

**Pastor Pete's report on  
the "Bests of the Past" interview process  
and what it indicated to him.**

**January, 2015**

The interviews were clearly a good experience for the Transition Team, and seemed so for those who participated as well. Many stayed to talk more afterwards. In all over 80 people were interviewed, which is a little more than half of those who could have been. We had a good range of ages represented. We were quite happy to have several young adults participate.

We practiced interviewing beforehand as a team and already then we began to notice two tendencies.

We saw how it was a challenge at times to share experiences. Often an opinion came to mind instead of an experience. So if -- to use a made-up example -- people were asked to share a great worship experience they remembered, the reply sometimes would be "a worship experience should have xyz in it." This tendency was also apparent in the actual interviews. It is not right or wrong, but it is significant that it is our cultural habit to a degree.

Somewhat similar was the difficulty some had stating positive experiences of the past. Often people could readily think of a negative experience much more easily, or an answer with negativity in it came readily to mind. Some did manage to give an answer with negative content that sounded positive. That is a unique skill!

These two tendencies: opinion over experience and negatives coming easier than positive, are both things to watch out for in ourselves and in the congregational cultural dynamic. They could indicate a 'poisoned' or 'unsafe' atmosphere or attitude within the congregation. These kinds of cultural habits take intentionality and focus to resolve and move in healthier directions. Becoming self-aware in this, catching ourselves and each other at it, and also gently pointing it out to each other has become a side benefit of the interview process for the Team.

With this report, I am moving from naming Adaptive issues to sharing some Technical ways the Adaptive challenges can be addressed. Technical approaches will only be effective if proper biblical Heart Change and personal faith journey growth is supporting and driving the technical solutions.

Technically council could research bringing people in to do playful education sessions that both expose these patterns and teach a new way. A way of positive Heart Change.

I will now run through the answers to the questions and what they predominantly seemed to indicate to me. I did not participate in any interviews, in fact, at the wise recommendation of the Team, I was largely invisible during them. I did sit and 'debrief' with the team members after each round of interviews. After all the interviews were done, the Transition Team took all the answers from each interview group, read them off to each other and wrote them down on large sheets of paper. They then grouped similar answers together numbering the times something was mentioned. A report with those prioritized statements will be released soon. My report mainly looks at the key responses and those which were mentioned most often.

## Question 1

When people described times they have felt most engaged and alive in the church, having a role or a job clearly helped them feel 'part of' the Christian Reformed Church in Nobleford.

The biggest surprise was in how many people pointed to having been on council<sup>1</sup> as most engaging and involving, followed by other leadership or helping positions<sup>2</sup> such as in GEMS<sup>3</sup>, Sunday School<sup>4</sup>, Vacation Bible School<sup>5</sup> (VBS) and Cadets.<sup>6</sup> Some of these responses may have been from the same person -- for instance if someone helped in GEMS and VBS -- but still the significance of a total of 46 out of 66 responses being because of key leadership roles in key ministries is notable.

Beyond that, 10 people pointed to the music ministry, 9 to fellowship, 8 to multigenerational activities and SERVE<sup>7</sup> trips as times when they have felt most engaged and involved.

What I think this shows is that it is important to give people a responsibility, a way of contributing. This can become an intentional part of council and congregational action. Do not leave people on the sidelines too long.

## Question 2A

When people describe the experiences in worship that are most meaningful they point mainly to some aspect of the music ministry. Out of 131 individual things mentioned, some form of music got mentioned 53 times.<sup>8</sup> Beyond that, worship services with special focus<sup>9</sup> got 39 mentions. Moments when people were very engaged with the sermon was mentioned 28 times. That people would mention being engaged with a sermon is more or less expected in a Reformed context where the preaching of the Word is important. But it is noteworthy to honour the data that indicates music ministry is a significant way people grow as well.

What I think this teaches is that developing the ministry of music, particularly as it is used to facilitate worship and support the theme of the sermon is going to help grow the church. Council may want to consider sending some key worship facilitators to educational opportunities to further their skills even as they recruit and encourage new 'players.' The music ministry must remain in a supporting role though. There is always a danger it becomes central, which would not be good in the long run. So council will need to manage that.

## Question 2B

When, in our interviews, people spoke of Pastors who were particularly effective in the past, the character category of 'approachability' or 'personableness' of the preacher was revealed to be by far a major factor, getting 19 mentions in one

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<sup>1</sup> 14 of 66 responses in a category we called "Personal Involvement"

<sup>2</sup> 5/66 mentions

<sup>3</sup> 10/66 mentions GEMS = Girls Everywhere Meeting their Saviour

<sup>4</sup> 6/66 mentions

<sup>5</sup> 6/66 mentions

<sup>6</sup> 5/66 mentions

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.youthunlimited.org/serve/>

<sup>8</sup> 29 were about the singing, and 14 about the Praise Team

<sup>9</sup> Baptism, Profession of Faith, Cadet Sunday, Good Friday etc.

form or another. That is followed closely by people saying the pastor needed to “Be Real” and “Genuine,” and was further supported by an appreciation for those who were willing to share their past life experiences to help people in the congregation. All of these speak to and describe a certain type of character or personality. These three similar categories together covered about 50 of the 136 things mentioned. Beyond that a few other key elements mentioned were: a pastor who developed relationship to all ages and the community<sup>10</sup>, a pastor-wife team where the spouse is clearly supportive of the pastor’s work<sup>11</sup> and someone not afraid to challenge from the pulpit.<sup>12</sup>

It is challenging to state what this indicates in a few words or less, but to me it signals that the next Pastor in Nobleford would need to be very relational, leaning more to extroversion than introversion, very self-aware and authentic, passionate, and not afraid to admit mistakes and flaws but also be firm in the gospel they stand for and ready to challenge people with the implications of it.<sup>13</sup>

### **Question 2C**

When people spoke of sermons which were particularly effective, ones that had various forms of “Life Application” came up often<sup>14</sup>, along with ones that used Visual Illustrations<sup>15</sup> (imagined or physical). Between those two we have exactly half the things mentioned of the total of 68 responses to this question. The next category grouping of responses sounds similar to the previous question about character, saying it was important that the pastor was engaged-in and passionate-about the message and that it was clear they dug into the subject. This had 12 mentions. Then 8 about the pastor's personal experiences being related to the congregation, and on from there.

This again points a relational pastor, as 2B did, but also narrowing that to one who communicates well with visually oriented people, and does so with clear conviction and passion.

### **Question 2D**

This question was not asked in all interviews. It may also have confused some. So it’s results have less weight in the overall picture. Still, when it came to noticing good leadership, people mentioned “Wisdom of the Council - doing what needs to be done in tough times” as examples of good leadership, and the commitment of Cadet councilors and those who “see a need in the church” and step up to address it.

### **Question 2E**

When people spoke to us of Fellowship, they very often mentioned shared hardship that brought people together. It came up in some form or another 17

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<sup>10</sup> 13 mentions

<sup>11</sup> 10 mentions

<sup>12</sup> 9 mentions

<sup>13</sup> It may be worth sitting and noting what was **not** mentioned at all that some might consider important in a pastor. There can be significant learning in noticing that. There, for example are two things that sometimes come out as complaints about a pastor, in the form of “not formal enough” or not “reverent” or “traditional” enough. Yet no one mentioned that a traditional and reverent pastor have helped them grow spiritually.

<sup>14</sup> 16 mentions

<sup>15</sup> 16 times

times.<sup>16</sup> General fellowship with the church family was 8, and fellowship in Bible studies, particularly those that were multigenerational got 7 mentions. It was clear (and is clear from how people linger for fellowship time after both services) that a healthy level of camaraderie and 'feeling like family' to each other exists and is important.

Here I want to highlight the word "multigenerational." It was a response that was sprinkled throughout the answers and indicates that people have been helped much in the past by participating in events that got different generations interacting, especially those where a small group of people get the opportunity to know each other better. Council would do well to explore purposely organizing such opportunities.

## **Question 2F**

The outreach aspects of our GEMS, Cadets and Vacation Bible School ministries were top of mind when people thought about reaching out to the community and world beyond. Those three combined for 49 mentions or half of the total 96. Clearly they are seen as our best outreach. Next came the Burger Bash with 11 and CoffeeBreak with 8 and close behind that SERVE trips at 7. There was also a grouping of about 16 responses that talked about other connections in the community.

It was very clear from the reports on the interviews that SERVE and similar mission/ministries had the proportionately largest positive impact on participants in the interviews. Transition Team members can readily recall the passion with which people reported this effect, and the details of it. Ask them. Ask youth who went on the last one, or people who were prayer partners. You will hear it for yourself. What I'm saying is that in this case the small number of responses does not correctly convey how strong the effect was.

What this says to me is that council will do well for the future spiritual and faith development of not only youth but the supporting adults (prayer partners) to continue to support such mission trip endeavors enthusiastically, while continuing to help the congregation develop community connections through local ministry connections.

## **Question 2G**

When it came to talking about how people see themselves primarily contributing, interviewees mentioned helping with Sunday School<sup>17</sup> most often. In terms of ministry help, that was followed by GEMS<sup>18</sup>, VBS<sup>19</sup>, Council<sup>20</sup>, Catechism Teaching<sup>21</sup> and music<sup>22</sup> ministry. There was a long list of other individual ways of contributing, some of which showed good intentionality and awareness that there

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<sup>16</sup> I have learned that besides the Elders and council doing well in connecting with people, there a a number of individuals who quietly offer great companionship and support to members who are struggling. Often they have had a similar struggle themselves.

<sup>17</sup> 15 mentions

<sup>18</sup> 11 mentions

<sup>19</sup> 10 mentions

<sup>20</sup> 9 mentions

<sup>21</sup> 9 mentions

<sup>22</sup> 9 mentions

are many ways of contributing and serving, such as 'building relationships through fellowship'<sup>23</sup> and 'supporting a spouse on council.'<sup>24</sup>

What stood out as most unique and refreshing was that there was a grouping of about 11 similar-to-each-other responses that showed people recognized that their attitude or approach, or spirit of doing things was also a contribution. This is so true, but not often attended to.

Council would do well to find ways of supporting the awareness that the attitude and spirit with which you engage in church activities makes a difference. As I said one Sunday night "three people let loose with a gift of encouragement can have more positive benefit to the Kingdom of God than a 5 star pastor."

### **Question 3**

This question, about dreams and wishes for the future, presented a challenge in the process. It simply might have been difficult to shift from thinking about the real past to dreaming about the future. But it may also not be something people do often. In many interview groups, significant prompting and priming the pump was needed to get ideas flowing. But usually, once people made the shift, some ideas came to the surface.

This question is not so much about the ideas and dreams themselves but about opening people up to thinking outside of the current reality to what might be possible or hoped for in the future. Without some such notions forming what we do, are we not actually holding the status quo or wandering kind of aimlessly? Without a promised land we dream of getting to... ..

In my view, the way this question went is an indication that council needs to facilitate more such 'out of the box' imagining from time to time. A conflicted or tense time in a church can stifle dreaming, as the focus becomes getting through the crisis. Council can, for the time being at least, not worry about or take any suggestions as a specific proposal. That was not the point. If something suggested was indeed a prompt from the Holy Spirit, it will not go away and support for it will grow as people learn how this Spirit works to spur new ministry initiatives. Though, one day, I personally would be thrilled to see the church go solar and sell electricity back into the grid. That is an inside joke. Please smile and read on.

### **Conclusion**

This kind of interview process was and remains a tremendously helpful and useful exercise on many levels.

The Transition Team learned not only the answers they got, but also some new things about congregational dynamics that will be with them for a long time. We saw anew the value of positivity, not the artificial kind, and the bonding effect of vulnerably sharing with each other. Because of the mix of the interview groups, people learned good things about others they had not known before.

I know that the Elders have talked about exploring how to make these kinds of questions part of the home visits they do each fall. I encourage them to pursue this. Some participants left the interviews saying "We should do this more

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<sup>23</sup> 7 mentions

<sup>24</sup> 2 mentions

often” and that raises the possibility of doing some version of this annually as a congregational reflection and assessment time. Home missions has a Healthy Church survey, for instance, that could probably be adapted into the Appreciative Inquiry format and facilitated by one of their trained coaches. This is something I want to put some emphasis on: Just as some of you on the farm bring in others to help you with breeding management, or soil management, so you as a council can bring in people who can help you with “strengthening and deepening relationships with God and with each other.” Congregational Pastors tend to be generalists, like your family doctor. I, as a specialized Pastor help identify things, but certainly don’t have time or necessarily expertise to help work through some of the things identified. But there are Pastors who can. For example, Rev VanderVeer from Calgary, might be able to do some work with you on relationships, as might Rev Pieter Hendriks, who can also teach you about the importance of “the priesthood of all believers” and show you how that works. Rev Martin Boardman from Brooks can do more focused teaching on prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, and so on. I’m saying, don’t be afraid, even if you have a regular generalist pastor, to explore some of the other local and denominational resources out there. A number of you recognize what a great resource just a recording of a talk at Classis has been in sorting out questions about membership. Seek out such help when you run into a need or problem. Help is out there.

We got some very clear indications of the direction God seems to be leading in, and we got it through listening to the congregation, which should help them recognize the result and own and honour it.

We have a pretty clear picture of the type of pastor who we believe will be best to lead this congregation into it’s next phase of Kingdom work.

To close this, I will write a paragraph that simply restates the conclusions from each question:

The outcome of the interviews indicates to me that you should purposefully (and personally and personably, not by bulletin announcement alone) give people opportunity to be involved in things in the congregation. Intentionally develop and encourage some risk-taking as people learn to lead. It develops better leaders if they have room to learn from mistakes. Call a relational, personable, authentic pastor, recognizing that those strengths will give you a pastor who will be weak in other areas. Allow for that. Talk about how you accept that. Make sure that pastor is passionate about the Gospel above all, and loves to talk about Gods Grace and living it out, while acknowledging fallenness. If the person has gifts in communicating with visual helps, that is a bonus. The willingness to challenge people gently but firmly is also needed. A “people pleaser” pastor will not do you well in the long run, though some would love that. Facilitate more multi-generational activities with bible learning or service emphasis. Call out and expose toxic negativity and encourage healthy, real positivity. And, now and then, dream a little and see what God reveals and calls you to.

Shalom and Serenity,  
In Kingdom service  
Pastor Pete