

Results of Our Spiritual Identity Exercise

Introduction

Let's begin with a quick review.

To date, our board has addressed the financial stability of MCC NoVA primarily through the implementation of a Financial Contingency Plan. As a result of this implementation, the faithfulness of our pledging congregants, the generosity of our non-pledging congregants, and a recent generous donation of stock, we are now operating slightly in the black for 2015. This is great news!

33 people then participated in our Pow Wow with the Pastor forums, in which we addressed our five-year attendance decline by honestly facing issues somewhat unique to our congregation as well as cultural shifts and challenges experienced by a large majority of religious communities today. We discussed possible options for our future; and as a result of those discussions, we determined there was sufficient support to consider a reinvention of MCC NoVA.

The first step in this reinvention was identifying our *primary* spiritual identity, not as a litmus test for belonging to or participating in life at MCC NoVA, but as a foundation from which we could launch our reinvention. That is, whatever we become, offer or do, it will come from this primary identity—a place of spiritual authenticity.

31 people participated in our Spiritual Identity discussions, and this report is a summary of those discussions. We not only discovered our primary spiritual/theological leanings, we also began identifying core values and possible changes we may consider as part of our reinvention.

I have taken the liberty of summarizing these discussions into what appear to be common areas of agreement. So read on, be blessed, and don't hesitate to contact me at the church office should you have any questions or require clarification about any of this information.

Spiritual Identity

The Spiritual Identity exercise was straightforward. We examined the belief statements/foundational principles of eight different religious/spiritual groups (without the names of these groups identified), and each person selected which one of these statements most-closely aligned with his or her current religious/spiritual journey. Each person also selected which statement was most out of alignment with his or her current journey. Please note these results are based on the groups' *statements*, not the group itself.

15 people identified with Unity; 8 people identified with the United Church of Christ; 6 people identified with Unitarian Universalist Association; 1 person identified with Divine Science; 1 person identified with MCC. The three groups receiving no selections were New Thought, Creation Spirituality and Centers for Spiritual Living. These results may be further condensed, as Divine Science and Unity share the same roots, and UCC and MCC statements are somewhat close. Making these changes, means we have 16 aligned with Unity principles, 9 identified with the UCC statement of faith, and 6 people aligned with Unitarian Universalists principles.

By far, MCC's Statement of Faith was the least compatible with all three groups. 15 people made this selection, and most other statements received 1-3 selections (New Thought and Centers for Spiritual Living received no selections).

So what does this mean? These are my thoughts...

To no one's surprise, we're a bit "left" of progressive Christianity, with a total of 21 people identifying outside of what today is considered progressive Christian thought. Since we know MCC's Statement of Faith is in revision and will be voted on at the 2016 General Conference, that "left leaning" tendency *may* increase.

Are we Christian? Well, that depends. If you associate affirming creeds and specific beliefs about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, baptism and the Bible as requirements to be Christian, then the answer is—for the most part—no. At the same time, we *do* have people who hold to these beliefs for themselves. These beliefs sustain and strengthen them in challenging times—and that's great!

Can we be MCC and not be traditionally Christian? Sure! For me, "being MCC" encompasses many expressions of faith. Just take a quick tour of some individual MCC websites; we're all over the map theologically and spiritually, which is one reason our movement's Statement of Faith is changing. Besides, history teaches us that there have always been different expressions of Christianity.

Now, how do we honor our theological/spiritual diversity?

Shared Values

While we certainly have a broad spectrum of beliefs at MCC NoVA, our discussions revealed some values we share. Some of these you may already recognize.

- **Elastic Theology** (current core value, and updated in these sessions as "Respect for Theological Diversity")
- **Inclusivity** (current core value, and updated in these sessions to include affirming the spiritual journeys of all people, as well as affirming the journeys of those who do not necessarily embrace any faith and/or religion)
- **God's Presence** (current core value, and updated in these sessions as "the Christ in every person").
- **The Importance of Jesus** (recognizing and respecting we have different viewpoints regarding the teachings both of and about Jesus)
- **The Importance of Taking the Bible Seriously, yet not Literally**
- **The Importance of Prayer** (however it is practiced—through words, silence and/or peaceful action)
- **The Importance of Community** (Inside and OUT, and updated in these sessions to include our relationship with God and others, as well as communal worship—whatever forms that worship may take)
- **Open Table**

OK. We have a primary spiritual identity. We have some shared values. What possible changes do these indicate? What already works? The next section outlines the *beginnings* of these discussions.

Possible Changes

Worship

- **Music:** gradually change to reflect our primary identity; mix choir and “sing a long Sundays;” update language; balance our use of the Divine Feminine with the Divine Masculine (alternatively, use gender neutral language)
- **Creative Arts in Worship:** Interpretative Movement (dance and scripture readings); drama as reflection, etc.
- **Experiment with the Format:** “Church Has Left the Building” (worship as community service projects followed by communion potluck at church); World Religions Sunday; Conversational Reflection Sunday, etc.

Community

- **Inside:** “fun stuff” (cycling, hiking, camping, bowling, etc. just for the fun of it); Homecoming Sunday in the Park; Drumming as Spiritual Practice
- **OUT:** continue involvement with D.C. Pride, NOVA Pride; consider (again) involvement with Fairfax City festivals; Buffalo Wing Meet and Greet; interfaith social events just for the fun of it; Campus Outreach (engaging youth where they are and not expecting them to “come to us,” even after we do go out to meet with and listen to them)
- **Inside and OUT:** film series and discussions open to the community; expand outreach to the transgender communities based on the needs expressed to us by these communities

What’s Next?

On Saturday, May 16th, Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins will be facilitating a retreat focusing on Progressive Faith in the 21st Century. He will share a portion of the journey of his church, Sunshine Cathedral, as well as how a progressive faith can be an integral part of the reinvention of MCC NoVA. Durrell will also be preaching at our May 17th service. If you would like to attend the Saturday session, please contact the church at 703-691-0930 so we can have an idea of attendance for the light lunch we are providing.

Summary

Thank you to everyone who has participated in our journey of reinvention so far! The discussions have been informative and thought-provoking. I’m looking forward to May 16th and 17th to see what new thoughts and energy come forth, as Rev. Dr. Watkins shares his thoughts and wisdom with our community.

And if you haven’t been to MCC NoVA in a while, why not take this opportunity to come, learn and be part of this hope-filled journey forward?

Peace,

Pastor Danny