

Community Café Summary

May 7, 2017

At this community café, five small groups spent an hour discussing three questions about how we can nurture relationships at UMC. The questions follow with brief summaries of each group's responses.

Question 1: In what circumstances have you experienced nurturing relationships at UMC? Were they programmatic? Were they more spontaneous? Were they expected or came as a surprise?

- Many in this group have participated in small groups, either in the past or present, and experienced these as the primary place of nurturing in the church. One person said all of UMC seems like a small group, since he attended a large church before. Another person wished to be included in a small group.
- Many in this group had been welcomed in the church by an individual connection stemming from an invitation: someone reaching out and asking a new person to participate. The church service and related activities – such as men's breakfast and small groups – are the vehicles that foster the friendships. It is important to get past polite chit-chat and have meaningful conversations without fear of acceptance and judgement. Member turnover is a challenge and has caused pain but is understood to be a dynamic of this church.
- This group experienced nurturing through meals such as fellowship meals, invitations from hosts and Lenten suppers – as well as through sharing faith stories and conversation in small groups. Camp Hebron has also been a nurturing time for several people.
- Small groups were a common theme in this group – both traditional small groups, as well as serving on committees such as the fellowship committee. How do we sustain small groups when people are so busy? Perhaps short-term, trial small groups? Many expressed gratitude for ways that UMC people had helped them with moving, work projects, children, or in difficult transitions in their lives.
- This group felt nurtured by invitations for lunch after church or other shared meals – and coming to church to worship God. Could we have simpler meals that require less preparation/set-up or have people gather and bring their own food?

Question 2: UMC is facing a time of transition, which is an opportunity for creatively re-thinking the ways we build relationships at church, or - more broadly - how we envision the future of our congregation. What models might nurture a vibrant, Christ-following community? For example, what if we met one Sunday per month in smaller "house churches," sharing a meal together? What other ideas have you had about this?

- Can we arrange multiple small groups with short-term commitments to share together in book discussions, Sunday school, service projects or fellowship meals? (Perhaps at fellowship meals we could be assigned to small groups to share meals and a discussion topic in smaller rooms.) One person asked if the 3rd Way collective could be in charge of the Sunday morning service on a regular basis.
- We discussed the three options of finding another pastor right away, finding an interim pastor and not seeking a pastor right away. The consensus was to not be in a hurry and to rely on the gifts of our members in the interim, although there was also understanding of one member's reminder that the elders had extra work to do during the last long pastoral transition. It is important to preserve the "priesthood of believers" concept that is strong in our church now by not being too reliant on a pastor to do everything. Perhaps in a house church model, one of the cells could meet at church and welcome visitors. It was also agreed that we are all much busier than even 10-15 years ago so whatever we do needs to "fit" with this busy lifestyle.
- Some in this group expressed the sentiment that a pastoral transition does not mean that anything else needs to change; there is no need to change for change's sake. Two people liked the idea of a work day

or service project once per month, either instead of or after the worship service, but three people expressed hesitation about replacing Sunday worship with another event.

- How can we actively involve youth and children in our services? Can we be more creative in our worship – add drama (with costumes!), new songs, story-telling by members of the congregation, skip the bulletin once in a while? Could we break into small groups during the worship service occasionally? House churches would be “fun,” but might be difficult to organize.
- Some in this group liked the idea of occasional house churches. One person shared that church relationships and growth are Spirit-driven; our own methods to increase membership, etc. won’t be successful on their own.

Question 3: Our annual fall retreat at Camp Hebron has been one way we have encouraged relationship building. In what ways have you experienced this retreat? Is this investment of time and money a worthwhile endeavor in building up the body? Why or why not?

- Four of six group members spoke strongly about the importance of Camp Hebron in their lives. One person expressed that funding Camp Hebron is spending too much on ourselves. Another person stated that many of us spend money on vacations and could share with others in the congregation who do want to attend Camp Hebron.
- We all agreed that the retreat environment of sequestration is helpful for relationship building and that Camp Hebron is a really good set up, offering many choices including just hanging out. It was clear that five of us want to find a way to continue at Hebron and one thinks it is a good concept but not a good value for the cost. We discussed also having a service at UMC during the retreat since two of us had come as visitors to find the church closed.
- Everyone in group thought Camp Hebron was positive and worth the money, but one feared because it was so divisive, maybe we should not do it anymore. Two people suggested more spiritual activities, while three people expressed that Camp Hebron is best if mostly unstructured. Someone suggested that people could be given the choice to pay their own costs. Someone suggested that we could have a retreat at the church building and go to the nearby park.
- This group unanimously and enthusiastically supported Camp Hebron and the funding of it from the church budget. Several people expressed a wish for more opportunities for spiritual growth/learning as well as small-group sharing. One wondered where the group games – such as softball - have gone. Someone else suggested that maybe members of the congregation could lead craft sessions or teach a small class in their area of expertise. Everyone agreed that all activities should be optional.
- Some members of this group shared lack of interest in keeping the Camp Hebron tradition and including it in the church budget, including some whose children have “come and gone.” Others have found it to be very positive experience and would like to see it (or something like it) continue – as a way to build relationships within the church, especially with younger people.