

Congregational Priorities

Report to Session
St. Simons Presbyterian Church
St. Simons Island, GA

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Introduction

The following report is a result of a series of meetings I held with session members, staff and deacons throughout January 2019. During these meetings I asked only one question; *“What do you think are the significant issue(s) facing St. Simons Presbyterian Church today?”*

The Feedback

By meeting with people in smaller groups, everyone had an opportunity to share their thoughts and concerns. I met with elders, 2-4 at a time over lunch throughout the month of January. I also met with all program and administrative staff, the associate pastor, and with the deacons as a group.

Rather than summarize their comments, I took verbatim quotes from their key statements. There was much duplication, so the following quotes are representative of all the comments made. They are in no particular order of significance.

- *“We need to take a look at generational giving trends.”*
- *“Some new members join the church but then disappear.”*
- *“When I look around everyone is pretty dressed up.”*
- *“My family enjoyed the family retreats that we used to have. What happened to those?”*
- *“We sometimes miss the valuable ideas for ministry and worship that new members bring with them from past churches.”*
- *“The time to rejuvenate our ministry teams is now.”*
- *“It is easy to get lost in our church.”*

- *"The process for nominating church officers could use some rethinking."*
- *"We act out a mission, but do we really know what our mission is?"*
- *"Staff cannot do everything."*
- *"It seems like the elders do not feel 'qualified' to talk about church finances."*
- *"We need to create guidelines for how to distribute endowment funds."*
- *"There is a problem with people saying 'yes' to serving and then not showing up."*
- *"How do we improve Sunday School? Inconsistent attendance often makes planning and volunteer recruitment difficult."*
- *"Same people step up for everything and we end up burning them out."*
- *"Who are the people who do not feel welcome in our church? How can we better reach out to and include them?"*
- *"Seeing more diversity in our church would be great."*
- *"Older members may not want social activities to attend but just love and attention from their church family."*
- *"It feels like you have to work harder to fit in if you are a single person."*
- *"Some events are difficult to get to for working people."*
- *"How can we be more intentional about partnering with other faith traditions and ethnicities in our community?"*
- *"My committee assignment left me feeling useless and not needed."*
- *"There is so much going on that if I showed up for everything the church asks us to, I would be there multiple times every single day."*
- *"It is time to bring back annual or biannual ministry team kick offs."*
- *"How well do we know our neighbors who live around us? How do we reach them?"*
- *"A move towards being more environmentally friendly would be good."*
- *"We are too quiet about all we do as a church. We need to do a better job sharing what our church has to offer with the broader community."*
- *"A small group ministry could help us develop closer connections."*

General Observations

1. This report does not focus on the positive *strengths* of SSPC. There are many. In fact, at times, it was difficult to get people to talk about anything but the good things going on. Some of the many encouraging and positive things mentioned include a growing mission presence, our well-used and well-loved campus, the upcoming sanctuary renovation, a welcoming congregation, the strength of our staff, the reinvigorated lay-led pastoral care ministry, growing worship attendance, and expanded opportunities for older adult fellowship.
2. There is a general concern about the demographics of our congregation. Yes, we are situated in a community that skews older but what are we doing to welcome younger people – both single, married, and families? Our children’s ministry is a real strength of the church and we have welcomed a number of new families in recent years, but are there other things we should be doing such as working to strengthen ties with our preschool?
3. Shifting demographics also impacts stewardship. Although SSPC has seen an increase in the average annual pledge amount over the past 5-years, the total number of giving units is on the decline.
4. It was interesting that very few people expressed any desire to change our existing worship format or explore the possibility of offering alternative worship services. The consensus seemed to be that we do *traditional* worship well, so why change?
5. Our growing endowment was touched on in several conversations. In the past year the endowment has more than doubled in size and is likely to grow further over the coming 1-3 years. A number of people emphasized the importance of establishing guidelines to help direct the ongoing distribution from the endowment each year.
6. There is frustration with the current ministry team structure and officer nominations process. While some ministry teams are high

functioning others seem to struggle to understand their role and/or identify key leadership. Likewise, the nominations process has been described as feeling *rushed* and *out of sync* with the rhythm of the church calendar. We need to refresh our ministry team structure in order to create an across-the-board *team culture* at SSPC.

7. The Deacons desire to better utilize various forms of outreach (Web site, newsletter, phone trees, etc.) to both identify those with needs as well as to invite new participation in congregational care activities.
8. Staff mentioned the word *balance* more than once. How do we better balance staff time with congregational needs? Likewise, how do we strike a better balance of lay-led ministries versus staff-led ministries?
9. The issues *most discussed* were the need to study and plan for the future **stewardship** of the church, identifying ways to be more **welcoming**, and to examine the **governance** of the church with a focus on revamping ministry teams and nominations.

Recommendations

1. **Establish a Congregational Stewardship Study Group.** St. Simons Presbyterian is blessed with many assets including a well-maintained campus, gifted staff, and strong giving profile. That said, the time to study the giving landscape of our congregation and plan for the future is *now*. The primary tasks for this group will be to study historic giving trends to SSPC and explore different methods for reaching the congregation and increasing giving to meet both the current and future ministry goals of the church.
2. **Create a small ad-hoc team to make recommendations for revitalizing the ministry team structure and nominations process.** Some of our ministry teams are high functioning. Some are not. There are also some highly active groups doing good ministry but who are unclear on where they fall within the current ministry team structure. Additionally, the current process for nominating new church officers is hampered by the fact that we elect and install new officers in the middle of the busy program year. It is time to rejuvenate and reimagine our ministry team organization and nominations process. I would recommend this team

consist of the pastor, associate pastor, clerk of session, chair of the diaconate, and current chair of the nominating committee.

- 3. Form a taskforce to study best-practices for welcoming and connecting visitors/new members into the life of the church.** There is a certain degree of randomness with regards to who feels welcome and who does not when they walk into our church. We need to do a better job of providing structured approach for how we welcome and connect people into the life of SSPC. This may include targeted recruitment of ushers, better training, updated signage, strengthening ties with the preschool, and new member classes. This group will study best practices of peer churches and make recommendations to session.

Conclusion

Along with these recommendations, there are also opportunities to revitalize *session meetings*, strengthen *officer training*, and encourage *lay leadership* across all ministries happening in the church. Doing these things will help to instill a team culture and further empower lay leadership across the church. Lastly, the *upcoming renovation* will require close coordination and a good deal of grace across the staff, session, and congregation as a whole over the coming 12-18 months.

The implementation of any of the recommendations in this report that are approved by session should *start now*. The different groups should endeavor to complete their work by June 1. This will allow us to use the rest of the year to “water in” any new processes / programs that are put into place.

St. Simons Presbyterian is a congregation blessed with a strong staff, sound financial grounding, and a growing congregation of faithful and loving people. I am excited for the future ministry in this place and grateful for the opportunity to play a role in shaping it with you.

Peace,

Alan Dyer