

# Initial Distilling Report

From the Vision Team

70 people participated in one or more listening group session between March 24 and May 19. The sessions were lead by Vision Team members who took notes on the full conversations and shared them with the full Vision Team. Six Vision Team members to date have done initial distilling reports, and their insights and trend findings are summarized here.

This initial report was compiled to give you, the congregation, information on trends and discussions heard during the listening sessions. Over the summer, the Vision Team is going to continue distilling and discussing this report and our notes from the listening sessions in order to create a final document that includes a refined Mission and Vision for the congregation. The Financial, Spatial, and Strategic planning teams will use the final document as guidance for their work defining the future of the budget, building, and overall ministries of Advent.

Three addendums to the insights and trends are found at the end of this report:

- 1) The questions asked during listening sessions
- 2) The core values named during listening sessions
- 3) The innovation ideas identified during listening sessions.

## **INSIGHTS AND TRENDS FROM LISTENING GROUPS**

*Seven thematic trends were identified in this initial distilling period based on all listening session notes. Those themes are: Community Connection, Welcome & Invitation, Liturgical-based Worship, Music, Personal Faith Formation, Ministry Participation, and Service & Social Justice. Insights on each theme, additional questions, and early ideas for action and implementation are included here.*

- Community Connection
  - Community seems to be the quality of Advent that people value most: a congregation that is diverse, welcoming (especially of children), and service-oriented where people feel at home. People are looking for more opportunities to build community, across the three worship times, and particularly in small group settings. It is important to members to have a chance to connect with and know more about each other to really be a community and family of faith.
    - Advent has a history of diversity (age, race, sexuality, socioeconomic, etc) which is recognized and appreciated by members and visitors. How can we continue to be intentional about being accepting of and supporting congregational diversity?

- The most prominent need and desire members have at Advent right now is for relationships.
  - Members are yearning to be known and to know each other. The positive reaction to the listening groups across the board indicate that people are seeking out ways to connect with one another.
- There were recurring comments that there is not enough time for fellowship on Sundays or outside of Sundays, so although people are involved and thankful for the various ministries and action-based participation, room for improvement still exists in activities that focus on connection between congregants.
- *Implementation Ideas*
  - Continuing with small listening groups and other small group activities (e.g., bible studies, discipleship studies, Adult education). The key to this will be having variety of opportunities for members who prefer one form versus another form of group.
  - Fellowship hours, both between worship services and more generally: “We need to be aware and more intentional about it”
    - Designate a “connecter/schmoozer” and invite people to put on name tags and sit with someone new.
  - Larger non-ministry based fellowship events for the congregation would be a good way to implement community building. This could address the consistent theme of not enough time for fellowship on Sundays or outside of Sundays.
  - Specific suggestions from sessions include:
    - Bring back congregational food events (themed potlucks, suppers), silly skits, sing along.
    - People who attend love the congregational retreat
- Common thoughts/questions related to these trending theme:
  - Can we find ways to get us all together, once every couple of months, for fellowship/fun?
  - We haven’t been doing much to get to know people lately.
  - There’s not a lot of crossover between families, older people, Latino ministry, younger people.
  - We are good at welcoming new people; not as good about reaching out to or following up with members who have fallen away.
  - There are lots of ways to participate in ministries for others, but not activities to be together as one congregation for only that purpose.
  - There is importance to developing ongoing connections through conversations of faith and scripture and prayer groups. Perhaps the small groups strengthen the assembly for worship.
- Welcome & Invitation
  - Welcoming seems to be the single biggest reason people chose Advent: the experience of being called by name (the power of knowing someone’s name and of someone knowing your name was consistently lifted up), the personal touch of having someone reach out to them, or of a pastor engaging them. Hospitality that is open and affirming is important—being welcomed, accepted, invited, and valued for one’s self.

- We are lifelong Lutherans, people new to Christianity, from many denominations, church dropouts returning, seekers, questioners, faithful disciples and people in search of vocation. We are eager to find an open, welcoming affirming community of faith, friendship, kindness and care. We want to engage in God's work of love and justice with other people of faith.
- It is important both for visitors and for long time members to continually feel welcomed and invited into the congregational community. Welcome and connection are inherently intertwined. What opportunities can we find or create to build connection among members while also reaching out into the community and welcoming in new faces?
- The welcoming experience was noted as inconsistent by many and there is a hunger to put more emphasis on training and structures so the welcoming ministry is truly embedded in the congregation.
- *Questions for further consideration*
  - How can we be a welcoming church and invite in new members even when it's no longer the societal norm that everyone goes to church?
  - What are the needs of the community that we can identify and meet? How can we identify spiritual gifts of our members and invite them to meet community needs, in the way we have with Music Mondays and some of the food ministries?
  - Welcoming and acceptance are part of the Lutheran theology. How can we lift this up to create space in our tradition for folks who are searching? How can we empower our community to know about tradition and talk about it, while also finding ways to stretch tradition in ways that might be exciting for new folks?
- *Implementation Ideas*
  - Develop, train, and appoint people to make others feel welcome at Advent including greeters, people to follow up with outreach to new visitors, and people to check in on congregants who disappear or don't attend regularly.
    - The above is a direct implementation suggestion to this comment: "Mixed experiences for feeling welcome at Advent for new members. Some were welcomed right away, others weren't greeted or followed-up with."
    - How can we train everyone to be able to welcome folks, even if it's outside of their comfort zone? This is a skill that can be learned rather than one you inherently do/don't have.
- Liturgical-based Worship
  - Our strong worship and music practice deepen members' faith and connection to Advent. This is an important part of being a member here and a grounding for daily life. The experience of God's presence in worship together is valued.
    - There is appreciation for a traditional Lutheran liturgy, music program, and hymnody that is enlivened with new elements and experimentation. The need to find a balance between traditional and new worship elements

was emphasized. People like trying new things, but we have to do it intentionally and thoughtfully. There's also an inclusivity element to trying new worship elements: representing other cultures, values, and worship styles in our worship.

- People are drawn to the strong, impactful sermons, that open scripture in a meaningful way, offering new insights and lifting our hearts and souls, inspiring us to serve.
- People also relish a time of quiet and meditation, especially the moment at the beginning of the service to stop, breathe deep, and connect to God.
- Communion is highly valued and people love having communion each week.
- Worship and community are connected. Even as people comment on the elements of worship that they appreciate or find challenging, they discuss in the relationship of how worship either draws them into community (seeing people, the choir, etc), or how they wish that worship would draw them into community ("divide" between different worship services, feeling bad about not being more connected to others at worship, etc.)
- There were a few notes indicating that people unfamiliar with the liturgy at first feel lost or confused by the liturgy. This is important to note because people not familiar liturgical-based worship may feel uncomfortable until it becomes familiar.
- *Implementation Ideas*
  - To address the people who are new to liturgical based worship, consider expanding or modifying the note at the top of the bulletin to indicate that this is liturgical based worship, and if unfamiliar to you, do not worry! Feel free to ask anyone around you for help, or to participate at your own speed until it becomes more familiar. An alternative to printing in writing is to add a little statement along the lines of the above at the same time as the pastors say "welcome" and explain the hymnals/bulletin interaction. The idea here is to let everyone know that it is okay not to be familiar with this style of worship.
  - Providing short explanatory notes in the bulletin about different worship elements can help both newcomers and long time members understand and feel comfortable with both the practice of and history/tradition behind the liturgy. It could even be the basis of an adult faith formation series!
- Music
  - People who worship at Advent deeply appreciate the music and music programs at Advent. Music helps people connect with Advent and is an important part of the worship experience. Music resonates with people and acts as an "easy way" or "gateway" to the worship experience.
  - Regarding the types of music, most people love the traditional music (which is linked to liturgical-based worship). Some would like a little more variety or modern music, but not to the exclusion of traditional music. Some meaningful things were said about music, including: "music makes the worship vibrant" and "the music this church supports are all ways that love and God are found."

- *Implementation idea: Choir as example of community-building for broader application at Advent*
  - In addition to the meaningful worship connections with music, in terms of community-building, there is clear causation that people who participate in the choir (regularly or ad hoc) feel a strong sense of connection to Advent as a community. This ties directly to the first theme of connection and fostering sense of community.
  - The strong feeling of community at Advent that exists as a result of participation in choir indicates that we could further explore how to emulate, learn from, and take lessons from the choir experience and apply this to other areas at Advent's ministry and experience.
  - Are there more participatory activities like choir which can foster a very strong sense of connection to Advent? Are there other activities (new or existing) that can emulate this sense of belonging? Given the success of community building via choir, it is well-worth exploring this model, and how it may be applicable to other groups, ministries and experiences at Advent.
  - The initial thoughts on the model of choir: strong leaders with direction and empowerment, regular participation, a common goal, regular contribution to meaningful worship and support from Advent leadership. What else can we learn and what else can provide a similar meaningful experience while helping build community?
- *Music Mondays*
  - There was also a sub-theme of music relating to Music Mondays. Music Mondays is a good example of programming and community outreach raising Advent's visibility in the neighborhood and the city. It brings in new people into the space who otherwise wouldn't be aware of or attend Advent.
- Personal Faith Formation
  - Advent is a community of love and kindness where it is safe to be different, have many points of view and grow in understanding each other. We can openly share faith, hopes, dreams and life with a diverse group of people. Most of life is not as diverse and is secular. Advent helps us focus outside of ourselves, bring God's good gifts to people in the neighborhood and beyond.
  - It's a place that's okay with questioning, with different faith backgrounds, with continually growing and challenging faith. How can we talk about this more? It could be a good gateway for non-members who are also seeking/questioning faith.
  - It's a place that can challenge us to continue growing deeper in our faith. Two recurring needs/desires for growth in faith were
    - Non-judgemental spaces to explore questions and uncertainty about faith and God
    - Applied Faith: How to be a disciple and follow Jesus in our lives and our world?
    - How can we balance the two and use one to inform the other?
- *Children, Kids, Young Adults*

- Involvement of children in church, particularly the children's sermons is highly appreciated. Having space for children in the church is good.
  - Outside of worship, it was noted that Sunday School and active faith formation for children feels lacking. There is an opportunity to grow in this way, and an expressed desire for stronger youth groups and Christian education programming.
  - The importance of family faith formation for members and as outreach to the community was continually lifted up as being formative moments in members' lives, past and present.
- Ministry Participation
  - People's connection to Advent seems to either be through their appreciation of worship (liturgy, music and preaching were named several times) or through their involvement in a particular ministry.
  - There is some guilt that people aren't "doing more" in the congregation: attending worship, volunteering, etc. They witness a lot of great ministry programs that they haven't personally been involved with, and some superstar members, and they are comparing themselves to those superstars. How can we support all levels of participation and help counteract the feelings of guilt?
    - A shared challenge to our hopes for ministry and relationships at Advent is limited time to be here together. Difficulties in participation like commutes, distance, busyness, being overscheduled, traveling for work, and being forced to choose between competing options were shared.
    - On the other hand, many also shared the experience of Sundays being rushed or not allowing enough time for reflection, faith formation, or relationship building. We share this challenge of limited time, and how best to spend it
- Service & Social Justice
  - Service is lifted up both as a way to build community within the church and to minister to the community outside the church. Service ministries frequently create a true sense of belonging.
  - Social Justice is a constant, welcome, and inspiring theme, from the Gospel and from the pulpit, inextricably linked to Jesus' life and message. Social justice is frequently mentioned as a pathway to church membership. "Social justice as a faith act" is a consistent theme. God is the source of justice for people. God empowers our work of justice.
    - Is the congregation fully engaged? Could there be more training? How would we engage the congregation without making busy New Yorkers feel guilty for not doing more?
    - There were points about the importance of finding ways to connect the congregation to our social justice ministries, and about using social justice ministries to draw in new folks and connect them to Advent. Two examples directly from notes:

- Music Mondays, pantry, community lunch as examples of “branding” being known, consistent and growing identity. Use as a way forward.
  - People in the community want to make the world a better place so can be invited to regular ministries that accomplish this. Need to be organized, advertised, consistent, and meet a need, offer a place of friendship while helping others regularly, - monthly, quarterly, seasonally, weekly.
- Relationships are connected to Faith Formation & Social Justice. Many participants shared understandings and experiences of Faith Formation and Social Justice that are relational. There is a powerful opportunity for relationships to be a vehicle for Faith Formation and Social Justice at Advent.
- Congregation members are feeling a tension between finding a balance of “supporting” the community, and “reaching out to” the community.
  - Some ministries are sustained by people outside of Advent, or with very little Advent congregant participation. In future strategic planning, it is worth examining and discussing these ministries further to determine what is needed from Advent to maintain sustainable ministries. If congregant participation is low, do we need to commit more members to claim the ministries as Advent’s? Do we need outside assistance in maintaining any ministries? Are any of our ministries more of a space sharing ministry, rather than Advent specific?
    - If ministries are sustained by one or two congregants, if those congregants leave or can no longer sustain, what happens to those ministries?

#### **ADDENDUM 1: LISTENING GROUP QUESTIONS**

*These topics and questions are what all Vision Team members used while leading their groups. Not all questions were asked in every group due to time constraints and how the individual conversations progressed.*

- **Faith Journeys & Practices**
  - Tell me about your faith journey and how Advent has been a part of your faith journey?
    - If people don’t cover it in the question above: How does Advent support you in continuing your faith journey, practice, and/or education?
  - Talk about a way your faith is present outside Advent.
  - Talk about your worship experience on a typical Sunday at Advent
- **Community and Belonging**
  - How do you make others feel welcome?
  - When have you felt a deep sense of belonging?
  - When do you feel connected to the Advent community?
    - Follow-up: Who was part of that experience?

- **Faith Formation & Social Justice**
  - Tell me about an activity that helped form or grow your faith.
  - How are faith and social justice connected for you?
    - If the group has trouble answering, invite them to define “social justice” first
  - What do you think is a core value of Advent? What would Advent look like without this value?
    - Say: We’d like to challenge you to choose only one to share
    - (Possible follow-up if time permits): Have heard all of these, what would Advent look like without these values?)
- **Adaptability & Innovation**
  - What has been the traditional role of a church in the community and what do you see it looking like in the future?
    - Optional follow-up: How might technology/the digital world play a role in that future?
  - What do you think is the most important message of the Gospel for today’s world? Why?
    - Optional follow-up: How might that look in action?
  - What is one area you see room for innovation at Advent?

## **ADDENDUM 2: WHAT IS A CORE VALUE OF ADVENT?**

*These are pulled directly from Vision Team members’ session notes. They have been grouped and edited for clarity, and duplicate responses have been noted.*

- Community (x8) — connection and fellowship with other members of our faith family in a place where we can share our faith with and learn from one another
- Diversity (x6) — accepting and inclusive of people with differing backgrounds including (but not limited to) faith journeys, race, age, sexuality, gender identity
- Welcoming (x6) — showing hospitality and God’s love in action to everyone who comes through our doors and to those beyond our doors or immediate community
- Music and Worship (x5) — a strong musical tradition and quality Worship experience that is centered in scripture
- Spanish worship (x2) — one congregation in two languages with a worship experience specifically for those who want to worship in Spanish, though desires expressed for more cross-community experiences as well
- God’s Grace (x2) — living example of God’s eternal grace given to us by Jesus on the cross
- Transcendence and ritual — there’s a comfort of the music and liturgy, the beauty of the building creates a sense of peace so the overall aesthetic is inspirational and centering
- Challenge vs serenity — both are valued, but sometimes are (properly?) in conflict, this dynamic is especially present in sermons and preaching styles
- Faithfully questioning and searching and knowing it’s okay not to have all of the answers

### **ADDENDUM 3: WHAT IS ONE AREA YOU SEE ROOM FOR INNOVATION FOR AT ADVENT?**

*These are pulled directly from Vision Team members' session notes. They have been edited slightly for clarity, to remove participant names, and to eliminate duplicate responses.*

- Ways of connecting the congregation to our social justice ministries.
- People in the community want to make the world a better place so can be invited to regular ministries that accomplish this. Need to be organized, advertised, consistent, and meet a need, offer a place of friendship while helping others. Regular schedule (monthly, quarterly, seasonally, weekly) can help people know what to expect.
  - Use examples of programs with strong “branding” and consistent identities like Music Mondays, Food Pantry, and Community Lunch as models for moving forward with future ministries.
  - Examples for regularly scheduled events during the year: Food Packing Sunday, Seasonal open events like the pre-Christmas activities and fair, music, visual art, dance and theater arts programs for families, pop-up street theater or music - 20 minutes, repeated during the day, perhaps while people wait for lunch or pantry, or a Saturday. Choir mini concert on the steps...or inside singing songs of faith.
- More partnering with local businesses for outreach, like the family grocery store across the street where people congregate. We should get out in the community as much as possible. Even if it doesn't work, it shows we're reaching out. We're here.
- A throwback to the themed potluck dinners we used to enjoy, which included skits, dancing, and mingling games. It was nice getting to see a goofy side of people, being pushed outside their comfort zones a bit.
- One time Advent got the street outside (Broadway) closed down for a street fair. It had games, food, and even a petting zoo. — this was brought up in a few groups, sometimes as a suggestion for congregational growth/outreach and sometimes just as a positive memory/past example of outreach
- Have hospitality awareness discussions and training for everyone so that the whole congregation can be a hospitality group. Training can encourage use of name tags, teach ways of introducing yourself and remembering each other, provide an invitation to visit more with each other and participate in ways that interest or fit.
- Special trained hospitality group that shows the way. It is the little things that matter - bathrooms, open doors, appreciation, welcome both long time members and visitors with same heart felt, “Glad you are here.” Accompany people downstairs to the forum, fellowship time, bathrooms. Make room in our congregation for everyone. No assumptions.
- Safety and accessibility issues need attention.
- Justice not just a community, corporate matter, but one on one. Conversation about how we see, think about and assess each other - people we know and strangers. Are thoughts, biases, prejudice, disgust or preferences sinful - or only when they become actions? Can we make ways to have one on one conversations with someone who is different in some way?
- Do we need new or different service times? One group talked about this quite a bit and there were a number of ideas shared. Saturday evenings came up a lot. The difference

between traditional and more contemporary or especially contemplative services came up as well. No one thought that a new or different service is a silver bullet, but it was a significant discussion in one group.

- Bring in speakers/lectures/political forums (heard twice in separate groups)
  - We spend so much of the day trying to educate about the news of the day, can Advent help with that?
  - “Music Mondays for the mind”
- Getting outside of our doors to invite people in. When we do this we need to make sure the invitations inside are clear and specific (gave example that during the Advent bazaar some visitors didn't realize there were items for sale in the basement)
- Recognizing the community goes beyond the Sunday morning worshippers
- Also important to lift up current innovations we're doing well — different liturgy/prayers (ex the women-conscious service); music variety
- Can we explain the traditions and liturgical choices/practices more to people? Both cradle Lutherans and new visitors/members could find this helpful.
  - One participant visited a church with a wall of brochures that explain each brochure, and also passed a wall of photos with corresponding photos for each ministry.
- It's important to be of quality, and we can and should innovate but also can't try to be full every day and be all things to all people. Doing too much not well isn't helpful either.
- Do what we do, but do it better. We need to invest in things long-term. We've invested in marketing and communications, and that has paid off. But when we don't invest, we lose. You need to put the money and develop the program we want to grow – even if there is a long return on investment.
- When the Spanish service has brought in special speakers and music, it draws people in. But it's always the tension of budget and cost/benefit analysis
- We need to commit more to Christian Education and programming for children and youth. We are doing well with music currently, but if we want to grow, we need to invest more.
- Building had been focused on maintenance, but then focused on a new building, which hurt the process for basic upkeep.
- You can put money into bad stuff to keep it running at a basic level, or we invest in something in the future.
- A better outreach of young Latino families who are looking to raise their children in a judgement and hate free zone but nevertheless surrounded by living examples of Jesus' love.
- Bringing our children and youth into the transcendence of the worship experience. We are good, I think, at teaching them about social justice, less good at helping them enter into worship