



# Vital Church Assessment

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Bethel United Church of Christ  
Evansville, IN

10/13/23

CONVERGENCE

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# OUR PARTNERSHIP

Convergence partnered with Bethel United Church of Christ in 2023 for Assessment and Consultation services. This report contains the data from your church assessment, an analysis of the data, and creative thinking about what the church could consider as they determine their future.

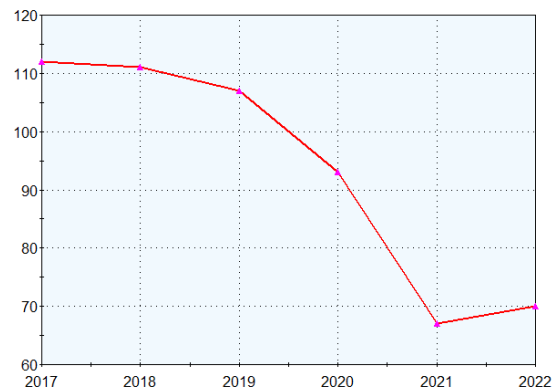
## CHURCH DATA

### MEMBERSHIP AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Bethel UCC has approximately 183 people participating in worship or other church activities and/or supporting the church with time or funds at least annually. This is up slightly from 175 in 2018.

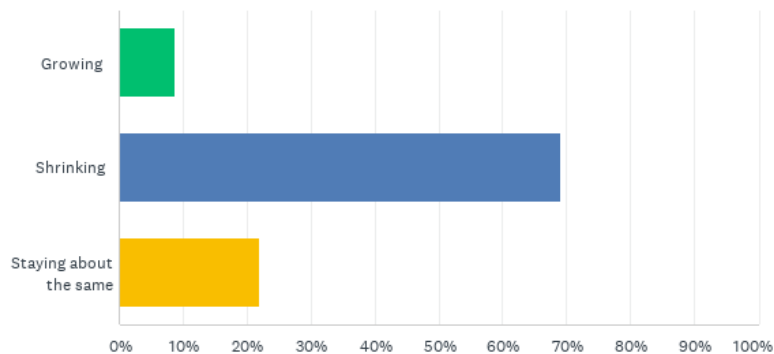
The church has 1 worship service a week. Sunday worship has an average of 71 people attending face-to-face and 21 Youtube views per week. In-person attendance has decreased over the past 5 years but may be stabilizing or increasing now.

In 2022, you added 9 new participants, the most in any year since 2016, but this is not enough yet to make up for the year over year decline in worship attendance.



When asked, "Do you think your congregation is growing, shrinking, or staying about the same:"

### Q14 Do you think your congregation is:



There is a sense among survey respondents that your congregation is shrinking. Your sanctuary likely seems much emptier on Sundays than before the pandemic.

In addition, many people attend less frequently than in past decades due to the demands of modern life (with many averaging once a month rather than once a week these days) which contributes to a sense of a shrinking congregation. You would need approximately 300-400 people connected with a congregation to average 100 in worship these days.

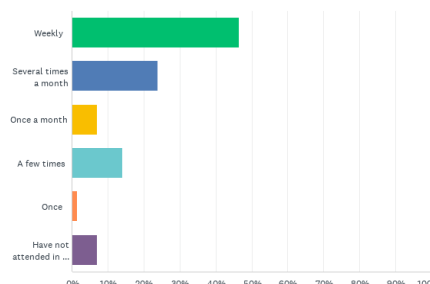
The majority of your survey respondents (76%) are attending at least once a month. 46% report attending weekly.

Your congregation primarily participates face to face, with online being an add-on. 39% have never participated online, suggesting that although you worshiped outdoors most weeks during the pandemic, this group could have become severely disconnected from non-worship activities during that time.

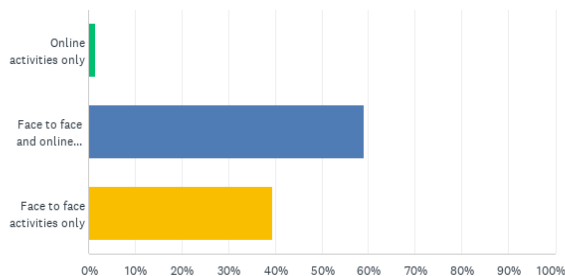
Bethel holds approximately 42 non-worship activities per month, with about 155 participants. These include:

- Second Sunday Celebration
- Adult Basketball, Youth Basketball
- Friday Friends
- Teams: Worship, Building & Grounds, Church Development, Administration, Mission, Leadership Council
- Choirs: Chancel, Bell, Youth
- Iron Men Group
- Youth Group
- Adult Book Study
- Children's Church
- ASP Work Camp

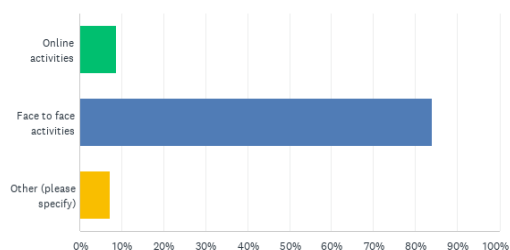
Q2 How often have you attended worship or another church event (face to face or online) in the last six months?



Q6 During my time as a part of this congregation, I have participated in:



Q7 In the past year, I have most often engaged with this congregation through:



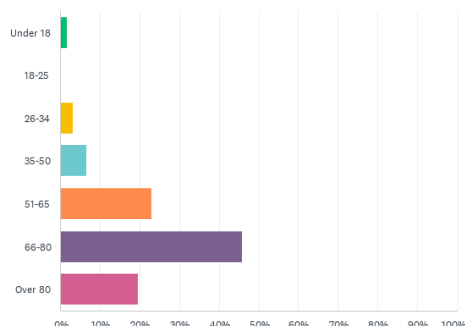
- Nine to Dine Groups
- Vacation Bible School
- Stockwell Elem.Volunteers
- Ladies Lunch Bunch
- Wise Group
- Grief Group
- Youth Musical
- Adult Sunday School Class

## CURRENT DEMOGRAPHICS

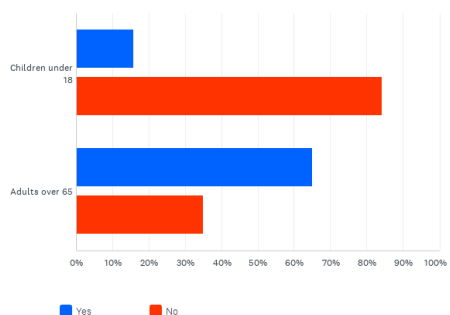
The majority of your survey respondents (66%) are over 65. Only 11% are under 50. 65% of survey households contain adults over 65. 16% of survey households contain children under 18. This mirrors the demographics reported on the member survey. According to your leader survey, this mostly mirrors your congregational demographics once we factor in the 14% of participants under 18, only 1 of which completed the survey.

However, those under 50 may be underrepresented in the survey results, so it is worth making sure this group is a part of any visioning conversations. Your governing body is all over 50 years old. Ensuring representation by youth and younger adults on this body will help your decision-making reflect all the voices of your congregation.

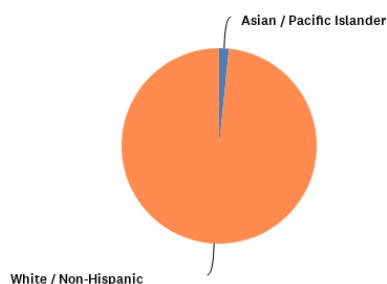
Q39 How old are you?



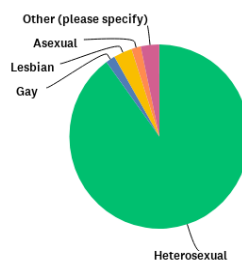
Q42 Does your household contain?



Q40 Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)



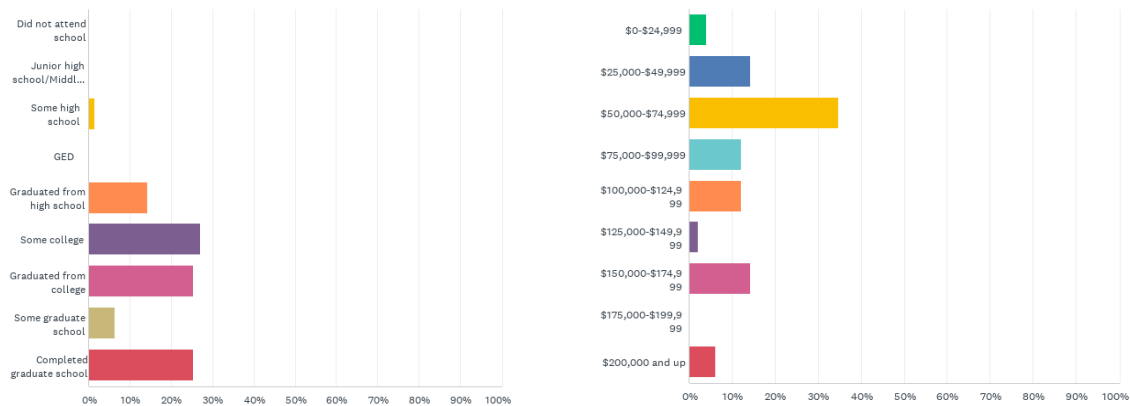
Q43 Would you identify yourself as:



Your survey respondents are predominantly White/Non-Hispanic (98%). 2% of respondents describe themselves as Asian/Pacific Islander. This mirrors the demographics reported on the leader survey. 90% of your respondents identified as heterosexual. 2% identified as gay, 3% as lesbian, 2% Asexual, and 3% as other. Survey respondents identified as 77% female and 23% male.

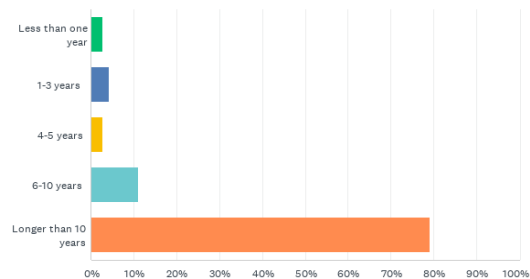
Your survey respondents are varied in education levels. Survey respondents are primarily middle income, but diverse in income levels.

Q41 What is the highest level of education you have completed? Q45 What is your approximate average household income?



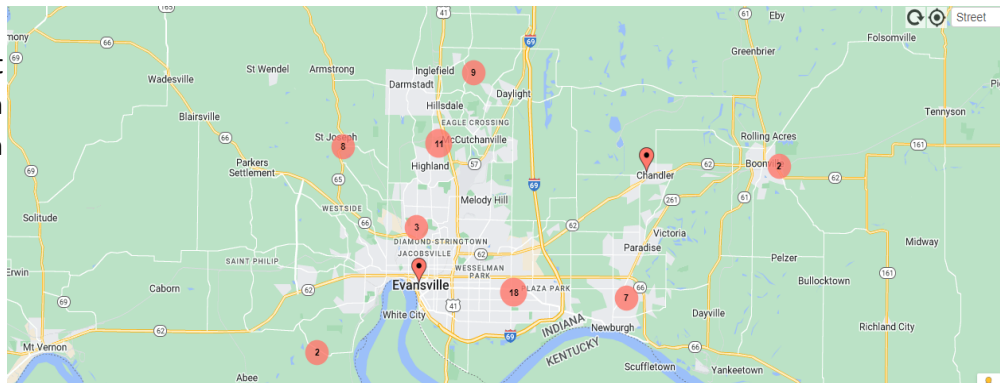
Most of your survey respondents have participated for longer than 10 years.

Q1 How long have you attended worship or other events (online or face to face) with this congregation?

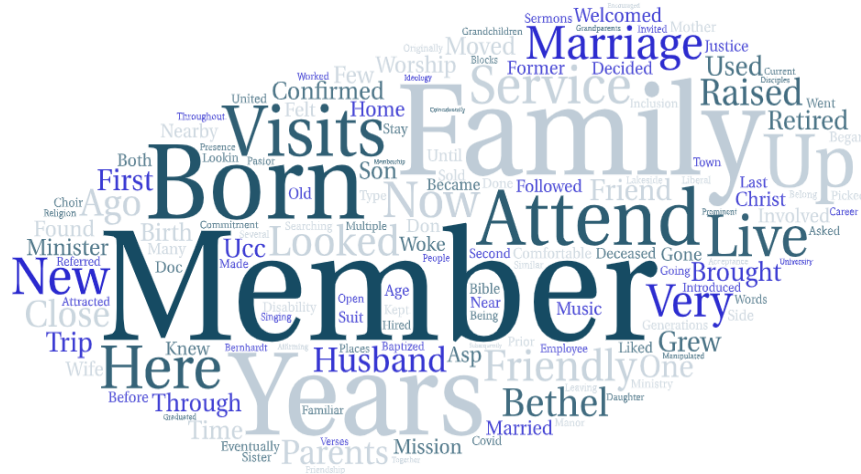


Your congregation is geographically dispersed, with the majority of survey respondents (54%) living 6+ miles away. 21% live over 10 miles away.

This can make it difficult to have good in-person attendance at church events.



When asked, “How did you come to be involved with this church?” your members responded with these words:



Survey respondents were largely positive in their perceptions of the congregation and its situation. Over 90% of respondents agree that your congregation:

- 5

Over 80% of respondents agree that your congregation:

- Is like a close-knit family
- Is spiritually vital and alive
- Has a clear mission and purpose
- Engages all the senses in worship
- Has worship that makes them think

On the site visit, members shared a few strengths as well:

- The endowment which has allowed them to continue to have a full-time pastor, well maintained property, and programing.
- The new Bethel Buddies preschool which is also able to offer full day childcare.
- The facilities and the music program.
- They also felt the Open & Affirming Covenant was an important change the church has made in recent years.

When asked, “When you think about the next 2 years of this church, what do you hope you'll be able to say about what you all have done together as a congregation?,” your members responded with these words:



There was a strong impulse to engage more people in the life of the congregation and have more engagement/impact in the community.

Potential struggles include in the following areas:

- Enthusiasm is mixed. Only 50% are excited about where the church is heading.
- Intergenerational connections may need attention. Almost 50% do not believe your congregation is a source of learning for children and youth. Only 57% believe that you successfully engage people of all ages



When asked, “What do you see or sense could hold you back as a congregation?” your members responded with these words:



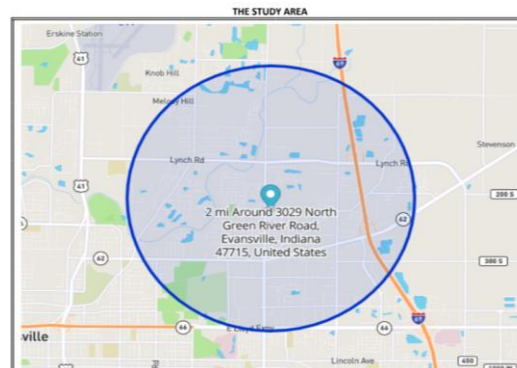
Respondents are concerned that your average age, declining numbers, and resistance to change are current challenges.

Many of these challenges are not uncommon to congregations such as yours.

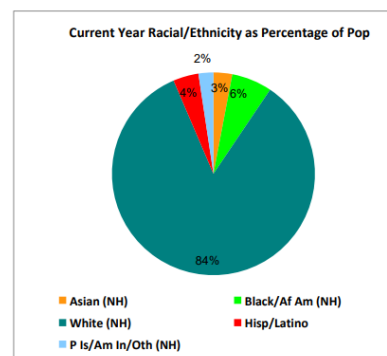
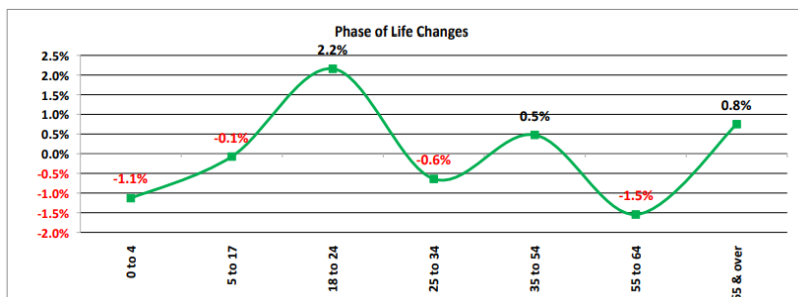
## YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

2022 population	~16,966
2027 projection	17,361

The population in your area is growing slowly over time. The estimated 2022 population within the study area is 16,966. The 2027 projection would see the area grow by 395 to a total population of 17,361.

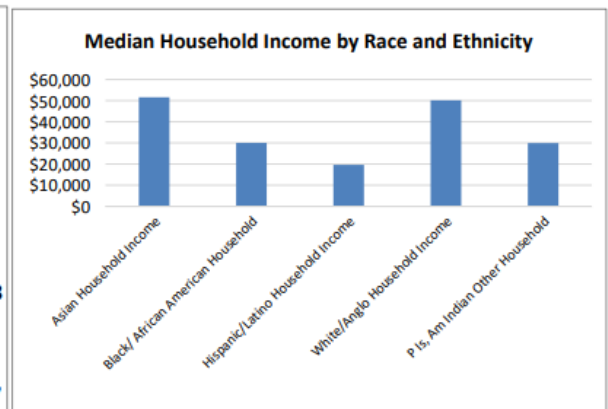
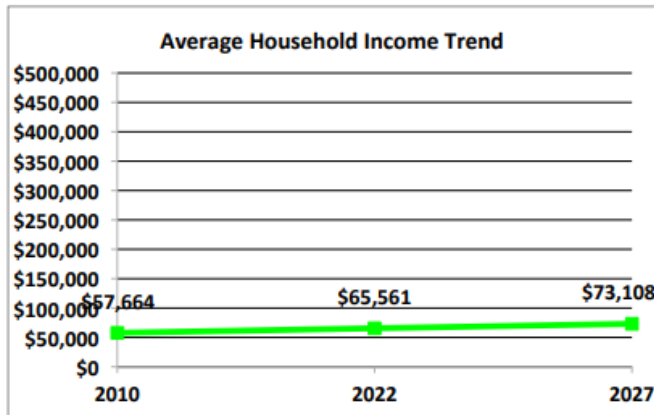


Family households are growing as fast as the population suggesting that the increasing population per household is from additional children. The fastest growing age group in your area is 18-25.



Your area is predominantly White/Non-Hispanic, but is more diverse than your congregation.

Your area has an average income that would be classified as middle-income, but there is significant income inequality between racial groups.



Your neighbors have largely conservative values, but some that are in common with your congregation, such as valuing tolerance and diversity, concern for the environment, and protecting same-sex marriage.

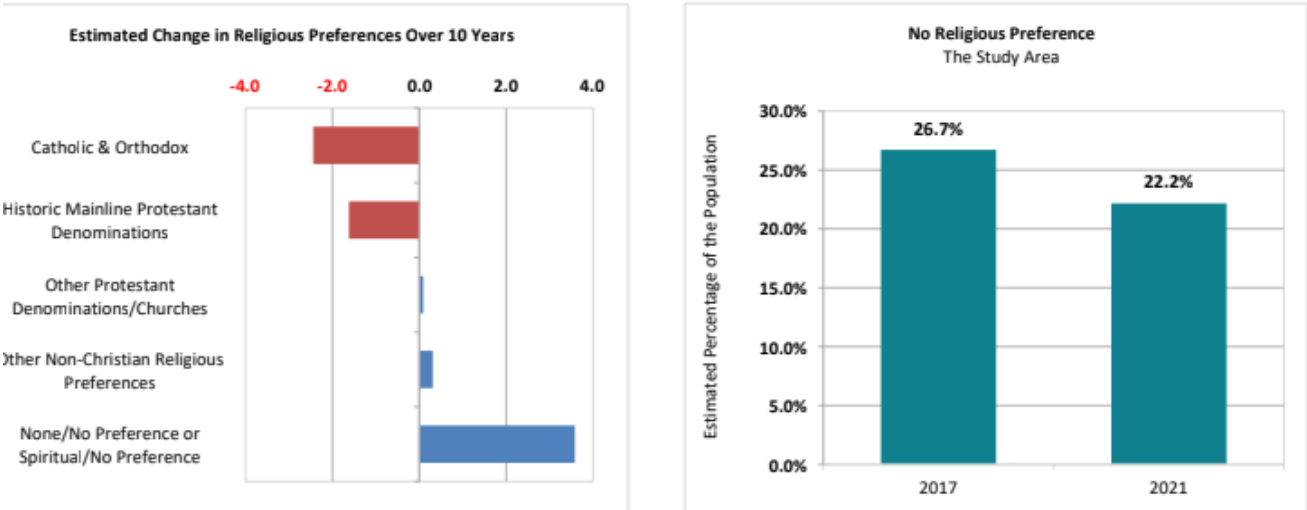
Ranking	Concern	Ratio	Strength
1	I believe strong families are key to social stability.	19.6	Extremely Strong Agreement
2	I believe America has a moral responsibility to be a force for good in the world.	9.6	Extremely Strong Agreement
3	I believe tolerance is necessary for social peace and wellbeing.	8.6	Extremely Strong Agreement
4	I believe that the US is losing its place of world leadership.	5.5	Very Strong Agreement
5	I have great hope for the future of my own community (i.e. neighborhood, village, town).	4.0	Very Strong Agreement
6	I believe children should be raised by a mother and father only, if possible.	3.7	Strong Agreement
7	I believe the science that says humans are affecting the climate of the planet (i.e. climate change).	3.6	Strong Agreement
8	I believe we must be good stewards of the environment even if it means restricting natural resource development.	3.5	Strong Agreement
9	I believe our society must give more attention to accomplishing economic justice.	3.2	Strong Agreement
10	I believe greater emphasis must be given to embracing our ethnic diversity.	3.1	Strong Agreement
11	I believe the US should pursue avenues to stop illegal immigration.	3.0	Strong Agreement
12	I believe some form of amnesty program for illegal immigrants who have been working and living in this country should be implemented.	2.3	Strong Agreement
13	I believe same-sex marriage must remain legal and protected.	2.2	Strong Agreement
14	I believe asking the rich to pay a higher tax rate is a way to establish economic justice.	2.2	Strong Agreement

While your neighbors do not have strong religious beliefs, they have some in common with your congregation. Your neighbors' top religious beliefs are in a loving God and that people in church do not behave as Jesus would behave.

Beliefs about God in Rank Order			
Ranking	Concern	Ratio	Strength
1	God is love and invites the world into a loving relationship.	5.7	Very Strong Agreement
2	I have a relationship with one living God.	3.2	Strong Agreement

Beliefs about Jesus in Rank Order			
Ranking	Concern	Ratio	Strength
1	People in the church do not behave as Jesus would behave.	6.8	Very Strong Agreement
2	Belief in Jesus does not require participation in a church.	5.0	Very Strong Agreement
3	Jesus was both divine and human.	4.8	Very Strong Agreement
4	Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah.	3.5	Strong Agreement
5	Jesus actually rose from the dead as the Bible teaches.	3.3	Strong Agreement
6	Jesus rules now and always as Lord of heaven and earth.	3.0	Strong Agreement
7	I have a personal relationship with Jesus.	2.3	Strong Agreement

Your neighbors are also not very likely to have a religious preference or participate in a congregation. The segment that identifies as none/no preference has declined during the pandemic, but is projected to increase over the next decade.



For those who do not participate in a religious congregation, the top reasons were that religious people/organizations are too judgmental, too focused on money, and/or untrustworthy.

Among those who might consider participating in a religious congregation, they are looking for:

Top 10 of 25 Reasons for people outside a religious congregation or community for not participating			
Ranking	Concern	Ratio	Strength of Reason
1	Religious People too Judgmental	3.0	Strong Reason
2	Religion too focused on money	2.9	Strong Reason
3	Don't trust organized religion	2.6	Strong Reason
4	Don't trust religious leaders	2.5	Strong Reason
5	Don't believe in God	2.2	Strong Reason
6	Disillusionment with religion	2.1	Strong Reason
7	Wasn't relevant to my life	2.0	Strong Reason

Ministry or Program Recommendations Based Upon This Study Area			
Preferences are ranked by ratio of important to not important			
Ranking	Program	Ratio	Strength of Preference
1	Warm and friendly encounters	5.7	Very Strong Preference
2	Quality sermons	3.4	Strong Preference

While strong community connections are not a magic bullet to grow a church, they are a mark of a vital church. Creating distinctive initiatives to add value to the lives of those in your neighborhood, will help your congregation be known to those who may be seeking a Christian congregation. Being creative on how to meet any unmet needs of those in your community should also be a priority. Keep in mind - all needs are not material, and those who may seem to have more than enough fiscal and physical wealth may still have deep spiritual and relational needs.

Your neighbors' biggest life concerns include:

Top 15 of 44 Life Concerns			
Ranked by greatest concerns			
Ranking	Concern	Ratio	Strength of Concern
1	Ongoing impact of COVID-19	18.9	Extremely Strong Concern
2	Social & political tensions/discord	7.6	Very Strong Concern
3	Health crisis/illness	3.8	Strong Concern
4	Racism/racial injustice	3.7	Strong Concern
5	Financing the future/savings/retirement	3.4	Strong Concern
6	Fear of the future or the unknown	3.4	Strong Concern
7	Losing weight/diet issues	2.7	Strong Concern
8	Personal health problems	2.6	Strong Concern
9	Illegal immigration	2.5	Strong Concern
10	Quality of children's education	2.4	Strong Concern

Your neighbors can primarily be classified in older Mosaic segments with names such as Golden Year Guardians (16.9%), Autumn Years (9.1%), Thriving Boomers (8.6%), Blue Sky Boomers (5.9%), and Booming with Confidence (2.5%). In short, they look a lot like your congregation. On the site visit, people shared with our consultant that there are a lot of seniors living in complexes around the church. Loneliness is a major problem.

There are also significant segments of singles and younger folks as well. Significant Singles (10.8%) and Singles and Starters (8.6%) are the largest of these.

Mosaic Segments		
K40 Significant Singles - Bohemian Groove	867	10.8%
J34 Autumn Years - Suburban Sophisticates	725	9.1%
E20 Thriving Boomers - No Place Like Home	687	8.6%
Q64 Golden Year Guardians - Established in Society	617	7.7%
L42 Blue Sky Boomers - Rooted Flower Power	474	5.9%
Q63 Golden Year Guardians - Footloose and Family Free	471	5.9%
O51 Singles and Starters - Digitally Savvy	469	5.9%
B09 Flourishing Families - Family Fun-tastic	318	4.0%
Q62 Golden Year Guardians - Enjoying Retirement	260	3.3%
O54 Singles and Starters - Influenced by Influencers	216	2.7%
D15 Suburban Style - Sport Utility Families	204	2.6%
I31 Family Union - Hard Working Values	204	2.6%
O55 Singles and Starters - Family Troopers	202	2.5%
C11 Booming with Confidence - Sophisticated City Dwellers	201	2.5%

Meeting the needs of those neighbors may not end up with them attending worship, but is an important part of being a congregation grounded in the place where you are located. Such connections also generate the goodwill needed for community financial support of your congregation and its work, which is rapidly becoming an important segment of the financial picture for congregations.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In several recent cases, the majority of donations for capital campaigns to support historic church buildings came from outside the congregation (Partners for Sacred Places). Community connections and goodwill are essential for this kind of community financial support to occur.

To read more about the people that make up your community, see the reports in this folder: [Mission Insite Demographic Reports](#).

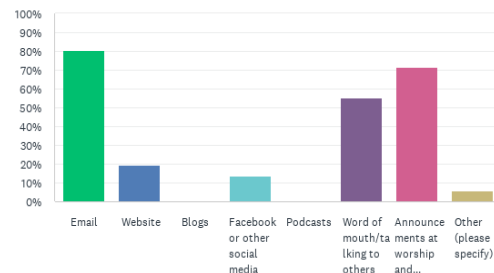
## NEARBY CONGREGATIONS

People in Bethel United Church of Christ have many churches to choose from. There are 10 other churches of your denomination in your larger community. Churches in your area with similar values to yours – Welcoming & Affirming of LGBTQ, Traditional Worship, politically moderate, aspire to intergenerational, mission oriented (service beyond our walls) respectful of interfaith – include St. Lucas UCC, the UU Church of Evansville, First Presbyterian, Methodist Temple, Old North UMC, Aldersgate UMC, and Bethlehem UCC. To grow, Bethel United Church of Christ will have to consider whether it has a unique mission and vision, one compelling enough to set it apart from all the other churches in its area, as well as how it communicates that mission and vision to the community. However, this wonderful tapestry of welcoming churches also provides great opportunities for collaboration and shared ministries.

## COMMUNICATIONS

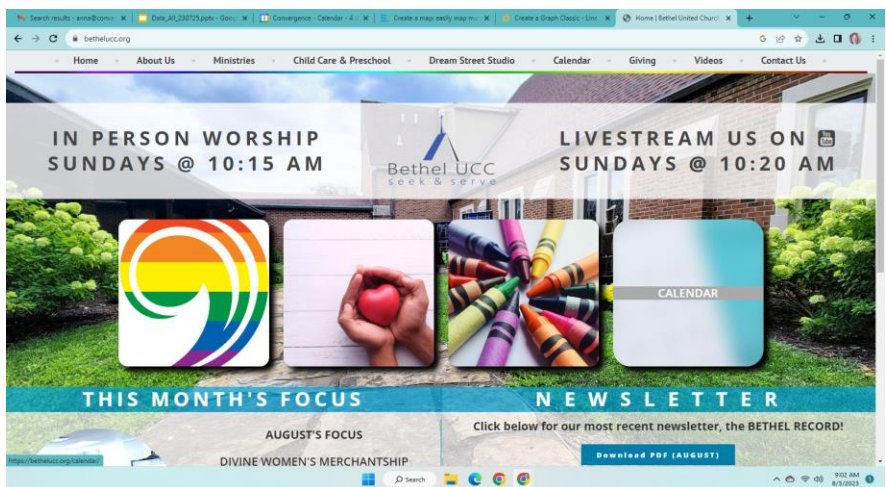
Bethel United Church of Christ communicates regularly using email, a website, and Facebook or other social media. The most common way survey respondents get information about your church is through email, followed by announcements and word of mouth.

Q33 How do you most often hear about church announcements and events? (Check all that apply)



The website is older in style. All links appear to be working. A refresh to a more modern church website style might be helpful to reach those looking for a congregation like yours.

Your Facebook is up to date. More pictures and posts about





the life of the church other than worship videos can help seekers get to know your church before visiting.

Your worship videos on Youtube and linked on your website/Facebook are clear and give a good idea of what to expect if attending worship. If you have the capacity, more photos or video of the worshipers or other scenes of church life would add a feeling of community.

Keeping all communications formats fresh looking and up to date is a great way to be welcoming to those seeking a church and to engage your members and those in your community in the programs of the church.

## EXTERNAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We at Convergence believe a vital church is instrumental in changing their community for the better. Bethel United Church of Christ is an engaged congregation!

The church has identified priority areas for community impact:

- Substandard housing
- Child education
- Musical arts

The impact is evaluated by looking at housing built and/or improved, volunteers involved in education activities, number of youth involved in musical arts. ~25 people from the congregation worked on at least one of these issues in 2022.

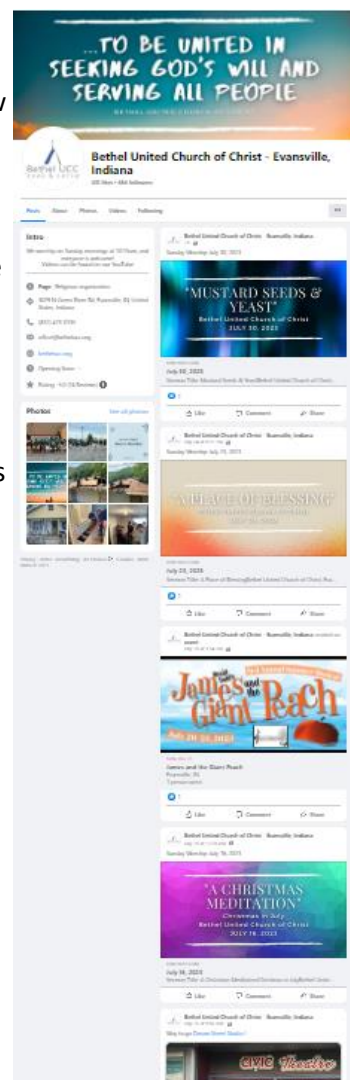
Bethel UCC participated in:

- 6 collaborations with other congregations or organizations in your local community
- 7 advocacy efforts for policies and programs on your priority issues
- 5 provisions of fiscal/material/facilities support on these issues
- 2 opportunities for adults in your congregation to learn about the issues
- 3 interfaith or intercultural experiences in your community/region
- 3 public actions such as vigils, protests, press conferences
- 10 sermons on these or other social issues were preached in 2022

Your efforts in 2022 reached 175 individuals who are not members of your congregation. 12% of the church budget goes to external organizations. You raised \$80,000 for a Habitat House in honor of a veteran who had passed on.

Your members are constantly volunteering in church and community. In 2022 alone:

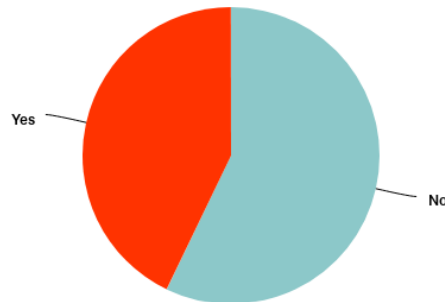
- 44 survey respondents reported volunteering almost 4000 hours in church activities
- 38 survey respondents reported volunteering almost 3750 hours in community settings







Q35 During the past 2 years, has your congregation experienced any disagreements or conflicts?



If there are still a few people in your congregation with less healthy behaviors during conflict, it could be worth working together to learn more about healthy communications and transforming church conflict. 82% reported no training in these areas in the last 5 years.

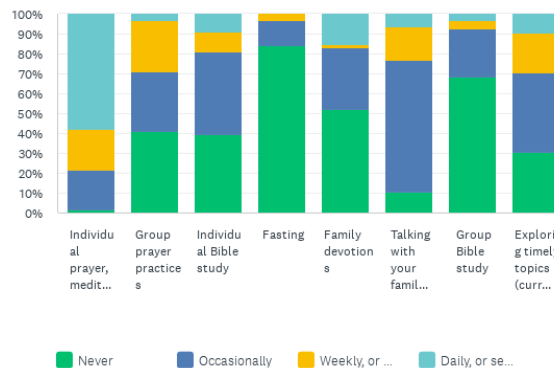
Any congregation working to grow or renew could benefit from healthy conflict skills. Perhaps those who have been trained as healthy conflict could encourage other participants to take a conflict course, or you could hold one just for your congregation. This could be a very beneficial part of the process as you all discern your next steps.

## SPIRITUAL LIFE

Growing and renewing a church requires a deep engagement with spiritual practices. Bethel United Church of Christ regularly promotes group Bible study and exploring timely topics in light of faith. The church occasionally promotes religious practices such as group Bible study. Others are only promoted occasionally, like individual and group prayer, individual Bible study, and exploring timely topics in light of faith.

Members who responded to the survey indicate that the most common spiritual practices in your community are individual prayer, meditation, or devotions, family devotions, and

Q23 In the last 6 months, how often have you engaged in these personal and family religious practices?



exploring timely topics in light of faith. However, you can see that for many, the only practice that is regular in their lives is individual prayer.

Group prayer, individual Bible study, family devotions, talking with family about faith, group Bible study, and exploring timely topics in light of faith are only practiced occasionally or never practiced at all by the majority of respondents.

Bethel United Church of Christ may exhibit a typical challenge in the mainline church today. We are great at service but can be weaker in areas of personal and spiritual growth. Any church facing significant work ahead, as all are due to the pandemic, would be well-served to look for opportunities to expand your spiritual development experiences but do so in a way that honors busy lives, commuting realities and short attention spans. A deep well of spirituality can carry members through many challenges and help them engage in healthy ways when things seem hard.

## FINANCES AND FACILITIES

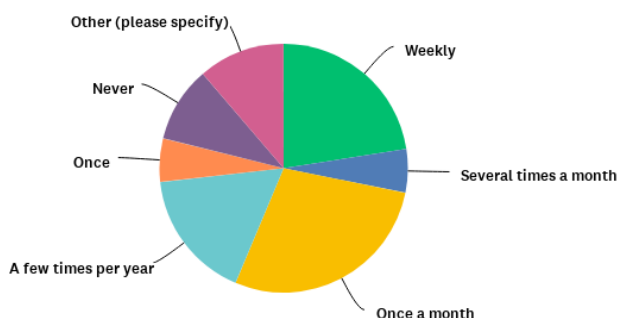
### FINANCES

Your budget for 2022 was \$971,903 and your tithes/offerings were \$215,582. The gap was made up with other income of almost \$670,000, but we understand this was an unusual year. Your leader comments indicate that your budget is currently sustainable without depleting your endowment.

Your average monthly giving is ~\$18,000. Divided by the approximate number of adults connected to your congregation, this is about \$120 per person per month. This is lower than what is typical for a church of your size and budget in the US. The average per person giving for churches like yours average tithe is \$200 per person per month.

Q3 How often have you donated financially to this congregation in the last year?

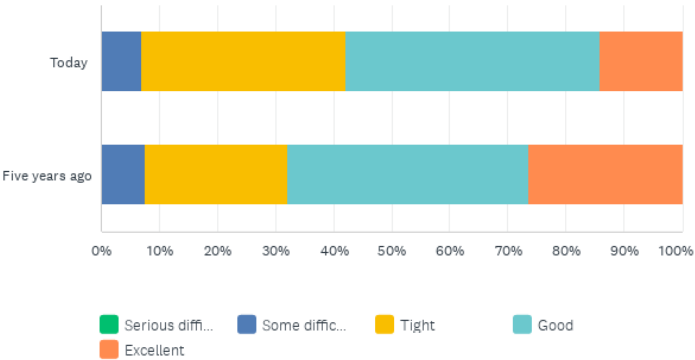
Most common (28%) was giving once a month, and 89% were giving regularly. 10% did not give in the past year.



There is a sense among survey respondents that your finances are tighter than 5 years ago, but the majority still see your finances as good/excellent.

Q34 Overall, how would you describe your congregation's financial health?

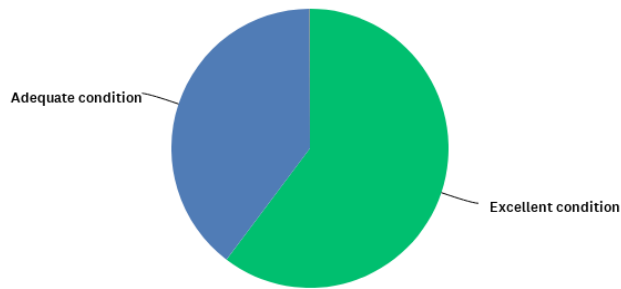
Vital churches have giving that sustains their normal operations and use their assets for impact in their community and world. One way to increase this ratio of gifts to budget is, of course, to grow your congregation. Another way is to increase the giving of your present members. A third way is to engage those in the greater community who support the work your church is doing in spirit to offer their financial support as well. We offer coaching and partnerships that can potentially help you take giving to your congregation to higher levels of sustainability, and would be happy to talk to you about these options.



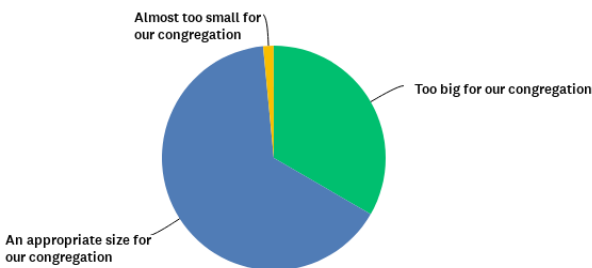
FACILITIES

Bethel United Church of Christ has facilities that survey respondents perceive as in good condition.

Q31 Our facilities are in:



Q32 Our facilities are:



Most believe they are an adequate size for your congregation.

On visiting your campus, our consultant reports:

The Bethel UCC church campus is located on a busy road with a mix of commercial properties, apartment complexes and churches. The building is attractive with a large electronic sign. There are at least 100 paved parking spaces. The buildings date to the 1980's but from all appearances inside and outside they are well maintained.

The church shares children ministry space with the Bethel Buddies Preschool. The school is operated by the church and is currently running at capacity with a waiting list. There is a nice outdoor playground. There is a large gymnasium with spaces for youth ministry and some of that space occupied by the Dream Street Studio.

The sanctuary is a mix of Classical German architecture features like the altar and organ in the balcony, with a good sound system and large audio screens. At worship when our consultant visited, there was a creatively decorated altar.

The church has a meeting room with its own restroom and kitchenette. That could be used for a variety of purposes including Brides, funerals, and groups of up to 10. The church has a commercial kitchen and a fellowship hall that seats at least 100 people. The building is handicap accessible and the church could be a candidate to be certified as an A2A (Accessible to All) congregation by the UCC.

There is also a substantial Solar Panel installation that provides support to the church operations. There is also substantial open land of several acres in the rear of the property that could be re-imagined for missional purposes.

Continue to be attentive to your space. Make sure it is clean, well-repaired, smells good (ask a stranger to come and tell you the truth, we develop a tolerance to smells over time), and is clearly marked as to restrooms, elevators, and other necessary spaces. All of this will ensure your welcome to those in your space is as warm in practice as it is intended.



## CONGREGATIONAL WELCOME

Worship is one of the first encounters many people have with your community. Our consultant observed that during your worship service, communion was well done with people coming forward to receive. The music was outstanding, particularly the violinist, soloist, and choir. Noted that the choir (12) was younger in average age than the congregation.

In terms of congregational welcome:

- 99% believe you want new members
- 90% believe you want to be racially and culturally diverse
- Over 90% believe you are welcoming to people of all races, all sexualities and genders, and those with disabilities.
- 76% welcome new people that are present for worship.
- 68% say that you love the enthusiasm of people with new ideas.

However, only 52% say it is easy to join existing church groups. In talking with people during the site visit, our consultant observed that the church has some good small groups but they have been together for awhile, hard for new people to join any except for the choir. You may need to create new groups (lunch groups, study groups, craft groups) and sunset some of the older ones to be as welcoming as possible.

Our consultant observed during the site visit that few people were wearing name tags. This makes it hard for new people to get to know others in the congregation. Could the church move back to using one-time name tags to make welcome easier?

Several people with walkers and canes had difficulty negotiating the pews. We recommend doing some pew cuts to make seating more accessible.

Several survey comments also mentioned areas that may need attention.

- The cliques that continue to ignite other members.
- The cliques and lack of real HONEST care for fellow members.
- Not treating others the way Christ would.
- Lack of acceptance of each other.
- We need to be more visible with our O & A commitment. People have been hesitant to fly an O & A flag. We are in a conservative community and there is fear of angry reactions.

Living up to your desire for growth with larger numbers of church members trained and ready to roll out the welcome by greeting new people and welcoming them into existing groups will make a huge difference in the perception of welcome by those who visit.

## OPENNESS TO CHANGE

In areas relating to openness to change, survey respondents indicated:

- Over 70% believe your church embraces change and regularly does new things in worship.
- However, only about half (52%) believe that your members are willing to change to achieve your goals.
- Only 57% believe new ideas are always welcome.
- Only 43% believe members are always willing to try something new.

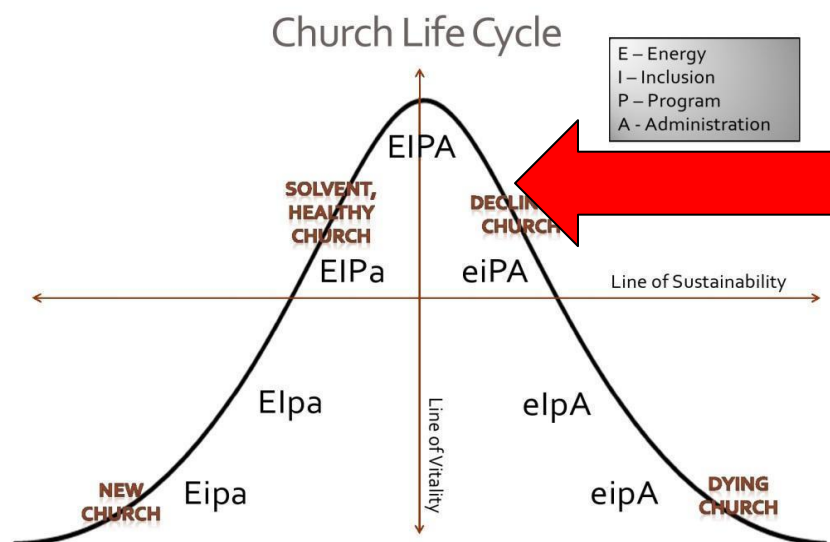
- 81% believe your church is more comfortable when things remain the same.

Several survey comments also mentioned areas that may need attention.

- Reluctant to progressive change and reluctant to embrace EVERYONE, no matter who they are.
- The congregation is aging and resistant to change
- Not being open to change
- Refusing to change, embrace the future. We are an aging congregation that has always done it this way!
- Unwillingness to accept change
- Not wanting to change
- As in most churches an unwillingness to IDENTIFY and accept changes that might be necessary to make the church successful in coming years.
- Not wanting to "change!"

## YOUR CONGREGATIONAL LIFECYCLE

Every congregation experiences growth and decline. These stages are marked by certain milestones that point to changes in organizational health and development. To better understand this, we use four indicators to measure health: energy, inclusion, programs and administration. At each stage in the life of a church, these indicators play a more or less active role. These roles are indicated by the upper and lower case letters on the graph.



The “Energy” indicator highlights the level at which the congregation is motivated into action around the vision and mission of the church. It speaks to the spirit of the faith community as well as its passion about its ministries.

The “Inclusion” indicator highlights the dedication and enthusiasm of church participants to invite people to be a part of the ministries of the church. It speaks to an outward focus on growth and an intentional commitment to hospitality.

The “Program” indicator highlights the level at which the church is able to start, grow and maintain ministries that transform both the community and the people within the church. These are particular to each church context and to the needs of the people within the church.

The final indicator, “Administration,” highlights the need of every church to have systems that promote growth through policies, procedures and staffing. Collectively, these indicators tell a story of where a church might be in their lifecycle.

Currently your church would be considered Quadrant 3. You have some solid Programming for your people and the community, although you might be spread too thin for your size. But you may be lacking in some of the sustained Energy needed to get things done while your financial and energy restraints may keep you bogged down in Administration. You are at a point where you must be intentional about your energy and attention in order to be a highly functioning church. Those churches in your position that do not invest that energy and attention wisely can easily slip into over-focusing on administration which can eclipse inclusion and growth, leading to decline and loss of vitality.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

**These recommendations could strengthen your church’s vitality in the next year:**

- **Work on welcome and change skills** - To truly welcome new people, you will have to get out of your comfort zones. Talking to and sitting with the same people every time you are at the church can feel unwelcoming to newcomers. New people will also bring new ideas. If new ideas are met with skepticism or reactivity, how can new people feel a part of the conversation? You may want to spend a season of the church year talking about welcome as a theological practice, and another talking about change as part of God's work in our lives. We would also recommend a digital ministry consultation to update website and social media, as a community member or organization curious about the church will look there first.
- **Clarify and align your values for greater unity** - You seem very aligned on your efforts in the community, as the most common issues mentioned by respondents are the same as those you prioritize as a church: housing and education. You are clear on your webpage that you are a welcoming and justice seeking church. However, a few survey respondents

were clearly struggling to embrace those values and were wishing for a different direction. It is very possible to love each other even if we don't agree on everything. But if the disagreement is over the value and rights of other humans, trying to hold this tension without naming it and working on it can cause harm. We might recommend a workshop or all-church book study to see if you can reach alignment about your values of welcome and justice. Including lessons on healthy communications could also help you examine how misalignment about values can become harmful to those whose value is in question and to the church as a whole.

- **Go deeper into neighboring and collaboration** - How well do you know your church's neighbors? What are their needs and what are they passionate about? Conducting community interviews is a great place to start, and we have guidelines for how to get these done. Once you know your neighbors better, consider - How can you collaborate with more of your neighbors? What organizations need space and could use your church? Who is doing similar work and ministry that you could collaborate with? Be willing to go to them and meet them where they are.
- **Practice intergenerational community** - You have a largely older congregation that is clearly longing for more young people to join you. You may have been waiting to be joined by more young people to become elders and sources of wisdom to them. If you are truly longing to be in intergenerational community and not seeing younger people as potential saviors and worker bees for your church, you are in luck. There are people of all generations in your neighborhood who may very much need your wisdom and gifts. Go to them where they are and figure out how you can cultivate intergenerational relationships with them. Do schools need class "grandparents" or are there young parents in your community who have no parents locally to help out? Are there groups of younger people doing service or advocacy who are short of the extra time and resources older generations can share? Get creative and you will find the intergenerational community you seek.

## WHAT IS NEXT FOR BETHEL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST:

*The question for you as members and leaders of Bethel United Church of Christ is: “**are you willing to live into God’s future**”? Our recommendations, born out of our expertise in the life cycle and renewal of churches, are for Bethel United Church of Christ to work on the above areas. If you get stuck, our consultants and coaches can help you make concrete plans for improving all these areas. Putting your energy into these things will help your already vital congregation grow more vital and transformational in the years to come.*