

Transition Time Update: Step 2 – Café Conversations Summary

2018-2-11

So what, you might ask, did we glean from the Café Conversations?

Approximately 230 people participated in the 7 Café Conversations which took place from November 2017 through January 2018. The work was guided by consultant Anna Tansi and her colleague Deb Clifford. Additionally, we all owe deep gratitude to the Café Conversation Team, the facilitators, the people wearing “funny hats” at coffee hour and our staff who all supported the effort over those months to make these gatherings effective and meaningful.

Café Conversations Design Team: Rev. Erica Thompson, Rev. John Collins, Holly DeYoung, Bart Halloran, Oliver Avery, Sharon Barrett, David Bradley, Michael Cass, Deb Clifford, Kathleen Graham, Cynthia Jaworski, Linda Kelly, Harvey Kelly, Anna Tansi, Janet Tracy, Linda Wayman, Wanda Williams-McCormack.

The Café Conversations were intended to give members of the congregation a voice on topics that we don't generally talk about in depth while at church, and yet are ever-present as we interact with one another. From the sharing of our beliefs and concerns during the *Sacred Circles* last summer, several common topics emerged.

The topics for these conversations were:

- ***Diversity & Inclusion***
- ***AHCC Governance & Communication and***
- ***Faith, Justice & Action***

Key Takeaways:

First, the work of our transition process (encompassing the Sacred Circles and the Café Conversations) has been effective in addressing our sense of loss, broken trust, confusion, and hopes for rebuilding our church. Acknowledging that our work is not done, the small group discussions with diverse gatherings of people have been informative and have broadened our awareness of the varied perspectives, deep care, and faith within our congregation. Good communication paired with personal engagement feels to be the road to rebuilding our trust of leadership and with one another; to strengthening our capacity for deep and difficult reflection and conversation, and for envisioning how we will move forward together.

Second, participants were overwhelmingly drawn to the Faith/Justice and Governance/Communication topics over the Diversity/Inclusivity topic in our Café Conversations expressing less concern with our inclusivity. And yet, within our AHCC community, people in the minority among us (people of color, LGBTQ, physically impaired, etc.) expressed feeling less fully embraced at AHCC, suggesting that we have more to do on how we live into our Open and Affirming beliefs.

Third, there was great hope expressed that AHCC can be a faith community in which both comfort and challenge are understood as essential needs on our spiritual journeys. There must be room for both. There was unanimity in the belief that, as Christians, we are called to be people who seek and do

justice, whether it be through charitable acts of kindness, or actions which address root causes of injustice.

Lastly, while we may never fully understand Rev. Laney's reasons for leaving, we shared that he was an extraordinarily gifted preacher and pastor who brought new energy to looking outward beyond our walls and doing justice work. And today, we are a better faith community for the energy that has gone into conversations between people with different viewpoints, and for the commitment we have shown to this continuing conversation about who we are called to be and how we will practice our faith as individuals and together.

A Summary of Key Points and Feedback

The following pages capture the essence of the conversations under the three separate topics.

Report Outs by Topic

Topic: Diversity + Inclusivity

Individual Experience	Importance to AHCC	How can we address this
	We have declared AHCC as Open and Affirming and we are continually challenged to grow in diversity and to live up to that statement.	AHCC can be a place of learning and support in a society struggling to understand the injustices that result from discrimination; a place where we learn to authentically accept and embrace others. Consider the difference between tolerance and acceptance.
		Be curious about differences and inquire with respect. Be willing to examine our own biases and tendencies. Be open to <u>and</u> committed to new ideas. Listen to others. Show others compassion.
Many people have experienced some type of discrimination based on age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, etc. People of color feel they are not seen/understood/accepted at AHCC. Those with disabilities feel left out. Sick and heartbroken by what we see happening across the country.	Silence in the face of hate, bias, injustice is the equivalent of complicity. We are called to do unto others as we would have done to us.	Be an ally when we witness unkindness and discrimination or bullying.
	The church could better reflect its neighborhood and city.	We need to build stronger ties to the Hartford and its people. Work with our neighbors and partner agencies to determine what will speak to them and make them feel a part of our faith community.
People are drawn to church with different needs and by different ministries at different times in their lives.	Emphasis on the younger generation or exclusive focus on certain ministries at the expense of others can leave people feeling left out.	Create space and atmosphere for the ministries to which people are drawn. Example: Caring ministries and ministries attending to issues of justice have equal value. Micah: To walk humbly, love kindness and do justice.
		Strengthen caring team and connections between members to enable the one-to-one caring which takes place naturally in the presence of fellowship.
		The two "I"s: Consider both the INTENT of our voices and actions, as well as the IMPACT. Be mindful about absolute position statements, as "right vs wrong" as messages can feel exclusionary and judgmental.

Topic: Governance + Communication / Transparency

Individual Experience	Importance to AHCC	How can we address this
Historically, AHCC felt like a well-run institution with strong leadership. Now we are uncertain.	Uncertainty diminishes trust in effective leadership.	Provide clarity of decision-making processes and leadership roles between clergy, lay leadership and congregation.
Lots of unanswered questions about staff departures, how decisions are made.	Knowledge builds trust. Trusting relationships empower effective leadership even when there are demands for privacy.	Be intentional about sharing information to help dispel rumors. Promote the channels for conversation with leaders.
Concern that affluence earned influence in church decision-making.		Be clear that affluence does not earn influence in decision-making. Be intentionally inclusive in nominating process. Always ask, "Who is not in the room?"
	We value the congregational model of mutually supportive leadership roles of deacons and clergy.	Provide mechanisms for supportive clergy relations with lay leaders and with the congregation. Provide mechanisms for constructive resolution when there are different perspectives between lay leaders and clergy. Cultivate compassionate and Christian ways of sharing different perspectives.
		Read AHCC communications and bylaws to understand our governance structure. Offer constructive participation.
		Ready ourselves to embrace new ordained leadership.
Engagement is not what it could be.	The congregation IS the church.	Promote ways (fellowship, mission, governance) to become engaged for new and old members of all ages and abilities. Focus on leadership and governance structure with new members.
There is so much good energy among the members of AHCC to heal, to move forward and grow.	Positive energy can help grow the church; strengthen our resolve to explore opportunities for growth and to gather our resources for growth.	Look for the "good" and "gossip on it." Focus energy on sharing and promoting the good and diligent work happening at AHCC. This will help to counter the negative thinking and help our community to heal and grow.

Topic: Faith + Justice

Individual Experience	Importance to AHCC	How can we address this
Faith is like an oxygen mask, sustaining us.	Our faith should unite us; we all belong to one another.	Focus upon the bedrock elements of our faith. Revisit the core statements of our faith and our mission statements to confirm and reaffirm what we believe God calls us to be.
At certain times our lives require refuge, solace and comfort, and in other times prompt us to stand up and step out and some to do smaller, quieter actions of justice.	AHCC desires to meet people where they are on their spiritual journeys and to support them along the way.	Affirm, celebrate and support people who live out their faith in different ways than our own. Recognize the need for both “challenge” and “comfort” along our faith journeys
Need to be more than a sanctuary. As people of faith, we recognize the need to be people of action; prevent injustice as well as helping victims of injustice.	Even so, we do not wish to be divided over the significance of either upstream justice-seeking work and downstream acts of charity and kindness, (Rosa Parks vs. Mother Teresa).	Understanding the issues of injustice requires inquiry and open mindedness. Create opportunities for small group discussion around important issues that can be brought forward to congregational action or individual understanding.
AHCC has become more diverse in the past 5 years.	Narrowly defined messages on social justice or political positions may lead to division.	Faithful study of the Bible and exploration of its teachings will speak openly to people with varying viewpoints. Affirm and celebrate preaching that inspires people to live as Jesus would have us live; that uses scripture to expose our blind spots and reveals implications for today’s issues and inequities.
	Asylum Hill Congregational Church is located in a city with great need. Our founding lies in the needs of its people.	Build stronger ties to the city and its people. First work WITH our neighbors to identify needs within the surrounding community upon which we can be aligned and focused.
“Politics in Worship” has divided our congregation.	Avoid division within the congregation, without muzzling the minister. We want to be challenged <u>and</u> comforted. Challenge will help AHCC be and remain relevant in the lives of our members and will help to draw new members to church in a culture that is seeing less value in the local church...	Know that challenge is healthy. Issues and new ideas which may bring controversy require small group conversation paired with sermons, which promote inquiry, reflection and discussion. The pulpit is a position of authority and its authority can be used to inspire, educate, challenge, and comfort.
	People from varying socio-economic backgrounds can have different viewpoints on social justice issues.	Learn and affirm the ways AHCC serves our local and wider communities. Seek to understand other viewpoints. Explore ways to work side-by-side with others to cultivate greater understanding.

General Feedback on the Café Conversations:

- Optimism and hope!
- A feeling of togetherness ... making new friends
- Revealed the wide spectrum of backgrounds, education and experience that makes up our church
- The small groups opened windows to broader understanding ... they should continue regularly
- Broadened my perspective on why we all come to church
- Open, honest, heartfelt sharing and listening took place
- These conversations were held by a very committed group of AHCC members eager to make AHCC more vibrant, more welcoming
- The format empowers and enables every voice in our congregation ... they prepare us for harder and deeper conversations to come
- Future small groups could consist of more diverse perspectives: ages and ethnicity
- Glad to hear that there are many among us with similar views on the issues that matter, and yet know there will always be disagreement on the “how” we live out our mission
- We need to be prayerful about changing ourselves and the culture of our community
- I may never understand the complexities of how we arrived at this point
- AHCC feels like a microcosm of the world around us
- The chasm we experienced by Rev. Laney’s resignation is being bridged by people coming together and listening to one another
- Rev Laney was a wonderful preacher and pastor. His focus drew new members and supported a yearning for “faith in action and in the public realm” among us.

Additional Ideas to Discuss:

- Rumors versus Reality
- Bullying – how do we define it?
- Marketing / Promoting and Growing the Church: new focus on distinct areas: Hospitality | New Members
- Member engagement needs more conversation
- Making more efforts to get to know other members
- Launching more Christian Sharing Groups
- Making Diaconate Agendas and Minutes more readily available
- The desired characteristics of our next settled pastor
- How does the church become relevant again in our society?
- How can we support our neighborhood?
- Support of our affinity groups like SUSO
- Conduct more forums and informal conversations about challenging issues
- Cultivating of new leaders
- Methods for managing differences of opinion between clergy and lay leaders
- Should politicians ever speak during election years at AHCC?
- How to include new members on committees
- Inclusivity awareness: example ... make up shades for people of color in Boar’s Head
- Improving member-to-member connections
- Making website easier to navigate
- Deeper understanding of “social justice”
- Injustices of CT education system
- Understanding the UCC: as a connection to our sister churches, as a resource
- How do we really connect with people when they are so focused on their devices? Is more digital communication with them the answer?