

RESULTS OF THE 2024 ST. JAMES TRANSITION PROCESS: THEMES and PROPOSALS

Part 1: Six Themes from the Past through the Present

Note: Listening has been the foundation of the transition process. The transition team regularly listened to God through “Dwelling in the Word”. Interviews with approximately 100 members and friends of the congregation was another way of deeply listening. This listening focused on hearing the historical and present strengths of St. James, and on hearing dreams about the future that God has in mind for the congregation.

Additional people joined the transition team to do another round of listening: this time listening to the 500 responses from the interviews. Trusting the guidance of the Spirit, they listened for themes that ran through the responses. Here are the six themes they discerned as strengths of St. James from the past through the present.

Theme 1: Location and Feel of Building

The building itself supports people in their spiritual lives and also helps draw new people to St. James. Specific features of the building like its white-steeple architecture and stained glass windows are beautiful and well-maintained, and give off a positive, stable feeling. Entering the building in general and the sanctuary specifically communicates a feeling of God’s presence and closeness.

At one point in the past the congregation considered relocating to a large parcel of land on the outer edge of Verona. That St. James maintained its location gives it a mission identity both related to Verona and as a central gathering place for people from many outlying communities.

Theme 2: Working Together including Across Generations

The presence of all generations and ages of people is celebrated and provides a hopeful future for the congregation. Collaboration around youth activities and building projects has created beneficial focus and a shared mission, which resulted in worthwhile accomplishments and helped to reduce conflict.

Interviewees referenced the high importance of multi-generational efforts including VBS, Sunday School, youth drive-in dinners, Christmas pageant, Palm Sunday brunch, the Centennial celebration and more. Teamwork has also been important for youth mission trips, men’s group activities, new member dinners, the chili fun-raiser, community meal and church picnic. Many of these events draw in people not normally involved, creating a sense of comradery, community and service.

Building projects have also been a strong expression of teamwork. This is true both for those who have helped maintain the building and for people involved in the 1993 and 2016 building remodels, which were important for the sake of God’s mission through St. James. These efforts were not without challenges, but in the end the results were energizing and uniting.

Theme 3: Growth as Disciples

Over the years the people of St. James have grown through classes for all ages, ministry groups and service projects/mission trips. Growing through action has been just as important as growing through reflection.

There has been a strong history of adult education at St. James. Longer-time members recalled a significant Thursday night adult education program that lasted many years and filled the basement with participants. Others told of how much they valued the Sunday Morning Conversations and the Lenten Bible Studies on Wednesday evenings. Not only did people grow from these offerings, they also served as ways for people new to the congregation to get involved and meet people.

Women's Circles including the annual retreat have had a very significant role in deepening faith, building community and providing avenues for serving others. Other adult groups with similar impacts include the Habitat for Humanity group that existed at one time, men's ministry groups and the many ways St. James has supported Badger Prairie Needs Network.

The whole progression of opportunities for children and youth, from the St. James Preschool to the high school youth group, has touched countless lives both for learning and for loving one's neighbor. People who have taught Sunday School and Confirmation described how much they love helping children and youth make connections to the Bible and begin to work out who Jesus is in their lives. Planting the gardens and talking with kids about growing vegetables for people who don't have enough food has also been deeply meaningful. Youth who have been confirmed at St. James described how confirmation was taught in a way that connected to real things and was very discussion based. It was a safe place to talk about life, faith and more.

Youth mission trips have had a deep impact through hands-on learning. Frequently mentioned were the trips to NYC where world views were widened by serving at an inner city church. Other very positive memories for youth included their time with Pastor Mike Thomas and with Kelly.

Theme 4: Openness

The overall openness of the congregation is highly appreciated. This includes a spirit of acceptance and non-judgement that makes St. James a safe place. While tradition is valued, there is a mind-set that welcomes new and different ideas and opportunities. Also, political differences are respected. St. James treasures being a community but also allows for individuals to engage freely and without pressure as they find most helpful.

Interviewees noted the following:

- In a world that is so conflicted St. James makes space for people with varying beliefs.
- In my previous church my spouse and I could not take communion because of a divorce, but I was overwhelmed with happy feelings that everyone is welcome to receive communion at St. James.
- The adult group at the time took very seriously that we were not there to be a closed group—our purpose was to welcome people new to the congregation.
- People in my women's circle have differing points of view, and that leads to good discussion.
- A church is God's house, and at St. James I have never felt judged by the congregation or the pastors, so I felt closer to God and that I belonged.
- We are funny and it's a place where it's comfortable to just be funny. Not uptight.

- We are a congregation open to our youth, and open to women in leadership.
- We balance how everyone worships, with contemporary and traditional services.
- Pastors support new ideas and new ways of doing things.
- St. James is traditional in its music and that it doesn't use screens, but ideologically St. James is in tune with the times.
- St. James is eclectic: newcomers and long-timers, half Verona people and half who are not from Verona, conservative and liberal, young and old; there is space for everyone.
- A welcoming church more traditional in appearance but with an open-minded attitude.
- Being ELCA is an important characteristic, including that women are pastors.
- Friendly and welcoming to everyone, no matter who they are or where they are from.

Theme 5: Compassionate Connections

Many compassionate and genuine human connections take place at St. James, and they are often enhanced by food. These human connections occur both within the congregation and extend out into the community. Tender times, personal struggles and tragic life events have brought many people into one-to-one authentic interactions. The funeral ministry at St. James is very significant. The Hope and Healing dinner is a gathering where many find support. St. James is a place where people will listen to your struggles and help however possible.

Theme 6: Worship and Music

Worship and music are deeply life-giving to St. James; in many ways they are the foundation for everything. Worship and/or music was mentioned most often as being important to people's lives at St. James and most important for how St. James touches the lives of others.

This includes the regular things that happen every week, such as sermons and choir anthems. But also mentioned were how significant the festival seasons were, such as worship at Christmas and the Palm Sunday Cantata.

Weekly communion is important to many who were interviewed. People enjoy sharing the peace. Both traditional and contemporary worship/music are appreciated. The hand bells are enjoyed by many.

Part 2: Eight Proposals for the Future

Note: Each proposal builds on the strengths of St. James as described in the six themes. Following the approach of Appreciative Inquiry, each proposal is written in present tense as though it is already happening. This both helps us imagine it more easily, and eliminates the common practice of using "should" statements, which puts us back in problem-solving mode rather than focusing on strengths. The use of our imaginations is closely tied to our life with God, who made us in God's own image. We have been restored in Christ Jesus as people who can imagine once again our close relationship with God, and imagine our future as it unfolds with God.

Also, while each proposal is connected to one or more of the six strengths, the proposals are also meant to stretch St. James to build on those strengths. That means it is a GOOD INDICATOR that we are on the right track if we **do not** know how to do everything described in each proposal.

The final step, to be done after the new pastor arrives, is to design experiments related to each proposal (or a prioritized sub-set of the proposals). Those experiments will let us try the proposals on, AND, will help us learn to do what we do not currently know how to do.

Proposal 1: Expanded System for Volunteers

A wide-range of support is in place for volunteers both inside the congregation and in the community. For volunteers within the congregation, people are matched with positions based on their gifts, not based on the slot to be filled. There is excitement across the membership because contributing time and skills to support one's congregation creates a great deal of positive connection, and the overall number of volunteers has grown significantly. The congregation also maintains a database of volunteer opportunities outside the congregation, including opportunities for whole families to serve together, and matches members with those positions also. St. James t-shirts are worn, greatly increasing the congregation's reputation as a people who serve.

Proposal 2: Strong Multigenerational Community of Faith

St. James offers voice and support to all generations represented in the church, which has led to an even stronger multi-generational character of the congregation. Fellowship, service and education opportunities arise organically as all ages are encouraged to come together for God's purpose in authentic and fulfilling ways that support their lives both in and out of the church.

Proposal 3: Creative Support for Younger Families

Families with children from newborn through high school regularly express how grateful they are for support from their congregation. Parents with younger children and youth have a network of other parents at St. James who they know by name and have connected with positively. Families are supported through parenting groups, nights out for parents and get together for shared meal preparation. A nursery with paid staff is functioning well and there is a location within the sanctuary for quiet play during worship.

Proposal 4: Youth Involvement

Youth involvement at St. James is robust and meaningful. Youth of all ages are empowered to support and engage with each other regularly for service, worship and stewardship activities that are sometimes in-line with and sometimes independent from the rest of church life and weekend worship. Youth voices are included in Churchwide decision making and leadership discussions. Strong and personalized relationships with non-parent adult mentors within the congregation provide connection and guidance for children and youth as they progress from baptism, through Sunday School &

confirmation, and out of high school. The children and youth of St. James prove to be some of the best ambassadors for our church in the community.

Proposal 5: Congregation Culture Emphasizing Shared Leadership and Abundance

Shared leadership has blossomed within the congregation and is especially evident in a renewed understanding of how leadership is shared between pastors and people. There is an intentional, cooperative balance between what is done by paid staff and what is done by ministry teams. The primary function of the congregation council is overall, higher level leadership for the sake of empowering teams and individuals for ministry. The culture of the congregation is known for its spirit of abundance and generosity.

Proposal 6: Amplified Openness

St James has expanded on its value for openness and its history of meeting people where they are with processes for welcoming newcomers to the church. Newcomers are intentionally oriented to the opportunities and support systems of the church. Both new and established members engage with these processes to communicate their needs for their faith life and their desires to contribute to the church. St. James regularly expands its ministries to include the populations of Verona and the surrounding communities that aren't represented at weekly worship. St. James's amplified openness provides connection and enrichment that extends beyond the doors of the church.

Proposal 7: New Chapter for Adult Learning

Several additional opportunities for adult learning exist and have pastoral involvement. These include mid-week and weekend offerings, both at the church building and in homes. Interactive, discussion based learning is highlighted and a mix of auditory, visual and kinesthetic learning styles are incorporated.

Proposal 8: Expanded Worship Opportunities

St. James offers worship that balances the traditions of its worship practices and expanded forms of different worship practices. The worship space is one where many voices are motivated to engage and participate in the work of worship. The deep and beloved tradition of worship through music has expanded to include different genres of music and music-making opportunities with a wide variety of offerings and a growing team of musical leaders.