

MINISTER'S REPORT TO THE BOARD
MAY 25, 2021
REV. DR. DAVID CHISHAM

As we're beginning to reopen following COVID closure and precautions, I've taken some time to reflect on how FCCBRLA organized its ministry, what has transpired over the past couple of decades, and where we might go from here. Prior to COVID we were launching into our Future Story that we wrote following the floods of 2016, as a vision for where we wanted to go over the next five years. In that Future Story there were three initiatives, but the centerpiece of that initiative was the S.O.S. program, a service program geared for needs of senior individuals and families. There was much hope that this would be the program to spark renewal amongst us.

While I believe the S.O.S. program is a great idea, and there is broad support for enhancing our ministry to seniors, as described in the Future Story document the S.O.S. program presented a problem for me (us) with how to get it off the ground. Prior to COVID I had meetings with groups and laid out a framework for how the program might operate, hoping that a leadership structure would emerge. To be honest I was unable to get this project off my desk and into action. Upon recent reflection I feel I have a better sense of why that was.

There is a discipline of church administration theory that looks at church function relative to its size. Mega-churches (500+ worship attendance) have one style of operation, while large churches (300-500 attendance) have another. Moving down the scale there are program size churches (150-300 attendance), pastor centered congregations (75-150 attendance), and family size churches (25-75 attendance). Currently our average worship attendance puts us in the pastor centered congregational size.

I'd like to take a quick look back at the fulltime staff ministry of FCCBRLA, perhaps exploring some of the cognitive dissonance we feel. Looking back, there was a time when FCCBRLA was a program sized church, pushing into a large church category. Many long-time members remember when Rev. John Vickers and Rev. Michael Elmore were full-time staff, and Rev. Elmore ran a program called "Logos" which had a lot of moving parts and functioned at a high level. Church administration theory demonstrates that program sized churches require multiple fulltime staff to sustain their programming. This was a time of good feelings and the campus was built out with multiple buildings for a program sized congregation. Following Rev. Vickers departure, and when Rev. Bill Mackie was called, Rev. Elmore stepped down from his associate position. Although church attendance indicated the need for a fulltime associate, Rev. Mackie did not have a one and, instead, developed the Spiritual Gifts program to develop ministry assistance from the volunteer level. While there was enthusiasm at the beginning of the program, after a couple of years the program dropped off and participation declined along with numbers.

Following Rev. Mackie was Rev. Karunas who, with some extra fundraising, was able to facilitate a fulltime associate with Rev. Laura Phillips. However, when numbers didn't pick up and finances became tight, Rev. Karunas took another call as did Rev. Phillips. When I was called I was told that I would not have a fulltime associate minister. When I arrived our worship attendance as about 150, and that number decreased to about 100-125 over the past years. We are now squarely in the pastor centered congregation size.

Looking at the center piece of the Future Story, the S.O.S. program is a great idea, but it is geared for a program sized church with a fulltime associate who can be assigned to take the details and run with them. I think that I hoped there would be a volunteer who would take this by the horns and run with it, but that volunteer leader never materialized and, to be honest, if it did happen, I can foresee such an individual burning out quickly. As presented, the program would require coordination between three small groups: one to assess needs, one team for acquisition of equipment and organization of materials, and one team to do the work with good oversight. Again, it's a great idea, but I think it's too big for our volunteer-based ministry.

The Facilities Use committee (Mary, Dak, Pam and myself) has struggled with a similar impasse as we considered the experience of Broadmoor Baptist Church's development of its campus for rentals. In that case, a point person took the project on and worked tirelessly, until finally they hired a staff person to oversee rentals and building use. We don't have a free staff person, and the committee doesn't see a single volunteer in the congregation who is ready to take on a project of developing our facilities for rental use.

So the question comes back to this, while there is strong interest in moving forward with enhanced ministry to Seniors, what kind of ministry is more realistic for a pastor-centered congregation? There is an idea that has been floating around for a few years, one that we were exploring just as COVID hit, one that came up again in the Elders meeting last night, and one that would have relevance for many church members and people in the community, that is caretaker support—people entrusted with taking care of spouses, children, parents and loved-ones. There are a number of church members who are caretakers who are looking for a place to talk, looking for some assistance with their loved one from time to time, and possibly looking for a place they can minister in a meaningful way to others. I have some ideas in mind, but I'm not ready to launch into them without pulling together some caretakers to talk about this. Though it is a more modest project than S.O.S., it would fit the size of our congregation better, and if it grows into something more, we can grow with it. There might be some other workable ideas that you would share.

I offer this not only as a specific suggestion for how to recover an important insight that emerged from our Future Story, but also to help us think in terms of what kinds of ministry we do generally. The Minister's Council is ideally composed of committee chairs and committee members functioning fairly independently. In recent years it has been difficult to recruit committee chairs, and often these have been committees of one or two people. As we "push the reset" button on the functions of the church, I feel this is a good time to investigate what other options there are for organizing the work of volunteers to prevent burnout while still offering effective ministry.

I would like to say that I have a fully formed idea in mind of what else there is, but this is an emerging horizon for me as it is a change of direction and concept from our past patterns of organization. I hope to open a conversation and, with some good reflection, offer some helpful and positive direction in the future.

Respectfully,
Rev. Dr. David Chisham