

“...Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Luke 10:27

INTRODUCTION

Hancock Church is a community in transition. During a period of interim ministry, the congregation actively prepared for change and renewal by developing a strategic plan. A primary goal of the strategic plan’s congregational care committee was “to establish lay care giving as a core ministry of Hancock Church.”¹ Following a careful and extensive search process, Paul Shupe was called in August 2009 to be Hancock’s new senior minister. In September the Rev. Shupe initiated a study to assess current pastoral care activities and to propose a comprehensive plan to address the strategic plan’s call for renewed congregational care. The review and proposal consisted of interviews with church staff members and laity, research on pastoral and congregational care programs, and consultations with leaders of six UCC congregations to identify benchmark programs.²

The review of current programs and activities identifies important ongoing forms of pastoral care. The Deacons visitation and outreach ministry, the television ministry, the Cordon of Prayer and not least of all, countless acts of care are being carried out through formal and informal channels within the church community.

The review revealed also significant gaps in the caring fabric of the community. Members in all age groups indicated a desire for more pastoral care in forms that, in addition to emergency and crisis situations, provided support from their faith community that addressed day to day life challenges and transitions. The 2008 Strategic Plan states that one of the key yearnings revealed in their discernment process was “a deeper, more meaningful sense of community and mutual care.” As Hancock enters the next period of life together there is a clear mandate to embody the Covenant of Welcome in a ministry of hospitality that joyfully receives visitors and engages new members in full participation in the faith community.

Hancock Church is blessed to be engaged in a period of transition. Building upon the foundation of the past, the church is committed to renewing the fabric of community that makes a congregation the living body of Christ for one another. To be successful, this transition involves a fundamental shift from the traditional model of pastoral care to a new model of congregational care. In the traditional model, the responsibility to sustain caring connections belonged to the ministers with lay members taking on supportive roles. In the new model, each member of Hancock Church is invited and encouraged to claim their particular gifts and calling, playing a vital role in a community of care. Far from replacing the role of pastoral care, the new model of congregational care enables the clergy to offer their pastoral care at times and in ways only they can provide.

¹ Hancock Church, “Our Future Together: Report of the Planning Committee, 2008”: p. 8

² See Appendix.

This report has three sections. Part One summarizes pastoral and congregational activities currently underway. Full recognition of these efforts is vitally important: they are the basis upon which congregational care is built. Part Two offers a set of initiatives intended to strengthen Hancock Church as a caring community that serves one another in the way of Christ's love. Because change is a step-by-step process, it is suggested that these initiatives may be undertaken in three stages indicated in Part Three.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

1Corinthians 12:4-6, 12

PART ONE: CURRENT PASTORAL AND CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRIES

A. Profile of Hancock Church

A brief factual profile of Hancock Church help sets a context for this review. The large majority, four of every five members, reside in Lexington. Members thus share the general characteristics of the town in terms of education and affluence. In one respect Hancock members differ from the larger community: we are on the average older. The majority of members (56%) are over fifty years old; and more than one-third of the congregation is sixty-five or older.³ Hancock is blessed to have ninety-four members who have contributed to its fellowship for fifty years or more.

Hancock Church, like most mainline congregations, has been declining in size and active participation. The church had a membership of 1014 in 2003. By 2008 membership had declined to 824, partly due to correcting church records and partly due to additional losses. Equally important to membership is actual church participation, especially measured by worship attendance. In 2003 worship attendance averaged about 275 persons each Sunday; in 2007 attendance had declined to about 200. By the fall of 2009 this decline had reversed with average Sunday attendance back up to about 250 per Sunday. This positive trend is encouraging, yet less than one in three members are participating in the average Sunday worship service.

³ The proportion of Hancock members 65 and over is about twice that of the Lexington population. According the 2000 Census, 19% of Lexington residents were 65 or older. According to 2008 membership data, 36% of Hancock members are 65 or older.

Two important features are worth highlighting from this profile:

- *Growth and renewal of Hancock Church will require attracting a significant number of younger members, while at the same time encouraging active involvement and caring for the needs of older members.*
- *Formal church affiliation is of declining importance and visitors continue attending worship if they develop relationships within the church. Thus, attracting new members and caring for older members both will require Hancock to provide opportunities for active participation that allows members, current and new, to develop a vital sense of community.*

B. Current Pastoral Care Ministry

Hancock Church's clergy minister to the needs of our members in countless ways across a spectrum ranging from informal conversations on Sunday morning to pastoral care in times of crisis. It is vitally important for pastors to feel connected to members and vice versa. This becomes especially true when an individual or family is undergoing a time of difficulty or special need. Our ministers give priority to providing pastoral care in these ways:

- **Responding to emergencies** or longer term crises through hospital and home visits and phone contact;
- **Conducting funerals** and being present with families in bereavement; nine funerals were performed in 2009;
- **Providing counseling** and pastoral support for members of all ages and their families;
- **Visiting members** who are confined to their homes;
- **Being present** at social gatherings, special events, residential worship services, and other occasions.

Several points deserve to be highlighted as we consider clergy pastoral care:

- *Pastoral care, while vitally important, is one of many responsibilities we ask of our ministers. We expect a great deal of our clergy, often more than each of us as individuals realizes, since indeed "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."*
- *Pastoral care is the responsibility of our ministers, yet it is not their job to provide care for a community of 800 members. Over-dependence on pastoral care means the under-development of capacity to be a community whose members provide love and support to one another.*

- *Focused, timely pastoral care and renewed, expanded congregational care go hand-in-hand.*

C. Current Congregation Care Ministries

Renewal of Hancock Church as a community where we care for one another in the way of Christ's love will celebrate and build upon the many vital connections of care now underway. The following provides a brief overview of current caring connections:

- ***The Board of Deacons*** is comprised of fifteen members. A primary responsibility is visitation of members who are unable to attend services, whether due to illness or permanent living arrangements. Each deacon visits or calls three members on a monthly basis. Forty Hancock members are contacted on a regular basis.
- ***Flower delivery*** is a service provided to those who are ill, grieving, facing difficulty or a time of celebration. Eighteen members deliver flowers from the sanctuary after Sunday worship.
- ***Basic daily needs*** are attended to by Deacons and various members of the congregation. Such needs include rides to medical appointments, grocery shopping, providing meals, and personal support to those caring for loved ones.
- ***Funeral collations***, receptions that follow funeral services, are organized primarily by one Hancock member with the support of several others. This service includes arranging for food, setting up and cleaning up, and coordinating with family members of the deceased.
- ***A health ministry*** was conducted between 2003 and 2008 under the leadership of a member who is a registered nurse and received special training in congregational health ministry. Members were organized into care teams and trained to visit older members in nursing homes and private residences. The health ministry also provided blood clinics and health information sessions for the congregation.
- ***The television ministry*** continues its long history of broadcasting Sunday worship services for those who are unable to attend in person. Broadcasts are at 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. every Sunday of the year.
- ***The cordon of prayer*** is an intercessory ministry to lift up those who are in special need. The member who coordinates this ministry receives prayer requests. These requests are then recorded for phone access by other members, and distributed through monthly email notices.

- ***Informal care networks*** are sustained by ongoing activities of groups that include the choir, the bell choir, committees, and special project groups. In each case, regular interaction enables members to know one another personally over time, and to respond to developments that may occur in their respective lives.
- ***The memorial garden*** offers a quiet space in the central courtyard. The garden is a place dedicated to prayer and meditation. It is also dedicated to the memory of loved ones. Symbolic of coming into this space with memories, plaques are located at the entrance way.
- ***Special activities*** take place throughout the year. One example is annual fall picnic for seniors, which is sponsored by the Deacons, with attendance of about seventy seniors, caretakers and deacons.
- ***Educational programs*** addressing particular issues and needs are conducted periodically after Sunday worship. Topics have included making medical choices, family decisions concerning aging, legal issues, funeral and memorial planning, housing arrangements, mental illness, and prayer and meditation.

Several highlights emerge from this review:

- *Dedicated lay ministries and communities are a vital part of Hancock Church for many of its members.*
- *Current ministries do not include a significant number of church members.*
- *Networks of community and care develop wherever members gather together over a period of time, pursue a common interest, and get to know one another on a personal basis.*

PART TWO: AREAS FOR RENEWAL

This review, along with interviews, allows us to identify a number of areas for renewal. This section provides a broad map. Its purpose is to identify a number of opportunities within reach of the Hancock community. This map, however, is not intended to be a “menu” of new initiatives. Actual implementation requires carefully setting priorities and identifying a step-by-step process. Part Three of this report will present a set of specific recommendations that emerge from this broad mapping.

A. BUILDING COMMUNITY

- ❖ ***Strengthen community with elder members.*** A number of elders spoke of isolation due to lack of regular communication and available transportation. The church can respond by enhancing communication with elders by phone, regular visits and cards, creating one-to-one transportation partners providing rides to

church, medical appointments and errands, and offering periodic social events of special interest. There is also the opportunity to support those with longer term or more intense needs such as respite care for spouses or family members, loss or bereavement support and deeper family-like relationships. Because many of the older members of Hancock move to retirement residential communities lay and clergy outreach to them on a quarterly or biannual basis is important to maintain connections with the church. A Eucharistic Ministry for those members unable to attend church and provided by a partnership with clergy and deacons would provide connection with their faith community.

- ❖ ***Strengthen community with younger members and families.*** Younger members have expressed their desire for opportunities to share values and beliefs, to give and receive support, and to discern meaning through their life journeys. The middle years finds people carrying heavy loads of responsibility. The challenge is not to ask for more. Rather it is to develop small groups in which giving and receiving provide spiritual support and to provide opportunities for spiritual nurture through special worship and prayer services and education programs.
- ❖ ***Strengthen hospitality to visitors and new members.*** Some have noted that visitors often do not sign visitor cards and there is no way to follow-up. Several have mentioned that there is a sense of formality, even anonymity, before and after worship. One person described coffee hour as “the loneliest time in the week.” There is great opportunity for growth in this area. A methodical approach to helping visitors become better acquainted after worship will, in effect, be rolling out the welcoming mat to new members. New members then need to be encouraged to get involved using their particular gifts, talents and interests.

B. OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

- ❖ ***Spiritual formation and nurture.*** The opportunity to grow in one’s personal faith and spiritual life is a high priority for many. This is especially felt among a new generation of “seekers” who have not grown up as “dwellers” in a local congregation. Faith development is understood as both a “head experience” and a “heart experience” that are connected to daily life. Prayer and meditation groups offer personal as well as communal growth in the spiritual life.

Jesus said: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest commandment... The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

Matthew 22:37-39.

Special worship services can continue to be offered such as the Blue Christmas service and the special Lenten services. New services such as healing or blessing rituals can be very important in addressing specific difficulties or transitions in life. Important to the affirming, embracing and support of members responding to others needs is commissioning and blessing of their work both within the congregation and in the world.

- ❖ ***Life challenges in faith perspective.*** The church is unique in that it is the setting where members are able to address and discuss life concerns from a faith and values perspective. Biblical and theological perspectives provide an under girding of “faith, hope and love” in relation to countless issues: job loss, raising children, empty nests, retirement, caring for aging parents, illness and bereavement, values and lifestyle, the environment, and many others. These concerns can be addressed through small groups that foster community and support, or with an educational format with speakers and discussion, or in groups with a more theological and Biblical reflection emphasis. Of special relevance for an older congregation where many belong to the “sandwich generation” caring for elderly parents is a support group for caregivers and a bereavement ministry for those who have lost loved ones.
- ❖ ***Special training opportunities.*** Among those who feel called to do congregational care ministry in the Hancock or larger community, there is a desire to understand their work and to feel more effective. Those who reach out seek training and support to deal with difficult situations of illness, disability or loss. Frequently expressed was the desire to become more comfortable with prayer and conversations about faith. Opportunities to educate and support Hancock’s caregivers can be provided through regular times of sharing and learning as well as through participation in formal education and training programs provided by local and national organizations.
- ❖ ***“Bubble Up” Initiatives.*** In reviewing recent programs at Hancock, it is notable that many have been the initiative of lay members following their particular interests. The Feeding 5000 Campaign, Lenten small groups, the alternative Christmas fair, Hancock’s Environmental Action Team (HEAT), and the “As Time Goes By” program all illustrate the “bubble up” principle that the church is a host environment that encourages members to act on their passions. A healthy host environment provides recognition, encouragement, and support of members to see their own interests, talents and creativity as gifts that enhance the whole community. A congregation that recognizes, supports and blesses the talents and interests of each member is a congregation that truly cares for each person’s God-given gifts and provides congregational care.

C. BUILDING A SUPPORT PLATFORM

- ❖ ***Communication and coordination.*** In a family of more than 800 members, a system is needed to “connect the dots.” Communication needs to channel into a central switchboard monitored by clergy and lay leaders. Coordination among groups and individuals needs to aim at responding to the real and timely needs of members, not to maintaining bureaucratic channels. Several models are effective in other congregations and can be adapted to the particularities of the Hancock community. The key, as one minister stated, is to make sure that ‘the loop is closed’ from the request or awareness of care or services to the appropriate response in a timely fashion by laity or clergy. The creation and staffing of an effective system will serve to enable and support all the care-giving ministries of the church.

- ❖ ***Congregational ministries advisory group.*** Like every group, the Hancock community often faces more needs and opportunities than it can possibly handle. Unless addressed constructively, this unavoidable situation generates frustration, feelings of inadequacy, and sometime resentment. It may be advisable, therefore, to create a congregational ministries advisory group convened by the senior minister for two purposes: listening and responding to current needs as effectively as possible; and thinking ahead, “outside the box,” by acting on new opportunities.

We have learned from our planning journey that the single most important measure of the health of a congregation is the extent to which its members are connected in community. Congregations that intentionally work to diversify and strengthen the bonds among their members and with the communities around them thrive. Thus, our vision for Hancock is that each member recognizes the vital importance of these truths, actively encounters Hancock in the ways that strengthen community and endeavors to place love at the heart of all we do.

Hancock Strategic Plan, 2008

PART THREE. RECOMMENDATIONS

The map of possibilities identified in the previous section leave us with central questions. What opportunities are to be given priority and in what sequence are these priorities to be acted upon? The answers to these questions, of course, will require careful discussion and planning. To facilitate that process, this section recommends a set of action priorities sequenced into three phases of implementation.

PHASE 1 – SPRING 2010

- ❖ **Hire a Congregational Care Coordinator (CCC)** to work 10-15 hours per week with allocated administrative time from administrative staff. The responsibility is to oversee outreach programs to support older members. The CCC will begin to develop a communication and coordination platform by recruiting lay members to provide leadership and care teams for the congregational care programs and work with clergy and staff to implement.
- ❖ **Enhance the outreach ministry to elder members of the church through three initiatives.** The first is a caring connections program to strengthen communication with elderly members, and provide enhanced support—for example, rides, cards or meals. Second is a visitation ministry to coordinate lay volunteers who are available to reach out by phone and personal visits to several categories of members: elders unable to attend worship; members who are hospitalized or ill; and members undergoing a period of loss and bereavement. Third is a befriender ministry to support Hancock members who are interested in developing a longer term one-on-one relationship with another member of the church community. These initiatives would free the deacons to focus on the ministry of worship.
- ❖ **Create a Congregational Ministry Advisory Group** to assist the clergy, in coordination with church leaders, by clarifying priorities and by planning new initiatives for congregational renewal.

PHASE 2 – FALL 2010

- ❖ **Launch a congregational wide program of small groups.** The recommendation is bold, aiming for the participation of half the Hancock members in a small group experience. Each group will identify a common interest of its members for the purposes of study, sharing and service. The “bubble-up principle” will encourage groups to identify their own interests and concerns. Small group leaders will receive training before the initiative is launched.
- ❖ **Launch a ministry of hospitality to welcome visitors and integrate new members.** The ministry will focus on hosting and following up with visitors; integrating interested visitors into small groups; and inviting new members to identify their bubble-up interests.

PHASE 3 – SPRING 2011

- ❖ **Strengthen the platform of support for successful new initiatives.**
- ❖ **Initiate educational opportunities in each of the following areas:** training for lay ministry; spiritual growth experiences; and life challenges in faith perspective.
- ❖ **Promote and support ‘bubble-up’ ministries.**

APPENDIX

Program Models

Interviews were conducted with clergy from six UCC congregations of similar size and from similar communities. In recent years each congregation has addressed their pastoral care ministry to reflect changes in the membership profile and needs. Ideas from the following congregations have contributed to this proposal for Hancock church.

Acton Congregational Church, Acton	Rev. Andrew Armstrong
First Church in Cambridge, Cambridge	Rev. Dan Smith
Trinitarian Congregational Church, Concord	Rev. John Lombard
First Congregational Church, Reading	Ms. Gay Williams
Wellesley Congregational Church, Wellesley	Rev. Kathy Musser
First Congregational Church, Winchester	Rev. Skip Waterbury

Congregational Interviews

The contents of this proposal reflect the experience of the past and the vision of the future expressed by twenty members of the congregation. They represented all age groups consisting of many with both past and present leadership positions in all areas of the church, including co-chairs Strategic Plan and the Senior Minister Pastoral Search Committee of 2008. Current clergy and staff were also interviewed including a conversation with Rev. Ellis Johnson, Interim Minister, Hancock Church, 2008-2009.

Documents

Current and relevant data was reviewed from the following church documents:

- Annual Report of 2008
- Strategic Plan, January 2008
- Church profile from the Senior Minister Pastoral Search Committee, 2008

Resources for Understanding New Practices of Congregational Life

- Transforming Congregational Culture* by Anthony B. Robinson;
William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan; 2003.
- The Practicing Congregation* by Diana Butler Bass; Alban Institute, 2004.

Training Resources

- Stephen Ministries: 2045 Innerbelt Business Center Dr., St. Louis MO 63114
www.stephenministries.org
- Called to Care; Office for Church Life and Leadership*, UCC; 1991.
- Pastoral Partner Program, Coordinator's Manual*: Sharone Price 1998 and 1998
MediaCom Education, Inc.: Logos Productions, Inc. 2000.
- Developing the Caring Community: A 10-week Course in Pastoral Care Ministry for Laity*;
The Alban Institute, Inc. 1994.