

**First Presbyterian Church, Arlington Heights**  
**Congregational Assessment Tool (CAT)**  
**Executive Summary**  
**May 2020**

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## **Introduction**

Greetings! My name is Susan Czolgosz. I am an associate of Holy Cow Consulting. I want to thank you for participating in the Congregational Assessment Tool (CAT). I met with the elders of First Pres in February and provided them with a 3- hour in-depth analysis of the results of the CAT.

The elders requested that the same presentation be provided for the members of the congregation who expressed interest. We originally planned for this presentation to happen in March, but because of COVID-19, we were unable to meet. This meeting will be rescheduled once the shelter-in-place restrictions have been lifted and we are able to meet again in groups larger than 50.

Since I cannot provide you a full analysis of the results in a timely manner, the elders requested that I create an Executive Summary for the congregation. Below is a summary of the results produced from the CAT your congregation took in January. As with all my summaries, I have written this from the perspective of your congregation, utilizing the pronouns 'we' and 'us'.

## **General Overview**

We had a tremendous response - 472 representing over 100% of our average Sunday attendance. This response rate demonstrates that our congregation is engaged in giving voice to who we are today and to where we are going in our future. Thank you. Obviously, this response rate assures that we have valid, reliable and representative data.

These results measure member experiences, perceptions and aspirations. The numbers are symbols of the story you are telling through your responses to the questions.

In this assessment we also have some conversation partners. Our responses are measured against those from the last 300-400 (benchmarked) congregations who have taken the CAT from across the country. This comparative data provides a picture of how we are doing in relationship to other congregations at this moment in time.

## **What did we learn? What are our strengths and challenges?**

Our greatest strengths are revealed and explained through what is called the Performance Dashboard and Performance Indices. The CAT measures the following 8 areas of congregational performance: Hospitality, Morale, Conflict Management, Governance, Spiritual Vitality, Readiness for Ministry, Engagement in Education, and Worship and Music.

It is important to understand that these Performance Indices are a combination of two factors: 1) how we scored ourselves and 2) how that score compares with other congregations who have taken the CAT.

For instance, in the area of Hospitality, we were asked to respond to the statement: “Our church welcomes and is enriched by persons from many different walks of life.” 82.3 percent of respondents gave a positive answer. However, our benchmark on that question resulted in the 28<sup>th</sup> percentile compared to other congregations. The reason why our benchmark is so low is because the majority of churches score themselves higher on that question than we did. Hence, Hospitality is an area where we see a need for growth.

Our strengths are highlighted below, based on our percentile rank with the 300-400 benchmark congregations:

- *Engagement in Education (76<sup>th</sup> percentile)*
- *Worship and Music (67<sup>th</sup> percentile)*
- *Morale (61<sup>st</sup> percentile)*

These percentile ranks mean, for example, that in worship and music, we rated our experience higher than 67% of the congregations who have taken the CAT, or rated it lower than 33% of those congregations.

The other indices provide a window to opportunities for improvement and for understanding what has impacted the rating.

- *Readiness for ministry (42<sup>nd</sup> percentile)*
- *Governance (33<sup>rd</sup> percentile)*
- *Hospitality (19<sup>th</sup> percentile)*
- *Conflict Management (18<sup>th</sup> percentile)*
- *Spiritual Vitality (9<sup>th</sup> percentile)*

These percentile rankings do tell a story as compared to the enthusiasm felt by other congregations. However, in looking at our own responses, we need not lose heart. Our measures in and of themselves are average or typical of most congregations. Our work is understanding how we can improve these areas of church life to reflect excellence.

Two areas for focus are conflict management and spiritual vitality. With regard to conflict management, we need to better understand why certain members feel conflicted, and how to navigate and mediate that conflict in respectful and healing ways. This is an important area of work.

Spiritual Vitality measures our sense of closeness to God and God's presence in our daily lives. Even though we ranked in the 9<sup>th</sup> percentile, similar to the questions posed about Hospitality, our own measures of our Spiritual Vitality are relatively high. Yet, we are invited into examining our spiritual disciplines and how we can all go deeper into our spiritual lives.

### **Our Culture**

- We are theologically progressive compared to the benchmark congregations, and are at the same time somewhat diverse in our theological perspectives. Notably, this means we have a range of theological perspectives. Again, while theologically progressive, 22% of our congregation is more theologically conservative. For reflection: How well are we holding our various perspectives together through open dialogue and with respect?
- We are quite adaptive. This means the congregation is willing to make adjustments in the way we go about our ministry. The more flexible a congregation (like any organization), the more likely it is to adapt to the particular context in which it serves to meet ever changing needs and circumstances of both our members and those with whom we minister in the community. The less flexible a congregation, the more likely it is to believe that a particular style is central to its identity, and it can become rigid and maladaptive. Therefore, the more adaptive a congregation, the healthier and more vital it will continue to be. Our adaptability is a key strength.

### **Our Climate (Health and Vitality) as measured by Member Satisfaction and Energy**

Satisfaction, in this instance, is defined as member sense of well-being and peace in the congregation. Energy is defined as the passionate, persuasive sense of mission that members understand and live out.

Compared to our benchmark congregations, we are Average or typical of most congregations in the area of Satisfaction. In Energy, we are High. This places us in the top 30-35% of all congregations. This translates into being called a "transitional/transformation congregation."

We are transitional in that we need to transition some of our challenges into strengths to become fully transformational. Transformational congregations are those that demonstrate strengths in all areas of ministry and in the performance indices. Those are the congregations that are fully embodying their mission and are growing. The good news for us is that we are close. The important question is: What is holding us back?

When members are asked how they feel things are going in their congregation overall, they generally don't think about the entire array of ministries and qualities that characterize the congregation. Instead they focus on a relatively small number of things. What members focus on is unique to each congregation. These areas of focus are called '*drivers*.' Our *drivers* of satisfaction and energy are (when we are most satisfied):

- Worship services are exceptional in quality and spiritual content.
- Leaders in our church are representative of our membership.
- Our Pastors help us accomplish our mission by bringing out the best in everyone.
- In preaching, our Pastors engage people with a message that enriches their lives in the world.
- Our Pastors communicate with people in a way that keeps us informed and connected.
- The whole spirit of the congregation makes people want to get as involved as possible.

These drivers indicate a uniqueness about our culture and climate. The findings in these drivers is that we are a pastor-centric culture. With the majority of drivers focused on the performance of our Pastors, this demonstrates that we look to them to make things happen. This is neither a negative or positive quality. It is a description.

However, research has demonstrated that pastor-centric congregations have proven to be more unconsciously anxious than other congregations – when performance of the pastors determines our satisfaction, and energy, overall performance of the congregation falls squarely on the shoulders of a very small group of people. This creates the possibility of burn out in pastors and it detracts from the baptismal identity of the congregation to own and engage in all the responsibilities of the ministry of the church.

Our question is: Do we remain this way or do we change our culture in ways that more fully engages more of the congregation in the leadership of our communal life?

## Priorities for our future

These priorities represent where the congregation wants additional energy placed to improve our ministries. These are the top five:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and incorporate them into the life of the church.
- Make necessary changes to attract families with children and youth to our church.
- Develop ministries that work toward healing those broken by life circumstances.
- Strengthen the process by which members are called and equipped for ministry and leadership.
- Create more opportunities for people to form meaningful relationships (small groups, nurtured friendships, shared meals, etc.)

A notable indicator of a healthy and thriving congregation is its external focus. The prioritization as indicated above, demonstrates both an inward and outward focus. We are stating that we have some internal work to do in order to grow and improve what we have to offer to the needs of the world.

The two highest-ranking priorities are related to growth. This is common among 96% of all congregations. In order to achieve growth, we will be required to address some of the internal concerns and develop those areas into strengths while continuing to sustain our areas of strength.

**Overall, we are a strong, thriving congregation.** Now it is time for further conversation and strategic action around what this data is telling us and to what God is calling us in this next chapter of our life in ministry together?

To become self-satisfied, is to risk decline. If our mission as a congregation is still compelling, what is the vision for how we will live this mission in the coming years? We have much to celebrate and to be thankful for; and we are left with some important things to ponder and act upon.

Thank you again for your participation in the CAT. Your participation in every aspect of planning for the future of First Pres will be crucial. My best wishes.

Sincerely,

Susan Czolgosz