

**Atonement Lutheran Church
New Brighton, MN**

**Growth Gathering Event
March 6, 2000**

**Summary Observations
And
Newsprint Notes**

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Summary: Atonement Lutheran's Growth Gathering Event

The Question: What is God calling Atonement Lutheran Church to be and do at this time in its life and mission?

Consultant Observations:

Commitment:

1. It was evident that there is a strong commitment to the congregation by high percentage of the congregation's membership in attendance at the Growth Gathering Event. They cared enough to come, to stay, and to bring their input, and there was a high level of energy until the event concluded. There seems to be a blend of commitment that stems from their faith, their loyalty to Atonement Lutheran, and their desire for this congregation to "grow into the future" with a sense of purpose and stability.
2. Although I cannot recall if I made this statement during the Event or not, but I believe that "those who come have the power." Those who came had the conversation and did the dreaming and the thinking. "You are the leaders, and leaders lead."

Change:

3. There was positive response to the phrase: "Think outside the box." I believe that the majority of the participants know that new thinking is needed if Atonement Lutheran is to survive and move forward. It was not clear to me just what would be the motivator toward that movement.
4. There was an undercurrent of some excitement around change that kept evidencing itself as responses were made, particularly in the small group work where there was probably a higher comfort level in talking with those that they know.

There was evidence of tension between some members or groups in the congregation...some who believe that the way it has been has been "good enough," and others who believe change needs to take place. There were references to worship as one of those areas where they might have disagreement, but I sensed that it goes beyond that...to a different "world view" of the congregation of the future.

Most of those present seemed to voice readiness for some change to take place, but it is difficult to know if they would be ready for the implications of change. It is easier to talk about it than it is to experience it.

5. The participants did not seem to think of change as “risk-taking” because there was the unspoken belief that if something does not change, they will not be able to survive.

Stated in a positive way, the participants seem to want desperately to focus the mission and ministry of this congregation. Then – it seemed that they felt that if they could get that focus, and empower the people, they would be able to move forward with God’s help.

Outreach:

6. When they thought about the congregation under the category of Growth (where you might think there would be some thought about inviting new people into membership) the emphasis seemed to center on reaching out to those in need, worship and the use of the facility. There were not clear statements about telling others about Jesus, but it was clear to the facilitator that they were thinking about how the resources of the congregation (its facility, its technology, and certainly its people) can be used to “reach out.” There were also several statements in the “future picture” that spoke to being equipped to both know, and to tell their faith stories. I did not see too much evidence of wanting to just serve themselves. When they did talk about themselves, they spoke of being trained or equipped with certain skills, e.g. mentors...or about support groups such as for single parents, etc.
7. Various small groups spoke of reaching out to community organizations and to people in the community through the use of Atonements resources such as the facility (most noted was the commercial kitchen), technology, etc. – and certainly through the resource of Atonement members. I think they see this as a form of service, as well as making a statement that “we are here.” There were different kinds of suggestions for “becoming more visible in the community.” These references to visibility seemed to link to their thinking about “growth” as well as to the whole area of discipleship.
8. I did not hear any references to global outreach. It is my observation that the reason is two-fold. They are trying to understand and live out their Mission and Vision statements which seemed to take them into the communities around them. Second, because they are in a survival mode, the global picture was more removed.

Collaborations

9. There were numerous suggestions about collaborations with other congregations – or with other community organizations. I heard this done both as a way to expand their ministry, too maximize their

resources, and to form relationships that would not only make a bigger impact, but also strengthen or secure their future.

Identity:

10. I believe that the members of Atonement Lutheran are proud of their congregation. There was a distinct divide between how they think they are perceived currently, and how they want to see their identity in the future. As the facilitator, I think they spoke about how they perceive the congregation's current identity when they identified present Concerns: e.g. declining attendance, declining income, losing our Lutheran roots, feel "stuck", concern about financial capability, etc.

But their vision for Atonement's identity for the future was around such very positive and hopeful statements such as:

- There will be a ministry of and by the lay people
- The entire community will know that this is a safe, non-judgmental, welcoming place
- Visitors would know what we are about
- This would be known as a place of prayer

11. They are concerned about the future of the children and their youth. Again, their concerns seem to be around the fact that they do not have the ability to adequately fund that area. They also mentioned the music as a strength. These are strong assets and the congregation should continue to build its identity on these strengths along with others.
12. They identify themselves as "welcoming and friendly." The Growth Task Team may want to look more deeply into this concept. It is at the heart of outreach for the purpose of attracting people into the congregation? Do new members feel welcome, and is there an effort to integrate and involve them? Who "fits" the welcome category?

Statistics and Demographics:

13. They seemed surprised that 65% of the population in their zip code have no faith involvement or moderate faith involvement. Although one group mentioned this as a "huge mission field," I am not sure that many were troubled by this statistic.
14. They did not seem overly concerned that worship attendance included only 33% of the baptized membership. Perhaps that is because during the last eight years the worship attendance has been fairly stable (static), so people know who to expect as regular attenders.

A General Observation: I believe that there was/is a "heartfelt" tension between wanting to discover how to plan for and live out the Mission and Vision as has been presented (around which this event was designed) - and with the "heartfelt" need to find a

way to survive as a congregation. Those two views or needs do not have to be in conflict, but they will have to be brought together to help this congregation see a future that will be carrying out God's mission and at the same time bring hope about the congregation's ability to survive. (The Team will need to wrestle with this).

General Observations:

15. There were numerous references about "training" members for a variety of areas. They talked about a number of different ways to strengthen members e.g. to be mentors, to be leaders, etc. One group called for "more Bible Study for all ages" – many of the groups spoke of the need to help Atonement Lutheran members know and tell their faith story. They also were concerned about education and nurture for various age levels including some intergenerational opportunities.
16. The event participants seemed to be aware that the congregation has worked on a Mission Statement and its Vision. Several voiced the feeling of being "stuck" or at the "coma" between "Making Disciples and Growing Disciples." As the facilitator, I felt that they accepted the statements, but were not sure how to move forward with them. (Note the newsprint section, Page 3).
17. There was quite a bit of conversation about the facilities, but unlike many congregations, they did not seem to suggest that you did not have enough space. They were more concerned about the best use of space. They saw it as a vital resource for ministry. They spoke about some areas that needed to be more accessible, and of the need to repair the parking lot...but spoke most frequently about the resource that Atonement has in its commercial kitchen.

The question is: How does your facility lend itself to nurturing members for ministry, and for ministering to people outside the congregation who are in need? Is your facility a viable resource that Atonement brings to any collaborative efforts? This is among the questions that you will want to answer as you prayerfully discern the mission God has given you for the present and for the future?

18. The lack of financial resources was seen as a major obstacle, but I recall hearing only one reference to the need for stewardship education. They did talk frequently about needing more money, but there did not seem to be an understanding that the current membership could provide more financial resources. This may or may not be accurate!
19. I was encouraged to hear that several groups saw a future where there would be growth through the use of small groups. This was seen as a way to involve members, as nurturing and learning groups, as groups

that would undertake ministry tasks, as support groups, etc.----one of the ways of making and growing disciples.

In Summary – Themes Frequently Raised by the Participants:

The following areas or themes are what I, as consultant, believe surfaced in the Growth Gathering Event. Many of them are referenced in the General Observations above, but noted here as what I perceive to be the key areas identified as possible priorities for the Growth Gathering Team to consider in Atonement’s strategic plan (not necessarily in priority order).

1. **Growth:** Because this event was around the theme of Growth, it would be fair to say that the design and the questions led them to respond through the “lens” of Growth. They did not talk much about adding new members, although in the 3-5 year picture they saw a larger congregation. They did speak about growth in the faith development of the members, in their ability to tell their faith story, and in their ability to reach out to those in need.
2. **Worship:** Worship is seen as central to what this congregation does, and they see this as a way to “flourish” within the congregation before reaching out into the community. They also saw it as a point of conflict, but did not dwell on that. Instead, they talked about the addition of another worship service that would accommodate the schedules of other persons. They also talked about the simulcast of the worship services as outreach, and taking worship services out to people where they were – examples given were to Meadowbrook and Brightondale.
3. **Children and Youth:** It is clear that these are on the minds of Atonement members. They were not specific as to what is needed or should change except that it should be tended to, and that it “should expand.”

The study and evaluation of the Kings Kids, per the Council action, should be a part of the thinking about Atonement’s future. Is King’s Kids seen as mission, as outreach, as service or??? There are a number of questions to be asked in the study and evaluation.

4. **Small Groups:** The reference to Small Groups came up in many of the reports –one of the reports said that “all members should have access to a small group.” They saw small groups as a way to connect and nurture members, as a way to invite outsiders into support groups and as a way to build community. They also said small groups could be a place where they study the Bible, where they learn to tell their faith story, where ministry tasks can be done, and on and on. I saw this as one of the key areas in the report back from the small group work.

5. **Identification and Use of Gifts:** There were numerous references to discovering the gifts of current members, as well as their interests and passions. The direction of this thinking seemed to be that people want to use/share their gifts, and want to be involved in areas where they have interest and feel that they can make a contribution. It was also seen as an important way to know and integrate new members.
6. **Equipping/Training People:** This was seen as key to “growing disciples.” They identified the following:
 - Teaching people how to tutor
 - Teaching people how to mentor
 - Teaching people how to be leaders and to lead
 - Teaching them how to care for people outside the congregation
 - Teaching people the needs of the church (not sure what they meant)
 This area relates to the references to Bible studies for all ages, intergenerational opportunities, and continuous and life long learning
7. **Facilities/Facility Use:** Event participants mentioned the facility in a number of occasions. It was usually seen as a resource for ministry. They did not speak about lack of space. They talked about handicap accessibility that could be enhanced. They were proud of the commercial kitchen which they believed could be used for outreach efforts. They saw the church facility as a vehicle for ministry for community groups, as a site for specific ministry offerings such as support groups, etc., for event that might attract community members such as musical events, for efforts such as health and wellness. It was quite evident that they see this as a significant resource.
8. **Technology:** Atonement members are obviously proud of their technological capability, and of the webmaster. They see it as a valuable tool for ministry.
9. **Collaborations:** Although there were not many specifics on collaborating with other congregations, it was offered several times...sharing in programming efforts, using the best resources from each of those involved in collaboration, hosting interdenominational events, music concert series, etc. No one spoke about the collaboration taking the form of Atonement as a satellite of another church. Neither did they identify the possibility of shared staff, combined youth programs or the like.

Of the above areas, I see Growth as the “umbrella” for all the work in the strategic plan. The Team will want to discuss each of these areas, but you might look at the Facility and Technology as key resources for what you do in your strategic plan. Small Groups and Collaborations can be strategies, but they can also be priority areas in your plan. You will decide. It is also important to note that there may be other priority areas for consideration that did not happen to be mentioned in this event.

Suggestions About How to Use This Document:

1. For Planning: Use this document as a foundational piece for the Strategic Planning Process.

Share this Summary and Observations (including newsprint notes) with the staff and with all lay leadership (Council, Board, Committees) for discussion and use in future planning.

I think it is important to wrestle with what I have suggested in my observations and summary themes. You may or may not agree, but the discussion will be productive, and decisions and changes will result.

2. For Exciting and Informing: Share this Summary and Observations Document with all who participated in this process to date (names were gathered at the event). It is also recommended that the document be made available to all members, for example, noted in the Sunday announcements where people can pick it up on their way out of the service.
3. For General Communication: Consider a synopsis in a communication vehicle such as your newsletter, the website, etc.

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Exhibit: Newsprint Notes – Growth Gathering Newsprint Notes, March 6, 2005

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