

Dear Covenant Partners and Friends of First Pres,

In August 2021, Session approved a new Vision Frame. This Vision Frame gives anchor points, common language, and definitions that direct our path as we envision and embrace life together as a church family. It reaffirmed our mission “to invite all people to say yes to Jesus with their whole lives,” and introduced new language to focus our identity:

*Encounter God Through Worship  
Equip One Another In Discipleship  
Engage The World In Mission*

As a way to discern God’s best as we lean into 2 of the 3 E’s - Encounter God Through Worship and Equip One Another in Discipleship - we held Congregational Conversations in November. In these Conversations, more than 200 people gathered in small groups to listen and share as we discussed thoughts about gathered worship and discipleship opportunities. In December and January, the Encounter & Equip Task Force (the Session team that organized and implemented the Congregational Conversations) read through each word of the written forms submitted from the Conversations.

Below are (1) major themes we identified in the Congregational Conversations, and (2) next steps in this ongoing process of discernment.

### Overarching Themes

*These themes speak to all areas of our life together, including all 3 E’s.*

- **We want to be a congregation united by our love for and focus on Jesus.** We long to be a people grounded in the Word in our worshiping life and in the ways we are equipped as disciples.
- **The lives of our covenant partners are full and complex,** with commitments that pull them in a myriad of ways. While we want to make worship and discipleship opportunities as accessible as possible for people with full lives, we also know that your engagement will require you to make church a priority. The good news that we saw in the feedback is that when people prioritize *Encountering God Through Worship, Equipping One Another In Discipleship, and Engaging The World In Mission* it is a source of significant spiritual growth. Thus, an overarching theme we saw is a **desire for our community to prioritize church even in the busyness of life, and to lean in together to live out the 3 E’s.**
- We long for a church that **warmly welcomes** people, not only to visit, but to belong. We want our church culture to be marked by inviting and enfolding people into community.
- There is an interest in and/or concern for how church leadership and the congregation are investing in and considering **the Next Generation**, including youth, college, and young adults as we make decisions.

## Themes of “Encounter God Through Worship”

*These themes speak to all areas of our life together, including all 3 E's.*

- **We love to sing together!** Music is an important way for our congregation to Encounter God Through Worship.
- **We desire increased congregational participation** in the worship services, highlighting intergenerational engagement and involvement from youth and children.
- **There are questions about what makes a service “contemporary” and what makes it “ancient modern,”** as well as questions about which best engages people.
- **When it comes to worship styles, service times, and number of services, our congregation is varied and diverse in what we value.** There seem to be three basic, different threads of thought:
  1. For me, worship style and/or venue matters a whole lot. I find strength and unity in the diversity of our worship expressions and am deeply moved with love for God through the particular music style/venue I prefer.
  2. For me, worshipping together as one church family matters a whole lot. I most value being gathered as one body, regardless of style or venue. I am deeply moved when I see the family of God, in all our diversity, worshipping together in one place and time.
  3. For me, encountering God is enhanced when I am able to worship in various styles. I am not only flexible and adaptable with worship style and schedule, I long to be able to move back and forth between different expressions.

**In summary, when it comes to worship preferences, we affirm that our congregation highly values a diversity of worship styles and musical expressions.**

## Themes of “Equip One Another In Discipleship”

*These themes specifically speak to discipleship.*

- People shared that they experienced **most spiritual growth through spiritual disciplines**, such as reading Scripture, studying, praying, and journeying with a friend.
- **Our congregation sees the need for clearer “pathways” into Equipping opportunities** that are personal and communicated often. This includes new small group opportunities and opportunities for discipleship outside of Sunday morning.
- **People shared a wide variety of barriers** that kept them from engaging in opportunities or being committed. This suggests a need to offer a variety of times and ways (both in-person and virtual) for people to engage, keeping in mind that one's personal commitment is still necessary to overcome these barriers.
- Spiritual growth and connection with others happens not only through discipleship opportunities but also through **engaging the world in mission** (leadership, serving, etc).

# **So, what are our next steps in this ongoing process of discernment?**

## **1. Incorporate the major themes of feedback into our existing rhythms.**

The purpose of the Congregational Conversations was to help us lean into 2 of our 3 E's: Encounter God Through Worship and Equip One Another In Discipleship. To that end, the themes from the Conversations are being put to work.

- The Session, which has access to all the raw information, will discuss and consider these themes when making major decisions.
- Session committees, such as Worship Committee and Discipleship Committee, are actively engaging with the themes specific to their areas.
- You may have already noticed some changes based on these themes. For example, one of the themes in worship was to increase lay participation. The worship leaders have already been working toward this, by including personal stories, or asking people of different generations to take part in leadership roles in the worship service.
- As another example, one of the themes in Discipleship is to create more and clear paths of engagement. The Discipleship Committee is getting ready to launch short-term Lent small groups and is working on creating new long-term small groups in the fall.

## **2. Make a decision about our Sunday schedule.**

Developing the Sunday schedule is the current work on which our Task Force is diligently focused. As we discern the Lord's leading, we have developed a set of criteria to guide our decision-making process:

- our Vision Frame (strategic plan for the next 3-5 years)
- Biblical and theological integrity
- themes from the Congregational Conversations
- staff experience and bandwidth
- a desire to invite our faith community into deeper love for and commitment to Jesus
- and above all, listening to the Holy Spirit through prayer

### **We are currently seeking committee and staff input.**

The Encounter & Equip Task Force has used the criteria above to develop schedule options. These options are being shared with the Worship Committee, Discipleship Committee, and the staff for feedback and input.

### **In coming weeks, a recommendation will to go to Session.**

After refining the options based on feedback from committees and staff, the Encounter & Equip Task Force will propose one or two schedule options to the Session. It is our hope that Session will begin discerning a specific worship schedule in late February or early March. When Session makes a decision about our worship and discipleship schedule, we will inform you with sufficient lead time before any changes are implemented. We also commit to share more about why the decision has been made.

No Sunday schedule solution will fully satisfy every goal, theme, or individual preference. But we hope and pray that as we seek the Lord together, we will all lean in, grateful that the Lord has called us together as a family, in our unity and in our diversity.

Yours in Christ,

### **The Encounter & Equip Task Force**

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