

Listening Session Summaries – Strategic Planning 2024

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Are there things about our church that need celebrating?

1. The people of the church and the community of the church. (GIFT, Graham Inquirers)
2. The church's social awareness and its commitment to justice. (GIFT)
3. The church's stance on welcoming and accepting people. Everyone belongs just as they are. Reconciling network (GIFT, Graham Inquirers, Middle Schoolers, Seekers, Simplicity, Covenant, Zoom)
4. There is a sense of energy and moving forward in the church right now. (GIFT)
5. Sunday school classes which provide both Biblical education and education on the issues facing our world now (e.g., the Middle East). (GIFT, Simplicity)
6. Projects to help people in our community locally and in other areas. (Seekers, GIFT, Middle Schoolers)
7. Music ministry (Graham Inquirers, Seekers, Zoom)
8. Youth programs and college students (Covenant, Simplicity, Graham Inquirers, Middle Schoolers, Seekers)
9. Belmont is the perfect size. It's large, but it's not a megachurch so you know everyone in the youth group (Middle Schoolers)
10. Singing at Morningside (Seekers)
11. Encore Ministries and Heather (Seekers, Simplicity, Covenant, Zoom)
12. Church picnics (Seekers)
13. Young families (Simplicity)
14. The early service (Simplicity)
15. Contemplative Practices (Simplicity)
16. Improved technology during pandemic made church accessible (Covenant, Zoom)
17. Social justice, NOAH (Covenant)
18. Thriving with numerous personnel changes (Covenant)
19. The Columbarium (Covenant)

Are there things in our church that need healing, repair, or changing? Are there things that are holding us back from living into our mission of who Belmont should be or become? Are there things in our church that might have outlived their usefulness and should be put to bed?

1. Communication:

- a. Don't get much news about the TN Conference (Zoom)
- b. Use media more effectively (e.g., Eric Patton interview). (Seekers)
- c. Communication could be improved with the congregation. The newspaper with news of Belmont and the UMC is missed. They liked the paper insert in the bulletin. (Graham Inquirers)

2. Mission

- a. Volunteers in Mission programs. These are still present, but they used to be more active. Important to have both international and local mission programs. Approach should be from the perspective of abundance and not scarcity. (Simplicity)
- b. Creation care is not emphasized. Support other churches who are doing this (Seekers).
- c. There is a coalition of churches for social justice advocacy (NOAH), but no coalition to collaborate on missions or outreach projects to the community. (Graham Inquirers)
- d. Overseas missions have traditionally been driven by a few people in the congregation who are passionate about the mission and generate enthusiasm. Historically, many of these individuals have been from Graham Inquirers (the Lovells with the Congo, the Mathers with Malawi, the Garcias with Give Ye Them to Eat). Are overseas missions going to continue? Many community churches focus on concrete things individuals can do in their communities. Belmont's outreach to LGBTQIA individuals can be seen as a newer mission of our church. (Graham Inquirers)

3. Facilities

- a. Embarrassing to direct people to the disrepaired bathrooms, paint is peeling in places, carpet is disgusting. (Seekers, Graham Inquirers)
- b. Sound system in the sanctuary (Graham Inquirers, Zoom)
- c. Our church is not that friendly to the disabled. Getting in any door is difficult. The only bathroom that accommodates a wheelchair is off Parker Hall—highly inconvenient to someone attending during the church hours. Also, there is not enough handicapped parking, and if you park in front of the church, you have a long way to go to get in. The ramp in back is too steep, promoting falls if on a walker or runaway rollators and wheelchairs. (Covenant)
- d. The Belmont Methodist Episcopal Church South engraving on the frieze of the pediment is not descriptive of Belmont's identity. (GIFT, Middle School)
- e. The library is in a large classroom, and it is hard to use. (Graham Inquirers)

- f. The church is locked and not always available to members on nights and Saturdays. (Graham Inquirers)
- 4. Parking (Seekers, Graham Inquirers, Zoom)
 - a. Bus transportation for Leah Rose residents, and from Eakin so that people can park there for church. (Seekers)
 - b. Find ways to increase parking spaces (all adult Sunday school classes)
- 5. Giving
 - a. Finances are a problem. We need more money. Bank drafts should be encouraged. The church is too reticent to ask for money (example of a Catholic church that has an expectation of 10% pledge in their bulletin). (Covenant)
 - b. The ask to increase giving every year is difficult for older people who are on budgets. (Zoom)
- 6. Pastoral staff (Graham Inquirers)
 - a. Ministers are wearing too many hats and are overcommitted. Concern about burnout. A feel that the church is growing administratively but not ministerially.
 - b. Pastoral staff do not appear to have cohesive leadership, and they seem to be treading water.

What do you see as the challenges our congregation is going to face in the future? Is there some way to prepare ourselves for these challenges?

7. Participation:

- a. Technology can be a way to avoid in person events which decrease connection (Covenant).
- b. Better publicity for programs which recruit volunteers to write cards to ailing members (Simplicity).
- c. Pray for each other as an emphasized value. (Simplicity)
- d. Support for newcomers to the church (navigating the maze of the church, having a small group to which newcomers are assigned to get them connected) (Simplicity)
- e. Follow up with members who stop attending church. (Simplicity)

8. Membership recruitment.

- a. Use Weekday School for new members (two of the 12 people in class joined through the Weekday School) (Covenant).
- b. Be a neighborhood church (Covenant, Simplicity).
- c. Branding on the exterior of the church is important.
 - i. People think that Belmont is a bank (Covenant).
- d. Have an open house or offer tours of the church (Seekers).
- e. Better website construction to allow people to join easily. (Seekers)
- f. Make sure we track who is attending and have a plan for follow up (Seekers).
- g. Focus on younger people as new members (Seekers).
- h. Have a brochure about the church (Seekers).
- i. Outreach to other counties and to the unchurched (Seekers)
- j. The exterior of our church is what people see, and that makes them come inside or stay away. If you say, "I go to the church with the Pride flag," people recognize where it is. However, Belmont needs to improve its branding on the exterior of the church even more. (Middle School)
 - i. Pride flags are good, and there could be additional messages that communicate that our church is welcoming. It should be obvious and make you want to come inside.
 - ii. Open all the doors, not just one door when there is a worship service.
 - iii. "Belmont Methodist Episcopal Church South" needs to be addressed (below)
- k. Communication with the congregation needs to be better about the activities of the church, the relationship of the church to our denomination, and the missions of our church such as the Weekday School. (Graham Inquirers)
- l. How do we make the church relevant to young people? What is the future of the United Methodist Church? How do we reach out to other colleges in the area?

9. Need for small groups.
 - a. Don't schedule things during the Sunday school hour (Seekers).
 - b. Discipleship formation
 - i. Bible study groups (Seekers, Simplicity, Graham Inquirers)
 - ii. The need for a pastor or point person focusing on Discipleship or through Ministry Council (Simplicity)
 - c. Formation of additional small groups and social groups to meet in homes. One of the Lenten groups is still meeting. (Simplicity, Covenant)
 - d. Need a questionnaire to find out the interests of people and then connect those with similar interests. (Simplicity)
 - e. Most choir members do not attend a Sunday School class possibly because it is difficult to do both. Could there be a gathering period with coffee so that the different SS classes can mingle and those who want to attend both SS and choir can do so. (Simplicity)
10. Increase congregation involvement.
 - a. New members should be asked where they want to participate, not "if" they want to participate. (Covenant)
 - b. Local-ish mission activities to areas in Kentucky and Tennessee—these could be advertised at local colleges. (Covenant)
 - c. Joe Boyd shared that when he was usher for the early service, he actively recruited and gave prospective ushers a one-hour training course. (Covenant)
 - d. Have nametags (Seekers).
 - e. Wednesday night revitalization. (Seekers)
 - f. Want more outreach to new families and ways of connecting them with the youth who are already part of the group. Maybe a youth mentor to a new youth? (Middle School)
11. Need for improvements in children and family ministry.
 - a. Summer should not be a "break" from ministry. (Simplicity)
 - b. Increase participation in Sunday school for children; offering activities during Sunday school for their parents to connect with each other. (Simplicity)
 - c. Wednesday night should have activities for both parents and children. (Simplicity)
 - d. Need a full-time pastor for children and families. (Simplicity)
 - e. There are issues about when events occur which are difficult for families with young children which need to be addressed. (GIFT)
 - f. 9 a.m. Sunday school classes are hard to make and attendance is poor. By the time announcements occur, there is not enough time for education. The GIFT class did a supper club over the summer that was good for bonding, but not for education. Also, because the class has young children, many are servings as teachers in Children's Ministry.
 - g. Alternative times for church services besides Sunday morning. Saturday or Sunday p.m. might work better sometimes for families. Sunday p.m. might

also work better for college students who probably have a hard time getting up on Sunday morning. The early service is not very child friendly. (GIFT)

- h. Wednesday night dinner starts at 5 p.m. which can be hard to make if a member works until 5 p.m. (however, there is understanding that children need to be fed then due to children's choir which follows the meal) (GIFT)
- i. Committee meetings are often scheduled during dinner and bedtime for families. Meetings that start at 7:30 or later would work better. (GIFT)
- j. Middle Schoolers think the schedule for youth bells could use some help, and they cited the long time it is necessary to be at church if you are in bells (3:30-7:15 vs. 4:30-7:15).

12. Increase interaction with different ethnic/racial/SES/religious populations.

- a. Having activities with other congregations which increase our contact with people who are not similar to us (Lee Chapel AME, The Temple, Ebenezer UMC). (Simplicity)
- b. Having activities with other congregations who offer programs which Belmont does not offer (e.g., recycling at West End UMC, gardening at Franklin First). (Simplicity)
- c. Possible interaction with other churches (black UMC churches, immigrant UMC churches). Possible interaction with other faith traditions or youth groups. (Middle School)

13. The buildings are old and outdated.

- a. The restrooms are vintage 1950. The kitchen by the Iris Room needs to be rethought. Updating the church is going to uncover a lot of other issues (plumbing, electrical, foundation). This will be extremely expensive. (Covenant, GIFT, Simplicity)
- b. The "South" in "Belmont Methodist Episcopal Church South" needs to be addressed. Consideration should be given to rectifying this, either with a plaque explaining the history, removal, or some other means. Black pastors should be consulted as to possible ways of addressing this in an appropriate and meaningful way. (GIFT, Middle School)
- c. The GIFT class was pleased that the congregation is working on plans for the future of the church buildings and ways to keep the church functioning in healthy ways. The size of the buildings and their age is something that causes anxiety for the future. A way to utilize space without being burdened with ongoing excessive financial obligations in the future will be important.
- d. The third floor is a good youth space because it is their own space. However, adults do not come upstairs, and they do not see the disrepair in the walls and the holes in the couches and these should be fixed. Need a bathroom on the third floor. (Middle School)
- e. More parking is necessary. (all adult Sunday schools)
- f. A Youth playground would be ideal, the best location would be on the roof off the third floor. (Middle School)

- g. A labyrinth would be a nice feature, and a garden would also be good. (Middle School)

14. Worship

- a. There needs to be more flexibility about music and ritual to attract young people. There may be a need for a casual service which is family friendly. Maybe the service could be in the community center, maybe with screens (GIFT), maybe not with screens (Covenant, Middle School). Maybe there could be a multicultural element to the music. God should not be gendered. (GIFT, Covenant, Middle School, Graham Inquirers)
- b. Some of the ways that children were included in services were stopped during the pandemic. The GIFT class was glad that acolytes have recently returned. There used to be a time during service for the young children to be there, and then to leave after a children's word or homily for a children's church. (GIFT)
- c. Preach from the Book of Discipline at times. Emphasize who we are as Methodists. (Seekers)
- d. Have water available for attendees. (Seekers)
- e. Services should have a consistent ending time. (Covenant)
- f. Worship services might be modernized and more lively, but there was not support for screens. (Covenant)
- g. Some have noticed that the tune for the doxology changed a few weeks ago. (Covenant, Middle School)
- h. Paul's sermons are the best part. (Middle School)
- i. Want more opportunities for youth to be part of the service (greeters, worship roles). Could there be a sign-up sheet? (Middle School)
- j. Nourishment (Middle School)
 - i. Better communion bread. They used to enjoy eating communion bread after the service, but now it is poor quality. It should be Hawaiian bread even if the loaves are not round.
 - ii. The communion cups should be full; lately they have only been about $\frac{1}{4}$ full.
 - iii. There should be snacks after church in the Iris Room.
 - iv. There should be a monthly potluck lunch (or dinner) as a bonding experience.
- k. The prelude should be at the beginning of the service, not after the announcements to allow latecomers to get seated. (Middle School)

Listening Session Information on Golden Triangle Fellowship

Covenant Class, Simplicity Class, Graham Inquirers, Middle Schoolers, GIFT, Golden Triangle Women's Group, Golden Triangle Leaders

Response from Covenant Class to: What do you think about our relationship with the Golden Triangle Fellowship? What should that relationship become? How do we get there?

1. Our connections with GTF decreased during the pandemic. Even before then, the GTF had a distinct identity, and did not want to be “absorbed” into what they call “the big church.” A person in our class who began being involved with the Golden Triangle in 2006 and followed a class of children from first through twelfth grade talked about how the children enjoyed the programs and activities, but they also tended to relate more to each other than to the group of children from “the big church.”
2. Leadership is an issue for the congregation. Sandy is going to be unable to lead for much longer; Elena and Alexcia have moved away. There is no clear successor.
3. The future of the Golden Triangle Fellowship is larger than just a church issue. It is an issue of first-generation immigrants with a different culture and a different native language than English, and second generation immigrants (their children and grandchildren) who have been Americanized and no longer use Karen as their first language.
4. The role of the “big church” may have been to provide a supportive environment for the Karen congregation to make the transition from the Thai refugee camps to managing their lives in a new culture with a new language.
5. It will be important for the “big church” to have a meaningful conversation with the Golden Triangle Fellowship about their future.

Response from Simplicity Class on Golden Triangle Fellowship:

1. Golden Triangle Fellowship.
 - a. In 2019, there was increasing interaction between the GTF and the part of the congregation which meets in the sanctuary. Children and youth were intermingling in classes. Pastors had more presence in the GTF congregation. There was some succession planning with Elena and Alexcia being seen as potential local pastors.
 - b. Involvement dwindled during the pandemic and has not rebounded. The children who immigrated from Thailand have grown up and now have children, and those families are often not attending the services. Transportation is difficult, and often precludes involvement. Elena and Alexcia have moved or are moving out of state. Children and youth are no longer intermingling. There is not much communication between the Golden Triangle Fellowship and the people who attend the worship service in the sanctuary. The differences in experiences and cultural backgrounds between the GTF congregation and the rest of Belmont's congregation can make communication and connection more difficult.

- c. Recommend a sit-down meeting with Sandy Sakarapanee, and a meeting with GTF members for listening session. There has been a gathering on Saturday night for GTF members which could be a good venue.

Response from Graham Inquirers on Golden Triangle Fellowship

Belmont has given them space and provided some support. Recently, there was a split in the congregation over a conflict with Sandy, and a large subset left for another church that is “more Baptist.” Transition planning after Sandy retires needs to be conducted. The Golden Triangle choir and congregation could be better integrated with the sanctuary congregation—the feeling is that there is not much contact.

Response from Middle Schoolers on Golden Triangle Youth

Discussion of Golden Triangle youth who want their own youth group, feeling that their agendas might be different, and need to respect boundaries. Possible reaching out for some joint activities, but not wanting to disrupt either group’s distinct identity.

Response from GIFT Class on Golden Triangle Fellowship

There seems to be less relationship with Golden Triangle, and perhaps the congregations could be more integrated, either with shared services or shared activities. Recently a couple of Golden Triangle children have been in first or second grade Sunday school. Would more like to participate? The class recognizes that there are constraints on travel and time for the Golden Triangle Fellowship.

Response from Golden Triangle Women’s Group (Nel Schreiber and Gayle Morin)

They love their congregation and acknowledged that the congregants get along with each other. There is no backstabbing or gossip. They remember how kind Linda and Jim Fields were when they first started attending Belmont. When asked about their current relationship with the “big” church, they said that some were friendly but many just looked the other way without acknowledging them. They like it when Belmonsters greet them with smiles. They also mentioned that the children were not always welcomed in Sunday School.

They said that some of the kids attended Sunday School, especially the younger ones. They haven’t had any kids in the big church Confirmation Class for years. They acknowledged that activities outside of Sunday mornings are often difficult for them to participate in. Sandy teaches a class for young girls.

When asked about joint activities, they said they liked it when both congregations met together occasionally. They also remembered some of the activities we did jointly such as the cooking class. They are looking forward to October 6 when the service is joint. They hope there will be hymns that they know.

They never complain, but they liked it when the pastors took turns preaching at a Sunday service; they would like to have someone play the piano, at least for the first hymn, they would like to be able to join ESL or to have the opportunity to attend ESL somewhere.

They have worked out a substitute for two of the Sundays Sandy will be gone due to knee surgery. Sandy will be very hard to replace for many reasons, not the least is the low salary she draws.

Golden Triangle leaders listening session 7-20-24

Participants included Sandy, 5 adult members of the congregation, one youth. Sandy was the main speaker. Questions were translated into Thai to two women who were there (Wisnee? and a woman who lives in Smyrna), and then they were translated again into Karen. However, all present understood some English and would laugh or react to our statements.

What are the best parts of the Golden Triangle Fellowship for you?

1. The congregation is like a family; everyone loves each other; there are no significant conflicts.
2. Sandy said that the Karen had negative relationships with Thai in Thailand, but they love and accept Sandy.
3. The leaders of the Golden Triangle do not have meetings very often.

What do you see as the challenges that the Golden Triangle Fellowship is facing?

1. The main challenge is that Sandy is 78 years old. She will have surgery on her leg in October and will be in a wheelchair for two months. It is unclear whether she will be able to continue as pastor during her recovery. Her long term future as the pastor is limited due to her age.
2. The congregation needs lay leaders to invite people to attend church, and to bring their children to Sunday school. The church is not near the homes of the congregation. Many people in the church work long hours, sometimes on weekends or nights. This limits their availability.
3. The young people are comfortable with English, and they could attend services in English. Two of the young people (Elena and Alexcia) whom the congregation thought were going to transition into church leaders have moved to other states (Minnesota and Ohio respectively). They feel that attendance by young people has declined. They still have a young adult group in their congregation of people between the ages of 20 and 35.
4. The congregant who plays the guitar for the services would like others in the congregation to be taught piano. Although he can play for the services, he does not feel able to teach others to play the piano. They need a back up for the music.

What would you want for Golden Triangle Fellowship in 10 years?

1. Staying at Belmont is important because this has been their home.
2. New lay leadership to keep the congregation together.
3. A new clergyperson to lead worship.

Are there thoughts about what will happen when Sandy is no longer the pastor?

This is a big problem without a clear solution. They are praying that a solution will become apparent that will allow them to stay at Belmont.

Did the pandemic change the relationship between Golden Triangle Fellowship and the part of the congregation that meets in the sanctuary? If yes, was this positive or negative?

Members of the congregation from the “big church” used to be involved with the Golden Triangle Fellowship in a variety of ways. The people who used to be involved are no longer involved.

What would you like to see the relationship become between the Golden Triangle Fellowship and the rest of the congregation in the future?

They would like people from the rest of the congregation to be involved with them to help them work out the challenges they are facing and enable them to stay at Belmont with a new leader.

Are there ways you think Golden Triangle Fellowship should be involved with the rest of the congregation that is not happening? (missions, ministry, worship, meals, etc.)

The GTF’s congregation’s work hours and the distance make it difficult for the congregation to participate in activities like Vacation Bible School during the week.

There is a survey that the non-GTF part of the congregation is completing. Do you think the Golden Triangle Fellowship would want to complete a survey as well?

1. They do not want to complete a survey.
2. They would like to have a listening session with the Ladies Circle which meets at 4864 Cimarron Way, Antioch, TN at 4:00 p.m. on August 31, 2024.
3. They would like to have a listening session with the Youth Group. (This was explored, but it did not work out. The GTF leader who was reportedly meeting with the youth has not met with them recently due to long hours at work.)