**

“10 Fatal Mistakes Pastors Make” by Bill Easum *(he is a long-time church consultant and co-owner of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Strategies)*

“18 Fatal Church Mistakes” by Bill Easum

“Breaking Barriers Checklist” by Bill Easum and Bill Tenny-Brittain (a collection of resources concerned with habits/traits/practices that do/don’t aid in breaking through various attendance and other barriers) *(Bill Tenny-Brittain is the other co-owner of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Strategies and a longtime Disciples of Christ participant).*

“How to Grow Your Church” by Bill Tenny-Brittain

“Healthy Church Budgets Empower Missional Ministry: Congregational Management Insights” by George Bullard. *(Bullard is the director of The Columbia Project, a church consultation group)*

*that is generally understood to be more on the moderate-to-conservative theological spectrum. However, the Project's consultants include Disciples former General Minister and President Dick Hamm)*

"The Role of the Lead (Senior) Pastor and Staffing a Church" by Bill Easum

"Breaking the 200, 500, 1,000, 1500 and 3000" Barrier by Bill Easum

A dozen or so very provocative and thoughtful blog posts by Carey Nieuwhof including articles on trends that will affect the future of the church, traits of today's non-churchgoers, why churches don't grow and/or don't grow past certain attendance barriers, ways the church can/should respond as even "regular" attenders attend less often, among others. *(Nieuwhof is the Lead Pastor of the Conexus Church in Canada, a strongly self-identified "seeker church.")*

"10 Factors of Congregational Survivability, Vitality, and Vibrancy A Spiritual Strategic Journey Playbook Resource TCP Leadership Series" By George W. Bullard Jr.

"Avoiding Planning Paralysis" by Bill Tenny-Brittain

"Living Into the Potential of Your Congregation" by George W. Bullard Jr.

Church Unique: How Missional Leaders Cast Vision, Capture Culture, and Create Movement by Will Mancini *(Mancini is the President of the Auxano Group, a church consultation outfit that aims to assist churches do "strategic visioning" rather than "strategic planning." The Auxano group would generally be self-identified with more "conservative/evangelical" approaches to Christianity)*

"The Top Ten Most Fiercely Defended Traditions in Churches" by Thom Rainer

## **Section II. Persons Interviewed/Consulted with**

David Emery, Senior Pastor, Middletown Christian Church, Louisville, Kentucky *(David has led his congregation through a strategic visioning process that has resulted in growth in church attendance from about 600 to 1000. Prior to that he was the pastor of a congregation that grew from about 50 to 300 in worship)*

Dolly Mills, Executive Pastor, Middletown Christian Church *(she is the former Christian Education Director and now Executive Pastor, with general administrative and staff oversight for a total ministerial and program and support staff of about 25. She has been on staff about 14 years)*

Randy Spleth, Senior Pastor of Geist Christian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana. *(Randy is the founding and Senior Pastor. Started in the late 1980s with 13 people, Geist now has 1000 in worship in four services on two campuses)*

Warren Lynn, Director of Church Vocations for Disciples Home Missions (aka Homeland Ministries) of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) *(Warren's position has given him some unique insights over the years into the qualities of those pastors who have helped successfully led congregations in church growth)*

Ronald Allen, Professor of Preaching and New Testament, Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana *(Almost three generations of Disciples preachers have been mentored by Ron, and he has been a ubiquitous presence in churches and Regional Assemblies as a guest preacher).*

Charles Buck, Conference Minister, Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ, Honolulu, Hawaii *(A Korean-American serving an extraordinarily ethnically diverse set of churches, Charles offered insights about what is and is not different about the church growth situation of Hawaiian ethnic churches in particular, and United Church of Christ congregations in general)*

Barbara Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor, First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington *(Barbara has experience in helping churches "turn around," first doing so at Central Christian Church in Indianapolis where worship attendance grew from 60 to 200, at First Christian Church, Concord, California, where attendance doubled, and at United Community Church, Hilo, Hawaii, where worship attendance quadrupled).*

Dick Hamm, former General Minister and President for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and now a church consultant for The Columbia Partnership *(from both those perspectives, as well as his experience as a local church pastor and Regional Minister, Dick has seen a variety of churches that have successfully turned around and grown significantly).*

Dani Loving Cartwright, former Regional Minister for the Southwest Region (Texas/New Mexico). I have also have "in process" at the time of this writing, conversations planned with two other current Regional Ministers: Toni Bynum, Northern California-Nevada; Cathy Wirt, Oregon.

### **Section III. Executive Summary: Key Insights Learned/Re-Learned/Seen In a New Way**

*For continued growth, there must be a clear, compelling, concise strategy that guides all decisions about expenditures, personnel, etc. A "laser-like focus" " (in the words of one*

*blogger) on the “mission strategy”<sup>1</sup> – which can be easily and readily articulated by those from age six to ninety-six. At the same time, traditional notions of strategic planning are no longer useful due to the speed of cultural and churchly change. It is better to work toward a “strategic frame” into which a vision is centered and which is flexible, lean, and can accommodate new opportunities (but which can also serve as a criterion by which to decline some opportunities as not being germane to that vision).*

#### **Section IV. Some Specific Areas of Observation/Learning re Congregational Growth (+ How I believe we are doing on each)**

*Note: my comments are in **bold [brackets]***

##### ***Staffing/Personnel***

Bill Easum writes: “A primary reason churches fail to grow... in worship is because 100 people is all one person can adequately network, equip, and mentor/midwife into ministry. In traditional churches the rule of thumb is one program/pastoral staff person for every 100 people in worship.” **[We are in a good place with regards to this criterion, but always must make sure we never inadvertently diminish that ratio]**

More: In a church that would consistently break the 200 barrier, “the pastor shifts from being a chaplain to being a leader and starts handing off [direct] ministry.” **[This is a point that was emphasized in the readings in the January “homework”; it suggests that more and more of the Senior Pastor’s time is devoted to teaching and leading the leaders – “equipping the saints,” as the New Testament has it. Part of what this emphasis has made me realize is that I need to commit myself to doing more teaching and mentoring of both the congregation and staff/leadership. Stay tuned....]**

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize that I am combining two concepts here for the sake of convenience and succinctness: “mission” and “strategy.” “Mission” is understood to be the **distinctive** things that First Christian is called to be about as it witnesses to the community given its particularly history and gifts (those “distinctives” are therefore different for every congregation, even though the **general** mandate of Jesus – to love God and one another and serve the world – are the same for all congregations). For example, our distinctive mission to fulfill Jesus’ mandate might be, for example, to proclaim to a too-often skeptical culture that God is a god of grace, not judgment. Our “strategy” for doing so might be to embody that witness through music, proclamation, and particular forms of service. Combined, that is our “mission strategy,” and much of what this report focuses on is the tactics that should follow from a re-framed “mission strategy” that includes elements like “radical hospitality,” “outrageous generosity,” etc.

More from Easum: “Apply the 80/20 rule to everything staff does. 20 percent of what we do achieves 80 percent of the results. Knowing the difference is crucial to staff continuing to move a church forward as the staff grows larger. Staff should spend 80 percent of their time on the 20 percent of the agenda that will achieve the desired results. Staff should spend 80 percent of their time working on the things they enjoy and do best and only 20 percent of their time improving their weaknesses (unless these weaknesses are destroying their lives such as substance abuse or laziness). *Do not make the mistake of spending the bulk of your time improving your faults.*” **[This is a helpful insight that I will particularly be asking myself and staff to think about in terms of their own work as it relates to the church’s mission]**

And more: “The best model is for Personnel Committee to relate only to the Senior Pastor. They should hold her/him accountable and expect him/her to do the same with the staff.” “Do not turn the personnel committee into a staff committee. On the surface this sounds democratic and good, where everyone on the staff has direct access to the personnel committee. However, there are many ramifications of this decision and only one of them is good. The only good one is that it makes staff feel better. This committee, if you have it, should relate primarily with the lead pastor.” **[This is fact currently FCC’s practice and it’s good to know we are out in front on this]**

## **Worship**

Bill Easum writes about “Fatal Church Mistakes” including this one: “Making a long string of announcements at the beginning of worship service is one of the most damaging things a church can do to worship. ...Young adults tune to the moment you begin worship with announcements. Instead, begin worship with a rousing piece of music that says ‘Something great is going to happen here today!’ If you have to do announcements, don’t lead off with them.” **[In both regards, it’s good to see that our current practice mirrors what Easum says]**

Again from Easum: “Nine out of ten dying or plateaued churches we’ve consulted with shut down their choir and reduce their schedules in the summer, even though summer is a major time for reaching new people moving into the area.... If something is not important enough to our Christian development to keep open in the summer, perhaps it’s not really that important the rest of the year.” **[I will be asking the worship staff to think about this point.]**

Easum again: “The best way to **immediately** increase worship attendance is by starting another well-planned, well-resourced, well-publicized worship service.”

**[Some conclusion from my reading and interviews: The best way long-term to increase worship attendance in all services is to have that “laser-like focus on a) A well-crafted order of worship that thematically coheres; b) Consistently excellent preaching; c) Consistently excellent music; d) Informal (but not “sloppy”) atmosphere; d) folks who clearly enjoy being in worship and do not ever give the impression that certain folks (children, babies, those who are “different”) are less than fully welcome; e) start on time, end on time; f) keep announcements to a minimum, selected by the pastor; g) strenuously avoiding all “insider language” in the printed order of service; g) adequate parking; h) “welcomingness” that actually begins at the parking lot.**

**Some secondary, but nonetheless important aids to growth in worship attendance: a) not having too much information in the worship bulletin (lots of white space, visually interesting layout and color); b) making it clear that folks are welcome to use their smartphones as an aid to their worship; c) a drum set of some sort on the chancel (even on Sundays when it is not used) sends the message that there is an openness to a variety of music (Barbara Blaisdell offered this insightful point); d) churches must offer a way to access worship via online means (given the change in “regular” attendance patterns and the cultural fact that “online” is increasingly the default for many/most people.)**

### ***Mission & Vision***

Bill Tenny-Brittain writes: “It’s one one thing to discover your mission, values, and vision. It’s another thing to align everything the church does around mission alignment and vision attainment. *That means anything that isn’t moving the church forward specifically in its mission and its vision must be stopped or realigned.*”

Bill Easum writes similarly: “Avoid starting too many new programs. Focus only on getting more people in worship. You can disciple them later. You actually do more if you focus on doing less.”

Carey Nieuwhof: “Great opportunities are a chance for a vision to drift. An opportunity does not equal an obligation. Stay true to the mission.”

Bill Tenny-Brittain: “Review your mission, values, and vision until you’ve not only memorized them, but you’ve internalized them as well. Without them, decision making will be based on personal preferences. Know what your resources are: time, funding, facilities, “stuff,” and people.... Have a good “why.” If you don’t know what you want to

accomplish and why it's important, it's virtually impossible to accomplish anything of value. Before you start anything, you should know the "mission" for every event, ministry, and mission."

### ***Evangelism***

Easum: It is a mistake to think "that adding a second service or a radically different service will divide the church and no one will know everyone anymore. Well, let's be honest – unless you have a worship service under 35 people, no one knows everyone anyway.... The issue isn't 'Does everyone know everyone?' but does 'Everyone in our city know Jesus Christ?'" **[As I have previously noted, staff will be carefully looking in the next several months at the possibility and need to start a third worship service, probably at a "non-traditional" time]**

More Easum: In a church that would consistently break the 200 barrier, "Increasing the number of first-time guests and retaining them must become a priority." The "lead pastor must personally contact first-time guests within 48 hours. ...Much of the prevailing wisdom is that people are more likely to return to your church if the laity visits them. It's just not so. In churches with fewer than 500 in worship, people are more likely to return if the lead pastor... contacts them within the first 24 hours." **[We currently have a decent system in place for contacting first-time visitors within 24 hours with an email and a snail mail letter from me. In this day and age, it is overwhelmingly the case that first time visitors do not want a personal visit or even phone call. This fits with our experience that it takes first-time visitors an average of three-to-four visits before they will give us contact information.]**

And more: "Fast growing churches don't grow incrementally; they grow in big spurts. Often these spurts come from an intense push within the congregation for each person to invite their networks to worship on a specific Sunday. You need to plan three double days a year with a goal of doubling the number of first time guests attending worship. The goal isn't increasing worship attendance; it's about increasing the number of first time guests which will lead to grow in worship over the long haul." **[This is an intriguing idea]**

George Bullard: "Growing congregations will add a number of new people as members or regular attendees of their congregation at a rate of six to seven percent per year of the number of members and regular attendees they had at the beginning of the year." And "At its best church growth is an outward expression of a desire for a local congregation to attract as many people as possible into the Kingdom of God and into

their congregation with its discipleship practices.” **[It will be good to be more intentional about setting benchmarks and measuring results, with Bullard’s prescription as one possible criterion. But even more important is his second point that expresses the reason for church growth – not for its own sake, but for the sake of those who do not know the gospel!]**

### ***Budget and Finances***

George Bullard: “Congregations need to begin with the foundational principle that any facilities they utilize belong to the mission of God, and should not be selfishly seen as belonging to the congregation. Therefore, the fulfillment of God’s vision using the congregational facilities as a tool should always be the top priority.” **[I think that on the whole there is a great pride in understanding that our building is first of all a mission and community resource, rather than simply a place for “us” to gather.]**

Bill Easum: “I’m often asked if the church budget should show individual staff salaries and without hesitation I always say, “NO, not on your life!” Here’s why. First showing all the salaries encourages mediocrity. Why? Because the same mindset that publishes individual salaries also wants to give across the board raises, which is always a horrible thing to do. On staff person is performing effectively another is just getting by and they both get the same raise. How do you think the effective leader feels if they know poor work is regarded the same as effective work? It has a tendency to squash hard work and encourage slackers. Such a situation is never good. The second reason not to show individual raises follows in the steps of the first – it discourages paying people based on their performance where one person may not get a raise, another a 10% raise, and another a 5% raise because it can create jealousy among the staff. And do not be naïve enough to think that never happens.”

### ***Leadership – Ministerial and Lay***

Easum provocatively writes: “What are the positive requirements for church leadership? To give financially, to be a member or leader of a small group, a leader of a ministry whose members are accountable to one another, who regularly attend leadership training, who participate in daily devotion and prayer.” At least three of these, he says, should be required for anyone who would be serve as a lay leader in a congregation. **[Our new – as of two years ago – Bylaws have recognized that those in leadership need to be involved in worship, small groups and other ministries, and be financial givers.]**

Easum: "As the lead pastor goes, so goes the church, no matter what size congregation. Every act of a leader sends ripples through the congregation. Like any other organization, the people chosen to lead a congregation, determine its destiny more than any other human element. How they lead is crucial to the effectiveness of the organization."

Easum: "Lead pastors no longer focus their attention on immature Christians nor waste time working with people who don't want to grow. Rather, the role of the senior pastor is different from anyone else in the congregation:

A. The senior pastor is the "Keeper of the Vision"

1. This person focuses more on the big picture
2. And the core key leaders, including paid staff, more than on the congregation itself.

B. The less [direct] ministry the senior pastor does the healthier the church is. This is one of the major shifts effective pastors begin to make as soon as they can."

Easum again: Church members want "spiritual leaders who can lead them into immediate, uncontrollable, personal expressions of faith."

Another provocative but intriguing set of remarks by Easum: "1. Lead pastors don't pastor the church; they pastor the leaders of the church. They spend most of their time with the inner core of leadership, the Peter's, James', and John's. 2. Leaders need leaders. 3. Lead pastors need to carefully select those with whom they will lead" because "How the lead pastor models ministry will determine the way ministry is done in a congregation: If the pastor models equipping, the leaders will equip themselves and others for ministry. If the pastor models doing, the leaders will let the pastor do ministry. The most fundamental staffing decision you will ever make is whether the staff is going to perform ministry on behalf of the laity or are they going to equip laity to do ministry. In the thriving church of the 21st century the purpose of staff in any size church is to identify, recruit, equip, and deploy laity to perform the ministry and to run the programs. Biblically the role of staff is not to do ministry, but to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Ephesians 4:11-12."

Dani Loving Cartwright has a very good reminder for the Senior Pastor about what in his/her personality can **hinder** growth: "Pastor who is not willing to delegate to

others.... For a solid healthy program sized church to evolve, the ability to give away work has to become 2nd nature!!”

### ***Seeking, Welcoming and Retaining Visitors***

Per Bill Tenny-Brittain:

“When a visitor arrives the first time, the congregation is on trial. If the visitor feels welcome and the worship resonates with their soul, they are likely to return. If the church breaks one of **the four Platinum Rules of Hospitality (Don't Embarrass Me; Don't Confuse Me; Don't Ignore Me; Don't Overwhelm Me)** or if the worship doesn't move, touch, and inspire the visitor, they'll not return. And if you wait to follow-up until they've returned at least once, the odds of your visitors becoming returning guests who become faithful disciples of Jesus Christ (as well as a member) drop precipitously.” **[It will be good for staff and leadership to continue to assess how well we are doing with those four “platinum rules!”]**

And: “Members must connect with visitors and returning guests. That means every returning guest must have made a good friend in the church within approximately six months or they will drift away.” **[The small group ministries that we continue to have and to generate are indeed vital!]**

Easum: If you use nametags, there should be no difference between nametags for members and visitors. All should have the same kind.

### ***Congregational Governance, Self-Understanding and Effectiveness***

“Church faithfulness forgets that **faithfulness** alone is insufficient. It must also have **effectiveness** and **innovation** to be complete.” (George Bullard). **[We need to not only assess our work in these areas, we need to figure out how to “measure” these things. As several folks have pointed out over the years, what you measure becomes what is important to you. Another writer notes that the church is often good about measuring “inputs” but not as good at measuring “outputs” and results. (E.g., we can and should measure – and seek to increase – worship attendance and participation in small group and missions, but we also need to think about how we measure results/“outputs.” Some of these are intangible – deepened relationship with God – but nonetheless can be thought about)]**

Carey Nieuwhof provocatively writes: “Governance will become a major issue for future churches. When your decision making is rooted in complex bureaucracy or congregational approval for every major change, it makes decision making difficult and

courageous change almost impossible.” And “Involving everyone in leadership decisions is irresponsible. Large scale decisions (building purchases, major hires, etc.) can be emotional rollercoasters.... Always be transparent with finances and inquiries from people, but to take your entire congregation on every twist and turn along the way is irresponsible. You want to keep your congregation informed, but keep it to a minimum until plans are firm. Don’t take them on the rollercoaster along the way. If your structure demands that you have to over-inform your people, change it.” **[We have structures that, since the adoption of the new Bylaws, increasingly seek to put the decision-making responsibility with Committees and the Board, keep people informed of the “big picture” but trust those they have called into leadership with day-to-day decision making. The “Ask A Pastor” monthly sessions I’m going to start will also be an opportunity for folks to receive information transparently.]**

### ***Communication***

I received several positive comments from folks I talked with about our website (and, indeed, visitors continue to cite our website as the key reason they come to worship). However, it needs updating with more pictures (Barbara Blaisdell pointed this out), more interactivity, and with some attention to some of the dated sub-pages.

David Emery particularly noted that it is possible to **over-communicate** in such a way that the most important things are not being received. (When there is too much information it all appears to be of equal importance, much is overlooked or “un-seen,” and eyes glaze over). It’s intriguing that his congregation with 1000 in worship does THREE print newsletters a YEAR (of only four pages each), and their worship services do not in fact have a worship bulletin but simply a two page “welcome to worship and Middletown” page (with a “tear-off” with sermon notes). **[One of the things I will be proposing is that we have a “Communications Audit” as part of our long-term response to the need for continued church growth. See the final section. Several folks noted to me that our website has the key information easily available (where we are and when services are – it’s amazing how many church websites make you drill down to find that information) which is a good thing, but we also need to assess the website (and in fact any communication venture) with the question: “What do you want folks to DO because they’ve visited the website?”]**

### ***Facilities***

Per Easum, for a church to consistently break the 200 barrier, “there must be a parking space for every two people on the property at the peak hour” and “the nursery... has to

be taken to another level of excellence.” **[The first is tough: We don’t have that many spaces immediately adjacent to the church. But we do have plenty of spaces within one block. We need to do a better job of communicating those parking options. We also need to spend some money this spring and summer in a comprehensive study of what it would take to decrease the 40 year problem of icing in our parking lot. There are no simple or inexpensive solutions to that problem. Regarding the second, we have an excellent nursery staff, but it is time to again to an “audit” of the facilities – the last one was almost 5 years ago – to make sure we are truly attractive to young parents.]**

Elsewhere, Easum has written that the three most important rooms in the church (in terms of attracting and retaining visitors) are the restroom, the nursery, and the sanctuary. **[Our main restrooms are in good shape, our nursery could use a facelift and “brightening,” and our sanctuary is gorgeous but in need of re-painting due to non-cleanable stains from Christmas Eve wall candles.]**

## **Section V. Observations, Conclusions, Recommendations**

First, let me say I am enormously grateful for the way so many took so seriously the congregation’s “assignment” to read, think about, pray about, and discuss the “homework” I asked be done on the topic of moving to a program-sized church. I appreciate the seriousness with which that assignment was approached in the small groups and town hall meetings. What most struck me reading the compilation of responses from those venues was this: it was extremely heartening to see that folks seemed overwhelmingly to embrace this goal of continued growth. In fact, there were several comments that said, in effect, “this is the path we’ve already been on and this is simply another step along that path.” The other oft-said comment was to the effect “We’re ready, but we need to be told how.” In other words, it appears to me from reading these responses that there is fairly broad agreement about the “strategic goal” of such growth, and concern/questions about the “tactics” that need to be used to continue on the path toward the goal. My hope is that this report, and particularly this section, will help to begin to answer that latter question.

### **Some general conclusions:**

#### Some Common Traits of Growing Churches

A ‘laserlike’ focus on the mission strategy the church has identified

A simple, clear, succinct mission strategy “frame” that everyone in the congregation can understand, and which serves as the test of whether an activity, budget item, staff portfolio, etc., ought to be done or not because it does nor does not fit with that “strategic frame.” Not everything that could be done should be done. Each church has a distinctive mission that is no other church’s mission. Sometimes the pastor or board or committee needs to say “no” to an opportunity that does not fit with the mission strategy.

**Not to love the “model” more than the mission.** (The overall mission is to share the love of Christ with a hurting world. The “model” can, will, and should change. What worked in 1968 will not now work. What worked last year may not work this year.)

High degree of trust in the Sr. Pastor – but combined with a high expectation of and willingness to hold him/her accountable for articulating the vision/mission well and making staffing and other decisions that further the mission strategy. By extension, a high degree of trust in other staff and in the lay leadership the congregation has called to do the governance and oversight work on its behalf.

Quality worship that has consistently excellent preaching and music, that has an atmosphere of “welcomingness” and “informal dignity,” and which starts and ends on time.

The Senior Pastor’s role becomes more and more “team leader” who spends more and more time “casting and articulating the vision,” in teaching, and in particular identifying folks (staff or others) and mentoring, equipping and leading them.

A worship bulletin that does not overwhelm with information and too much text (you have begun to see changes already in this regard).

An appreciation for just how powerful the church’s online presence and availability (even in worship!) is; to continue to “leverage” that reality to welcome and involve “millennials” in particular. (Corollary : Donation/giving opportunities recognize that many/most folks nowadays – particularly “millennials” don’t carry cash/checks.)

A small governing Board that understands that it’s job is to “govern”/have responsibility for the “big picture” and holding the Sr. Pastor accountable for the articulation and implementation of the mission and vision versus the job of the Sr. Pastor and his/her staff team to “manage” and “lead.” (It intrigued me that Middletown Christian Church, which runs one-thousand in attendance, has, along with a church board of ten, exactly two other formal committees! *More and more folks these days don’t see a committee*

*membership as a privilege but as punishment; they are eager to serve and to do but not to go to meetings or be committed for years-long positions)*

A building which is both aesthetically pleasing and professional looking both interior and exterior. (“Professional looking” is a moving target, but these days it means clean, up-to-date, well-lit, bright and cheerful nursery, and an elevator. The last one, of course, is also a hospitality and justice expectation: the lack of an elevator says, intended or not, that some people are not fully welcome and some people count less than others.)

### **Some Recommendations:**

1. **Vision and Mission “Tune-Up”** From both my reading and the folks with whom I have talked, I believe that the key elements or “bullet points” of our “vision and mission statement” (e.g., “radical hospitality,” “service to God and neighbor,” “outrageous generosity,” “where growing in faith is expected,” etc.) are exciting, worthy, and continue to have real power to help us “frame” what is our distinctive mission, considering our distinctive gifts and talents. On the other hand, the statement itself is now seven years old and was written in the context of a very different interim time. The folks with whom I consulted with said NOT to do a large-scale and over-long “visioning” process, but more of a short-term “tightening and focusing and tune-up” process that incorporates these current emphasis into a “frame” that can give strategic focus to every activity that the church does. To that end I am going to ask the Moderator to jointly appoint with me a small group who can work this summer to do some of that “tightening and focusing” with the end result being such a “frame” that can guide our strategic decision about where to deploy our resources, money, and time. This is a “tune-up” not an “overhaul.”
2. **“Using the “Strategic Frame.”** Once we have that “frame” in place (this fall) both pastors whom I spent significant in-person time with (and a number of the readings I consulted) have said that it is utterly key to then use such a “strategic frame” to sometimes say “NO” to opportunities – i.e., there are some things that we *could* do that simply aren’t part of our strategic emphases. These may well be very good things – but things that we leave for another church with different gifts and callings. Again, the phrase “laser-like focus” here came up again and again.
3. **Making A List and Checking It Twice.** We are not Santa, but, like Santa, we need to insure that our documents and public presentation (e.g., website) are both accurate and helpful. With that in mind, I’m going to propose that the Ministry Board appoint a small, ongoing task-group whose job will be two-fold: to take a look at our important

current documents to see where they might need updating to reflect best practice or correct mistakes/oversights, and, more importantly, to do an ongoing “audit” of our documents and our website to make sure they are attractive, invitational, and accurate. While I don’t see this item being as important as item 2, it is nonetheless a very good thing to do.

4. **“Ask A Pastor”** Change brings both excitement and anxiety. Therefore I’m going to start in April (tentatively) an every-last-Sunday-of-the-month session called **“Ask-A-Pastor.”** In it, I will invite folks to ask anything they want (barring confidential personnel or fiduciary information) and I – or one of our staff team – will be happy to answer. Appropriate transparency is the goal and with the expectation that Jesus calls all of us to be adults and to take responsibility for our actions, to seek out information when we need it, to not hide behind anonymity, to presume the best about each other even in the midst of questions, and to trust one another and lay and staff leadership.

## **Section VI. Coda – Why We Do What We Do.**

I want to end not with the “practical” suggestions and recommendations, but with the theological and spiritual rationale for why we both to do these things at all! Growth in “numbers” all by itself means little if it is not in service of who God is calling us to be. As I put it in a recent sermon, Jesus gave each of us who would follow Him “one job” with two parts: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, strength, soul and mind – and our neighbors as ourselves. Elsewhere, he put the dual mandate slightly differently: Love one another (the “Great Commandment”) and “make disciples” (the “Great Commission”). I have sometimes talked about the Great Commandment this way: we are to “find the lost.”

Whichever version of Jesus’ mandate to us we would focus on, the spread of the gospel that he proclaimed that now lives in us is the reason for doing any of the things I discuss above. For example, when we continue to strengthen the excellence of our worship, we thereby express our love for God with our hearts and our souls – and Sunday by Sunday offer new opportunities to new people who do not know the love of God! When we seek to embody practices that more and more help us to increase the number of folks who are part of our ministries, we are also thereby giving more and more folks a glimpse of a God who is not a bully, not mean, not a God of joyless judgmentalism but amazing

grace – which at the same time strengthens our own spirituality as find ourselves knowing more of that God we proclaim.

No, we do not do the things we do and will do simply for “the sake of the numbers.” The church is the only organization in the world that exists for the sake of those who are not part of it. The more people that come to know God’s love through what we do and say, the more God will have cause to say of us “Well done, good and faithful servants!” And what more reason would we truly want than that?